At Kairos and the Freedom Church of the Poor we see the holiday season of Advent and Christmas as a time for revolutionary hope, a time to reflect on what it means that God is preparing the way to transform the world from the bottom up. This year Freedom Church, in collaboration with the Kairos Policy Team, have created a “Birth of a Movement” Fact Sheet. This fact sheet exposes the realities of suffering and injustice in our society (policy), shares insight (testimonies) from those organizing and resisting that injustice, and offers Biblical truths and analysis about the Christmas season, which counter the traditional narratives that are paraded out every year to reinforce the system that kills the poor and creates poverty. Taken together this fact sheet clarifies the intimate connection between these biblical myths and the policies and other charity-based “solutions” which actually perpetuate poverty, underscoring the need to organize our communities in a way that can understand and take on both.

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Week 1: Ending Poverty and Homelessness

Poverty and homelessness in our nation, and world, are the result of policy choices, not individual failings. We put these facts next to truths about Jesus’ birth - that it was a subversive challenge to the Roman Empire and that it is a story that calls for fundamental (systemic) reordering of the world which will be heralded in by the poor and “least of these,” not Caesar. During this season, we celebrate the birth of a new way, with the power to transform systems of domination and death, and bring forth a non-dominating system of love and life. You are invited each week to use these facts, stories and images to engage your community in a discussion about these themes.

Questions for reflection: How has the Christmas story and the Christian tradition more broadly been used to justify empire? How does an organized movement from below help to counter these myths and put forth a different vision for the world?

“Being poor isn’t a sin. Poverty is a sin.”
-Rev. Tonny Algood, Mobile, Alabama

Homelessness is a Policy Choice

Homelessness is an extreme expression of a system that has failed on many levels—denial of healthcare, lack of living wages, systemic racism, and militarism.

Did you know?

- Before the pandemic, 9-11 million people were homeless or on the verge of becoming homeless. This includes between 2-3.5 million people who were living in shelters, transitional housing or tent cities and more than 7 million people who lost their home and moved in with others.
- A full-time worker earning the federal minimum wage ($7.25) cannot afford an average two bedroom apartment anywhere in America.
- At the height of the pandemic, 30-40 million people were at risk of losing their housing. With the eviction moratorium lifted, evictions are on the rise and could surpass pre-pandemic levels.

Confronting the Culture of Empire on Black Friday

In a profit-driven society, human life is only valued as much as it is able to consume products or create value for the wealthy. Every year, on the day after Thanksgiving, Americans gather for a civic ritual that reinforces this theology of empire. For almost 20 years, Black Friday has been the busiest shopping day of the year and it traditionally signifies the start of the Christmas shopping season. While sleeping in tents outdoors is criminalized for the poor, it is encouraged for people who are camped out waiting for the next big sale.

It says in the Bible...

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you” (Read Luke 2:7-12)

The story of Jesus’ birth makes it clear that Jesus was born poor, to poor parents, in a deeply impoverished part of the Roman empire. The promise of his birth was delivered to and received by poor (homeless) shepherds sleeping in a field (Luke 2:8-9) not to kings and rulers. The story describes Jesus as a “savior,” which was a consciously subversive choice of words; it was the same word that Roman conquerors used to describe themselves to those they conquered.

Not unlike today, charity was used by the Roman Empire to mask the deep structural inequality that benefited the powerful. In Jesus’ time, Roman monuments and statues abounded with inscriptions of praise for the great charity of Caesar (eg. Res Gestae Divi Augustie). This helped obscure the reality that their charity was actually stolen from conquered people.

The 1968 Poor People’s Campaign’s Committee of 100 - Statement to US Government Agencies

“We come to you as representatives of Black, brown and white Americans who are starving in this land of plenty. We come to you because people who want to work can’t find jobs....we come to you with a direct request. We ask you to eliminate programs that try to fit poor people to a system that has systematically excluded them from sharing in America’s plenty. We say that the system must change and adjust to the needs of millions who are unemployed and under-employed.... We have come here to say that we don’t think it’s too much to ask for a decent place to live in, at reasonable prices, in a country with a Gross National Product of $800 billion. We don’t think it’s too radical to want to choose the type of housing and the location. We don’t think it’s asking for pie in the sky to want to live in neighborhoods where our families can live and grow up with dignity...”

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Week 2: Immigration and Housing

The story of Christmas is a story of challenging empire. Jesus, who was born to poor refugee parents in a poor part of the Roman Empire, is cast as “savior” not because he will magically save us all, but because he reminds us of a way to bring peace to the world that is rooted in truth, justice and love for all people. This way rejects the way of empire that seeks peace through violence and domination, by building walls, militarization, and sewing hate and division among people.

Question for discussion: In the Christmas story (and Las Posadas) Mary and Joseph seek refuge and are rejected. What are some of the places where you or those in your community feel shut out, rejected, or denied access? And how does the birth of a movement address that?

Policy Violence in Immigration

For centuries, immigrants have been the scapegoats for political elites to blame the worsening economic conditions - all while they are the ones passing the policies that harm the poor and homeless.

Did you know?

- Immigrants contribute an estimated $492 billion in taxes each year but are barred from many public assistance programs.
- Even when they were eligible to receive advance CTC payments in 2022, families with immigrant parents were less likely to receive them.
- Since 2002, over 5 million people have been deported by ICE. Over 25,000 individuals are in immigration detention centers right now, and at least 300,000 families and individuals are under heavy surveillance by ICE and Border Patrol.
- Approximately 1000 migrants die at the US-Mexico border every year. That’s three people a day.

Testimony from the Community

“Our immigration system has separated more than 2000 children from their parents at the border since 2007. It has built more than 1000 miles of border walls and sent migrants to isolated deserts and mountains at the border, where they are dying at a rate of 1000 per year. That means 3 migrants die every day. It has pushed 11 million immigrants in the United States to live in poverty and ongoing persecution.” (Fernando Garcia, Border Network for Human Rights)

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It says in the Bible...

“When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’” (Matthew 2:13)

Before the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph had to travel for a census, which was required to ensure more comprehensive payment of tax/tribute to Rome (Luke 2:1-7). The demand for tribute was a great economic burden on people and led many to flee their ancestral land and find work in distant lands. Joseph and Mary, who may have found work in their adopted home, had to return to Jerusalem where they were officially registered and it didn’t matter that it came during the last days of her pregnancy. This was what life was like for the vast majority of people living under the ‘peace’ established by Caesar. It is important to remember that the gospel writers intentionally chose to describe the birth of a savior under these circumstances and against these violent forms of control, in order to both critique that system and lift up a new way.

After the birth of Jesus, the Holy Family was forced to escape to Egypt, fleeing political persecution, as Herod began killing children whom he perceived to be a threat (Matthew 2:13-15). It was Empire that created the conditions to make the Holy Family refugees, and it is Empire that creates those conditions today for the Central, Caribbean and South American people who come to the US seeking refuge.
Week 3: Parent and Child Health and Welfare

During Christmas we are bombarded with images and feel-good stories of families coming together and the less fortunate being cared for by the more fortunate. For many the reality of this time (and most of the time) is much different. These myths around Christmas help to hide the reality of deep systemic poverty impacting all of us, but especially women, children and people of color. This kind of poverty and injustice won’t be ended by seasonal goodwill, but from a movement of the poor and the revolutionary leadership of those most impacted, like Mary, who in Luke 1 declares that, “God has cast down the mighty, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty!”

Questions for discussion: In her song, the Magnificat, Mary tells of a God who lifts the lowly and fills the hungry with good things. Why do you think the true message of Mary’s song has been suppressed throughout history? How do movements of the poor live into Mary’s message?

Care Work Policy Facts

Christmas is not a season for charity, but a season for revolutionary change - to raise wages, expand welfare programs, and eliminate the conditions that keep millions of us poor, especially parents and children.

Did you know?

- Millions of families are struggling to find care services for the elderly and children. In part, this is due to the fact that care workers, who are over 90% women and disproportionately women of color, are vastly underpaid.
- Unpaid care work would have totaled $1.5 trillion in 2019, at the current minimum wage.
- Ending poverty is not only the right thing to do, it makes good economic sense. Every year, child poverty costs our society more than $1 trillion, but public assistance like a child allowance would benefit society by approximately 8 times more than its cost.

It says in the Bible...

“...My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” (Read the Magnificat, Luke 1:46-55)

Mary the mother of Jesus is revered in the Christian tradition. During Christmas time we often find her portrayed as a meek and holy woman whose only contribution to the world was giving birth to Jesus. We don’t often hear about the community Mary comes from and how they hid resources in underground caves to avoid being taxed by the Romans. She and her family were revolutionaries. Mary was a young unwed mother and a powerful leader. When she discovered a new life was growing in her she felt the power and connection to God. Mary proclaimed how through her and the life she bore God would, “cast down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly.”

Testimony from the Community

“For those families we organized with that were receiving the CTC, it was a life changer. And we don’t like to hear that a lot of folks were catching up on rent with this money, because this money is supposed to ensure that your children have food on their table, that they have shoes on their feet, the school materials that they need, and access to extracurricular activities that they usually wouldn’t have access to. Using this money to catch up on rent is not a big win.” (Kenia Alcocer, Union de Vecinos)

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The hymn 'Mary Did You Know?' is a contradiction to the Magnificat

Controversy has existed over Mark Lowry’s popular Christmas song, “Mary Did You Know.” While some love the sweet yet haunting melody and the portrayal of Mary as sweet and gentle young mother, others argue that this portrayal erases the pivotal role Mary played in God’s salvation plan. But on both sides of the argument, whether we decide the question itself is literal or rhetorical - this popular Christmas song that is sung in thousands of churches across the country and repeated on Christmas playlists - contradicts the radical song that Mary herself proclaimed in the Magnificat. If we listen over and over to the melodic lyrics of ‘Mary Did You Know’ we risk forgetting Mary’s revolutionary message that the powerful would be brought down from their thrones and the lowly be lifted up. While many of the songs we sing during the holiday season are tender and bright and fill us with “holiday cheer,” they distract us from remembering the true mission of Jesus and the Holy Family - to build a movement that would bring good news to the poor, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty.
Week 4: Pray for the Dead and Fight Like Hell for the Living

This economic and political system we live in is killing us. In the US (the wealthiest country in the world) 250,000 people a year die from poverty. Around the time of Jesus’ birth the vast majority of people were poor (some estimate over 90%). It was a time of deep darkness where the lives of most were not valued. The story of Jesus’ birth is a story of the light of God persisting and being ever reborn into the world to resist the forces that take and degrade life. During this longest night of the year we remember the great suffering in our land, the leaders who have fallen fighting against it, and the fighters who continue to take up that struggle today.

Questions for Discussion: How does a country have so much wealth alongside so much poverty? What are some of the common understandings we encounter in our society about who the poor are, what poverty looks like, and what to do about it?

Exposing Policy Violence

Christmas is not a season for charity, but a season for revolutionary change - to raise wages, expand welfare programs, and eliminate the conditions that keep millions of us poor, especially parents and children.

Did you know?
- Instead of providing affordable and safe housing, the response to rising housing insecurity has been to criminalize unhoused people. As of 2022, encampments are illegal in at least one city in every state. Camping Ban States
- Every year spent in prison reduces life expectancy by 2 years.
- On average, 250,000 people die every year from poverty and inequality. That’s 700 people a day.

Homeless Not Helpless

“[Ending homelessness] can be done, if people take the initiative of breaking into these houses. Forget about it being against the law. I don’t care. Hell, I’m dying in the streets. That should be against the law.”
- Ron Casanova, National Union of the Homeless

(Left image) In 1990, Ron Casanova, cuts the lock off a HUD house as part of a coordinated housing take over that sought to build power among the poor and expose the housing crisis in this country.

Confronting False Charity and Compassion in Mass Media

During this season, we are accustomed to seeing Santa Claus outside of grocery stores and shopping malls collecting donations for the Salvation Army. And in movies, ads and other mass media, the Christmas story is used to reinforce that charity is the solution to poverty. Giving out blankets, having coat drives and serving hot meals are all important and necessary projects of survival for our communities, but they are not the solution for homelessness. If we believe that homelessness is caused by individual moral failing on the part of impacted people, then charity is the solution, but if we see that homelessness is caused by policy violence then policy change is the solution. This season is often seen as a charity drive but when we center the perspective of the poor and dispossessed, it has to become an organizing drive, because the way to change our conditions is through our unity as the poor.

It says in the Bible...

Part of the reason that the Christian tradition celebrates the birth of Jesus on Dec 25th is because this is about the time of the longest night of the year, the winter solstice (at least in the northern hemisphere). Gospel writers filled the story of Jesus’ birth with images of light and radiance emerging out of darkness as a way to challenge similar imagery used by the Roman Empire to talk about Caesar. In Luke 2:8-14 we read of luminous angels appearing to poor, homeless shepards asleep in the fields to announce the birth of a savior. In Matthew 2:1-12 a brilliant star shines in the night to guide wise men “from the East” (outsiders?) to the newborn savior. The Christmas story proclaims that out of the darkness (the darkness of suffering under Empire) comes hope. For them that hope came in the human form of Jesus - a poor person born of poor parents in an obscure corner of the Roman empire. This is who comes into the world as God’s promise of a new way and as a condemnation of the way of domination (the way Caesar). The promise of following the way of Jesus was not a guarantee of happiness in heaven after we die, as many Christian traditions choose to interpret this story, but it was the promise of the possibility of establishing a way of truth, justice, and love in this world. “Out of darkness let light shine!” (Genesis 1:3)

“Pray for the Dead and Fight Like Hell for the Living”
-Mother Jones

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