



GSR in the Classroom: ADVENT

LESSON – AMID BROKENNESS AND DARKNESS, GOD IS WORKING

SUMMARY: A sister offers hope that God's light shines through the troubles and conflicts that challenge our world.

BEFORE YOU READ: Alone or with a partner, discuss:

- What does it feel like when something precious to you is broken (examples could include your arm, your phone or a promise someone made to you)?
- How does it feel when you're at fault for breaking something?
- What gives you hope that things might be fixed?

Keep in mind while you read:

Pay attention to situations the writer describes as "broken." Do you agree with her? What other situations might she be missing?

A BROKEN CHRISTMAS: GOD WORKS IN DARKNESS

BY COLLEEN GIBSON

December 23, 2016

A vision of darkness lit by the tiniest of candles: I recall in my mind's eye the deacon in my home parish pacing back and forth as he preaches. I must have been about 15 years old, and now, a lifetime away from that moment, his words echo in my ears: God works in darkness.

Again and again, I return to these words, the tiny preacher in my head doing laps to remind me God works in the darkness. God must be working in the darkness.



A MAN LIGHTS A CANDLE ON THE ADVENT WREATH AT ST. RAPHAEL THE ARCHANGEL CHURCH IN ST. LOUIS IN 2015. (CNS PHOTO / LISA JOHNSTON)

And so I've lit the candles of the Advent wreath in anticipation. I've baked the cookies, hung the lights and trimmed the tree. All the while, I'm conscious of the subtle din of darkness humming in the background, like white noise filling in the prevalent gaps in cheer. Christmas is about lots of things — joy, hope, peace, trust — and this year, surprisingly, brokenness.

Even just a cursory glimpse at the news reveals the deep sense of disruption in the world. **Aleppo**. Elections. Terror. Assassinations. Upheaval. How could this be? And, what's more, how could this be the world into which we welcome the Christ child?

In a world that seems to be broken, joy and hope can be hard to come by. Hope seems to stand at a door shut in its face as refugees seeking asylum grow weary around the world. Joy loses its freedom when fear, spurred on by hatred and unwillingness to understand, fills common spaces like streets and sidewalks, classrooms and convenience stores. Language is harsher, violence takes root, civility falters and despair festers.

Into this darkness, the Light shines. In a brokenness where anything and everything that defines us seems now to divide us — be it race or creed, sexual orientation or immigration status, political party or socio-economic standing — God steps in. Not to outright heal division, but to embrace it and work within it, so that in our brokenness we might find light and life again.

Our God, after all, is a God of brokenness. That baby born under cover of night, in the lowliest of places, faced insurmountable odds. His parents faced a future that was uncertain, surrendering dreams that had been broken and trusting in promises that were, at best, not so clear.

In that seeming darkness, God worked. And in today's brokenness and darkness, God is working.

That is the promise of faith we trust in.

For all the darkness of Advent, Christmas promises light. It promises us that Christ has come, does come, and will come. We wait for and celebrate something we've already experienced: a moment of revelation . . . of **Incarnation**. And because we, in some sense, know for what we are waiting . . . the One for whom we are waiting . . . we wait in hope.

Not hope that that coming or this Christmas will be

VOCABULARY

Aleppo: A city in Syria that became a battleground in that nation's civil war until 2016, the year this article was written. More than 30,000 people, mostly civilians. Hospitals and schools were bombed, killing many children, and humanitarian aid was cut off.

incarnation: literally, to be made flesh, as God does in the person of Jesus to unite divinity and humanity.

the same, but that things will change. (And that we too will change in the process.) Hope that Love will come down and dwell among us, uniting us in our brokenness and revealing to us that brokenness shared is a blessing that helps to put flesh on God in our midst.

Meditating on the darkness of this season, I've been struck how God uses brokenness to shine through. In the words of Leonard Cohen, "Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in."

A world that is perfect is in no need of a savior, just as people who are perfect have no need for God. Our brokenness, both personal and communal, draws us into relationship. It allows us to see the light in the darkness and to celebrate tiny triumphs of goodness in the world and our lives, while also begging the question of why there is so much suffering in the world.

A God who becomes human knows there is no easy answer to that. Emmanuel stands with us in that suffering and calls for change. "God works in darkness," the tiny preacher in my head repeats.

In the darkness, the wind blew to part the waters of the Red Sea . . . and the people walked through.

In the darkness, a light shined to show wise men and shepherds the way . . . and they chose to follow.

God's work becomes our work — a labor of faith, hope and love.

We rejoice in that work this Christmas, mirroring the

light of that first silent night. We rest in the knowledge that we are not alone. Christ comes among us to dwell. No matter how bad the news seems, the Good News — the Word of God has taken on flesh and entered the brokenness.

Like lanterns in the darkness, we shine forth a love born within: our cracks transformed into guiding lights, pathways to justice and windows open to the world.

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AFTER YOU READ:

Consider a situation that you think is broken, either in the world or in your personal life.

- Who is hurt by this situation, and how are they affected?
- How could God be at work to bring hope to this situation?
- What might you personally do to help bring healing?

SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT: This reading is proclaimed at evening Mass on the night before Christmas, often celebrated at midnight. In it, the prophet Isaiah speaks of hope for hurting people:

*“The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
upon those who dwelt in the land of
gloom
a light has shone.*

*You have brought them abundant joy
and great rejoicing,
as they rejoice before you as at the
harvest,
as people make merry when dividing
spoils.*

*For the yoke that burdened them,
the pole on their shoulder,
and the rod of their taskmaster
you have smashed, as on the day of
Midian.*

*For every boot that tramped in battle,
every cloak rolled in blood,
will be burned as fuel for flames.*

*For a child is born to us, a son is given
us;
upon his shoulder dominion rests.
They name him Wonder-Counselor,
God-Hero,
Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.*

*His dominion is vast
and forever peaceful,
from David’s throne, and over his
kingdom,
which he confirms and sustains
by judgment and justice,
both now and forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do
this!”*

Isaiah 9:1-6

Alone, or with a partner, discuss:

- In your hopes in this holiday season, how might you focus more intently on the hope described in Isaiah?
- Who walks in darkness today? How does God work in their lives? How might you bring peace and joy to them this Advent?
- Which of the names that Isaiah uses for the Messiah encourages you the most? Why?

THE CHURCH'S CALL

Pope Francis urges us to not abandon hope in the dark times because God, with his love, walks with us.

"We have such need, in these times which appear dark, in which we sometimes feel disoriented at the evil and violence which surrounds us, at the distress of so many of our brothers and sisters. We need hope! We feel disoriented and even rather discouraged, because we are powerless and it seems this darkness will never end. ... When we are in darkness, in difficulty, we do not smile, and it is precisely hope which teaches us to smile in order to find the path that leads to God. One of the first things that happens to people who distance themselves from God is that they are people who do not smile. Perhaps they can break into a loud laugh, one after another, a joke, a chuckle—but their smile is missing! Only hope brings a smile: it is the hopeful smile in the expectation of finding God.

Life is often a desert, it is difficult to walk in life, but if we trust in God it can become beautiful and wide as a highway. Just never lose hope, just continue to believe, always, in spite of everything. When we are before a child, although we have many problems and many difficulties, a smile comes to us from within, because we see hope in front of us: a child is hope! And in this way we must be able to discern in life the way of hope which leads us to find God, God who became a Child for us. He will make us smile, he will give us everything!"

Pope Francis, General Audience, December 7, 2016

Reflection Questions:

- Both Pope Francis and Sr. Colleen Gibson believe that God works in today's broken and dark world. How do you see God bringing hope to people facing injustice and personal tragedies?
- Do you agree with Pope Francis when he says that God, who became a child for us, can make people smile?
- Did you know that on average every day, adults smile about 20 times and children smile about 400 times? Why do you think this is?
- Who or what makes you smile? How can sharing a smile with a stranger or someone who is having a hard day lift their spirits or transform the world around you?

SYNERGY WITH SISTERS

Read "[The God of Brokenness](#)," a poem by Sr. Colleen Gibson, who wrote the article you just read. Consider:

- Are we patient with God to fix what's broken in our world, like we must be with the healing of a broken arm, or do we expect quicker results?
- What separates us from God during this Advent season as we prepare for Christmas?
- What brings us nearer to God?

ACT

SELECT ANY OR ALL

1. It is important to keep up with the news, but many people experience “negative news fatigue.” It’s almost impossible to avoid news about war, violence and crises involving immigration and the environment. That news is becoming more graphic. Research shows that negative news produces increased sadness and anxiety.

During Advent, pay close attention to good news. Start off your day by visiting the [Good News Network](#), which reports positive news stories from around the globe (there’s even a free app). Share good news with your friends and family and keep track of whether good news lifts your spirits.

2. Seek the light of Christ by noticing the lights around you through the day – from sunrise to Christmas lights to the flickering of a candle. Keep a daily light list or use your phone to take pictures of the lights that help you to see the light and hope of Christ.
3. Take time to unwind after a busy day. Turn off the lights. Sit in darkness for a short time. Take a few deep breaths to relax and settle into a rhythm of steady breathing. Do you sense God’s presence in the darkness? What thoughts come to mind? Now, turn the light back on. Do you sense God’s presence in the light? Reflect your thoughts as you sit in the light.

PRAY

Come, Lord Jesus. You are my hope.

Come, Lord Jesus. You are my peace.

Come, Lord Jesus. You are my light.

Come Lord, Jesus. You are my strength.

Come Lord, Jesus. You are my joy.

Come Lord, Jesus. You are my healer.

Come Lord, Jesus. You are my friend.

Amen.

