

Global Poverty Bible Study

A New Year in God's World

By Alexis Coleman, Pastor, Harpers Ferry, W. VA

FIRST SESSION

As we move into the season of Epiphany, it is appropriate to take time to live with God's Word incarnate in Jesus Christ by shedding more light on the plight of the world's poorest people and our response to alleviate systemic suffering. We invite you to devote a few weeks to studying "A New Year in God's World."

"A New Year in God's World" author is Alexis Coleman, pastor of two United Methodist churches in Harpers Ferry, W. VA. She is a third-year practice in mission and ministry student at the General Board of Church & Society from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., and a certified candidate for Elders order in the Western North Carolina Conference.

This five-week congregation-based group Bible study is an invitation to deepen our awareness of Scripture:

- In the literal sense — How do we hear God's Word speaking for itself?
- In the allegorical sense — How do we receive and digest God's Word personally?
- In the moral sense — How do we respond to God's Word inviting us to take action?

"A New Year in God's World" includes five weekly Bible studies with short Scripture reading, questions for group reflection and action, facts on the state of the global poor and congregational prayers.

For more information on how to use this study please contact Alexis Coleman at Acolemand@umc-gbcs.org or Neal Christie at NChristie@umc-gbcs.org

Gathering and Introductions

Opening Prayer

Biblical Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ²a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; ⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. ⁹What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

¹¹He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. (NRSV)

Lectio Divina Shared in Community[1]

Listening for the Gentle Touch of Christ the Word (*The Literal Sense*)

1. One person reads aloud (twice) the passage of scripture, as others are attentive to some segment that is especially meaningful to them.
2. Silence for 1-2 minutes: Each hears and silently repeats a word or phrase that attracts.
3. Sharing aloud: A word or phrase that has attracted each person. A simple statement of one or a few words. *No elaboration.*

How Christ the Word speaks to me (*The Allegorical Sense*)

1. Second reading: the same passage by another person.
2. Silence for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "Where does the content of this reading touch my life today?"
3. Sharing aloud: Briefly. "I hear..., I see..."

What Christ the Word invites me to do (*The Moral Sense*)

1. Third reading by still another person.
2. Silence for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "I believe that God wants me to _____ today/this week".
3. Sharing aloud: at somewhat greater length the results of each one's reflection. Be especially aware of what is shared by the person to your right.
4. After full sharing, pray for the person to your right.

Note: Anyone may pass at any time. If instead of sharing with the group you prefer to pray silently, simply state this aloud and conclude your silent prayer with Amen.

Global Poverty: The Grim Picture

Facts and Statistics

Each day:

- 20,000 people die of extreme poverty
- 8,000 children die of malaria
- 5,000 mothers and fathers die of tuberculosis
- 7,500 young adults die of AIDS

Thousands more die of diarrhea, respiratory infections and other diseases that prey on bodies weakened by chronic hunger.[2]

There are three degrees of poverty:

- **Extreme** – Households cannot meet basic needs for survival. They are chronically hungry, unable to access health care, lack the amenities of safe drinking water and sanitation, cannot afford education for some or all of the children, and perhaps lack rudimentary shelter, such as a roof to keep the rain out of the hut, a chimney to remove the smoke from the cook stove, and basic articles of clothing, such as shoes. Extreme poverty occurs only in developing countries. The World Bank classifies these as people who have \$1 of income per day (measured at purchasing power parity). In 2001 there were approximately 1.1 billion people living in extreme poverty: 93% of the world's extreme poor live in East Asia, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In East Asia 15% of the population was considered to be extremely poor in 2001, in South Asia it was 32%, and in sub-Saharan Africa it is almost 50%. Latin America's extreme poverty rate is around 10% and Eastern Europe is around 4%.
- **Moderate** – Basic needs are met, but just barely. Income is between \$1 and \$2 per day. In 2001 there were approx. 1.6 billion people living in moderate poverty: 87% of the moderate poor live in East Asia, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa; 15% of Latin Americans live in moderate poverty.
- **Relative** – Lack access to cultural goods, entertainment, recreation, and to quality health care, educations and other prerequisites for upward social mobility. The relative poor are in high-income countries.[3]

According to Jeffrey Sachs, ending poverty means: 1) to end the plight of the extreme poor who struggle daily for survival and 2) to ensure that all of the world's poor have the chance to climb the ladder of development.[4]

Discussion

Read the following quotes by Jeffrey Sachs and discuss the questions that which follow:

“Everybody on Earth can and should enjoy basic standards of nutrition, health, water and sanitation, shelter, and other minimum needs for survival, well-being, and participation in society.”[5]

“As a global society, we should ensure that the international rules of the game in economic management do not advertently or inadvertently set snares among the lower rungs of the ladder in

the form of inadequate development assistance, protectionist trade barriers, destabilizing global financial practices, poorly designed rules for intellectual property, and the like, that prevent the low-income world from climbing up the rungs of development.”[6]

1. On first reading, what is your initial response to Sachs's assertions? How strongly do you agree or disagree with him?
2. If you have a flip chart or chalk board, list some reasons for agreeing and for disagreeing with Sachs so everyone can see them. Otherwise, jot them down on a sheet of paper.
3. What do you see as the primary barriers to making either of these assertions a reality?
4. How do you think other people you know would react to Sachs?

Applying the Biblical Text

In the Hebrew Bible the book of Ecclesiastes is called Koheleth for the author of the book. Koheleth claims to have been king over Israel in Jerusalem (verse 1:12), but the word Koheleth means either: 1) one who addresses an assembly, such as a speaker or preacher, or 2) one who collects or gathers.

If the latter is the case, it could be that Koheleth gathered wisdom sayings for the sake of teaching. There was controversy among Judaism about the worth of Koheleth being included as sacred Scripture.

While some Jews believed that Solomon was the author, others stressed its religious ideas. Koheleth's intention was not to teach about God, but rather to tell what he had discovered regarding life and what man might gain from life.

Koheleth was not a prophet declaring the word of God, he teaches neither faith nor obedience to God. Instead, he presents reflection and research as to what humans must accept as truth for the guidance of life. In the world as Koheleth saw it every possible occurrence or event is followed by an event of a contrary character. He advances this concept of opposites in order to teach that God has made everything beautiful in its time.[7]

In chapter 3 Koheleth says that nothing is better for man than that he should be happy, that happiness is a gift from God, but life is just an eternal round of events. The lack of any apparent purpose in things is the worst feature of life. Humans have no advantage over the beast. Both have the same fate, which is death and the return to the dust.[8]

Jeffrey Sachs says that, economically speaking, we can end extreme poverty in our generation (by 2025).

- Does the historical and theological background of Ecclesiastes diminish or increase its value to us as Christians?
- Do we believe that there is a time for everything?
- Is this the time to end extreme poverty?
- How do you feel about Koheleth's statement in Ecclesiastes 3:13?
- While we don't see extreme poverty in the United States, the relative poor live all around us. What is our Christian responsibility to the relative poor?

Leaving

Have someone read Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 again.

Pray: Our God in Heaven, in this New Year direct our paths to your will. Give us a heart for those who are poor, remind us daily that you mourn with them in their plight, and guide us in our quest to care for them. In Christ's name, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

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[1] <http://www.rc.net/saginaw/srsclare/lectio.html>, accessed January 7, 2008.

[2] Sachs, Jeffrey D., The End of Poverty, (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 2005), p. VII.

[3] Ibid., p. 20-23.

[4] Ibid., p. 24.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] The Interpreter's Bible, volume 5, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 3 and 17.

[8] Ibid., p. 5.