



The GATHERING

*"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your
children from the east and gather you from the west"*

—Isaiah 43:5-7



MennoniteUSA.org/wil

The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5–7

Gathering Work



When I was nine, my mom moved across an ocean and left me behind. It was her choice, but a heart-wrenching one. She had to weigh the fallout of a disastrous marriage against the cost of being separated from her daughter. For decades, I carried the loss of my mother just as I was beginning to understand what it meant to be brown and female in a world that was quietly—and now not so quietly—intolerant outside the white male norm. I lived in the gap between what could have been and what was. I often wondered if our relationship could ever be repaired.

My own experience has afforded me a small window into the overwhelming violations of human dignity and the wanton destruction of families that we see happening across our country. I know what it is like to be a child asking why your mother cannot come to your birthday party. I know what it is like to celebrate Christmas over the phone.

Today, hundreds of thousands of children are painfully enduring separation from their parents due to the mass deportation campaign carried out by the Trump administration.¹ Some babies may only come to know their fathers through a phone screen. Entire families have disappeared from their communities, leaving holes in our social fabric. Hundreds of children will spend this Christmas in jail.

A woman in my congregation recently stood up at church and, through tears, kept repeating, "If God can create the universe, how can He allow this to happen?" Eventually, we were all crying with her. That question sits inside many of us: How can this happen? And how can this ever be repaired?

What I know, and what I cling to, is that God is a gatherer. God heals brokenness. God welds families that have been torn apart and scattered across the earth. Since becoming a Christian, I have witnessed God gather my mom and me in ways too tender and miraculous to fully describe here. Even though an ocean still separates us most days, I have never felt more held by her love or more connected to her heart.

So when I stand before my congregation on another Sunday and see a spouse's empty seat, a godmother joining worship over video call from the detention center, or a mother suddenly thousands of miles away, I declare what I know to be true: No wall can keep out God's justice. No razor wire fence can stop God's healing grace. No political agenda is more durable than the arrival of God's kingdom. And God's love cannot fail to cross and gather us once again.

Questions

How can you and your community join God's gathering work this season? What connections can you build, even across distances, that draw others into a beloved community?

Dianne Garcia
Pastor of Iglesia Cristiana Roca de Refugio



¹ This estimate is based on a survey conducted by the Welcoming Communities Coalition in San Antonio and extrapolated to the whole country. Approximately 40% of those already detained or deported—a number greater than 500,000 people nationwide—have one or more children living in the United States.

The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5–7

Tree of Life

They start lining up at 7 a.m. at 630 Sansome Street—pressed against the building for shelter from the wind that whips through downtown San Francisco. They're here for ICE check-ins. An hour early, because lateness can trigger devastating consequences.

It's early in the second term of our current U.S. President, before we were organized with signs and songs, and sometimes clowns to lighten the mood. It's just my

partner and me. I hold a spot for someone I've never met. When he arrives (let's call him Luis), we tell him we can't go inside but will wait and pray. We promise to text every ten minutes so he knows he's not alone. None of us say what we all know: he might not come out.



At 8 a.m., Luis shows his papers and disappears through the door. We begin our vigil, stomping our feet to stay warm. *From the east I'll bring your children; from the west I'll gather you.* We stand like trees by the water, Trees of Life.

Five times we text. His replies are brief but deeply relieving: *Sigo esperando. Todavía no me han trasladado a una habitación pequeña.* ("I'm still waiting. They haven't moved me to a small room.") Such a move would alert us of impending deportation. Six times. Seven times. And then—he emerges! Our hearts leap. "Luis!" We embrace, giddy with relief. He'll go to work now, thankfully having missed just over an hour's pay. Tonight, he'll return to his family.

image: original
artwork by Pat Plude

Like trees standing by the water, we stood with him through one of his most vulnerable hours. Trees of Life. Do not fear. We are with you

Question

How have you been a Tree of Life for those navigating deeply vulnerable circumstances?



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

Weary and Persistent Hope

My mother-in-law, Miyoung Park, was born in 1942 near Pyongyang, Korea, before the peninsula was divided. Her father was a teacher and an underground freedom fighter against Japanese colonial rule. When she was seven, one of his students came to their home and said, "Teacher, please come with me. It will not take long." She remembers her father stepping out the door and never coming back.



Image: Miyoung Park with her husband and two sons, Hyun and Kyung Hur (1983)

A year later, when the Korean War broke out in 1950, her family fled south, carrying the piercing grief that even if her father returned, they would not be there to welcome him. Seventy-five years later and without an official peace treaty, millions of families are still divided. Sometimes my mother-in-law chuckles and says that her *abuhji* might be alive somewhere. In that laugh, I hear the longing of a child still waiting to be gathered into the embrace of her father.

In this Advent season, I remember the many families near and far who are suffering from separation and longing to hold each other. I cling to the promise of a God who gathers, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. Our God does not forget those scattered by war, by borders, or by detention cells and policies that tear families apart.

So I light a candle for the God who gathers from east and west, who calls to the north and south: *Give them back. Do not detain them.* I light a candle for families divided long ago and those separated even now, that their spirits may be renewed as they wait with weary but persistent hope of coming together someday. And I light a candle for our communities of faith, that we may vigil together through times of long waiting.

Prayer

Merciful God, hear the cries of your children who are separated from their loved ones this season. May your promise and presence sustain us as we wait expectantly for you to gather us again. Amen.



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

Lament & Healing

Fearlessly, we gather as daughters of the God who is mystery, the heavenly midwife, and the One whose chalice is large enough to hold all our tears. We gather as great-granddaughters of those who endured the Middle Passage, enslavement, and rape. We gather as granddaughters of those who resisted Jim Crow, segregation, and state-sanctioned murder.



Lamentations by
Rev. Dionne Nicole
Carter. Used with
permission

We go to the Hush Harbor, the clearing or the praise house to lament and heal through ring shouts, prayers, and songs of deliverance. In this sacred space, Black women's pain is neither ignored nor dismissed. Here, our anger is righteous, and where our tears are prayers. In this gathering, this sacred space, we "stand flat-footed and our toes on the ground," listening for words of lament, healing, and hope from our ancestor mothers and daughters- Hagar, Rachel, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Sandra Bland, and Breonna Taylor. We say their names and remember countless mothers, daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters who cradled families and held together communities with the strength imbued by Mother Sophia.

We enter with grief and questions. We grieve what has been lost. We grieve what has been silenced. We grieve for those who have transitioned, for broken relationships, and for bodies burdened by illness.

And when we have poured out all that we carry, we claim the healing that is ours in the God who promised, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you." Isaiah 43:5

LET THE HEALING BEGIN!

Prayer

God, who sees, show us the path that you have for us. Speak life into our weary souls. Help us to move past our fear as we take each step and walk into the healing and hope that you promised. Ase' & Amen.



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

Move the Pickles

These verses in Isaiah 43:5-7 refer to a people who have been living in chaos. It was a great time of political upheaval for the Israelites. They felt trapped, fearful, and abandoned. How did the Israelites hear Isaiah's words? Were they comforting or so far from their reality that they seemed impossible?



Photo: Steph
Greene / unsplash

Our world mirrors theirs in many ways. So where is the good news? How do we speak of hope in a world filled with terror?

Advent reminds us we wait for the child who brings hope. Jesus' world was not so different from our own and yet, Jesus showed us how to live amid despair. He embodied love that healed, that listened, that forgave. He took a break when he needed it.

Hope can feel hard to find today. In our house, we say, "Sometimes you just need to move the pickles." It started with my dad who often claimed he couldn't find something in the fridge. We'd say, "Dad, you've got to move the pickles." Sometimes you have to move things around to see what's there.

Finding hope these days is a little like that. We want to trust God's movement, but all we see is the hopelessness right in front of us. So we have to really look for it. We have to move things around a little

for signs of hope. It might be the ways people have been able to lend help because of connections they have. It might be a warm smile from a stranger. It might be an imaginative idea that someone came up with to meet a need.

Those inspirations for hope are out there, if we look. What has given you hope lately? How might you be a voice of hope for someone else?

Prayer

God of hope, open our eyes to stories around us that are giving us hope this advent season. Help us to live in hope through connection, imagination, and reunion. Amen.

Michelle Dula

Pastor at Blossom Hill Mennonite Church



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5–7

Remote Sensing

Every year around Advent, mami pulls out our old family video tapes from a dusty box in the garage. Many of these tapes are worn, having traveled to South America and back. The story of how we ended up in this country – stranded on the side of the street, undocumented, with only a couple of suitcases – is better left for another day. What matters here is that my mami brought a camcorder from Peru. And she loved recording everything: late night homework checks, our laughter and bickering, us singing songs and holding up drawings we'd later send with these tapes.



Image: Daniela Lázar-Manalo holding a camcorder, 1997

Toward the end of each recording, my parents would appear alone in the frame – as if they'd stepped away once we kids were asleep – and truly update our family in Peru. Mami usually fast-forwards this part, but I can always tell when the updates are light and when their composure breaks...

It wasn't until I was in graduate school reading about oral history methodologies that I came across the words, remote sensing. Apparently, there was a whole term assigned to this practice among immigrant families who share their stories via audio, tapes or letters with families back home, reaching across distance, attempting to bridge this gaping absence.

Every year we watch these tapes that encapsulate the rawness of that impossible time. We remember the single bedroom that bonded us, the creativity sparked by limited resources, the joy music brought, and the release of tears as we reached for our roots, for connection, restlessly praying that one day God would gather us.

To be loved is to belong. No distance, no border, no absence can sever us from each other as long as we refuse to stop reaching.

Prayer

God of the scattered and separated: Where does love fail to find us?



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5–7

A conversation with my children

My children had questions on the ride home from a simple play date—the running and giggling, the sneaked Laffy Taffy, the velcro

dartboard—and the moment they each held baby Julián for the first time.

"Mom, will our friends get taken away?" my eight-year-old, Bennett, asked.

"I hope not," I said. "I really, really hope not."

"But how would they do it?"

"ICE agents," I explained. "They work for the government. They could

come to the door. They could take our friends to detention."

"In handcuffs?"

"In zip ties—faster and cheaper."

"Like the ones in Daddy's shop?"

"Yes."

"But why would they go to jail if they haven't done anything wrong?" five-year-old Owen asked.

"Exactly," I said, my voice catching.

"They haven't done anything wrong. They just wanted to move to a new place. It makes no sense."

*Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you...*

"What would we do if ICE came?" Bennett pressed.

"We wouldn't open the door. If they got in somehow, we would take a video. We would warn neighbors. We would call people who could help. We would do whatever we could."

"Can't we force them to stop?"

"It wouldn't work." Silence.

"But this is why we color posters, why we call our leaders, why we send care packages," I continued. "This is why we gather with people who worry about things we don't. Your experience of living in Colorado is not everyone's experience. Some families live with fear every day. This breaks God's heart."

*I will say to the north, 'Give them up,'
and to the south, 'Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the ends of the earth...'*

"God is with people who have moved here recently," I told them. "And that's where we want to be too."



Image: oil painting
by Adrienne De
Forrest of Boulder
Mennonite Church



Amy Zimbelman
Conference Minister of Mountain States
Mennonite Conference.

The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5–7

Migration Patterns

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you... I will gather you." These words from Isaiah 43 echo through this season when the nights grow long and the distances between loved ones feel even longer. Advent reminds us that God's heart is turned toward the scattered—toward those who wait by the phone for news from a detained spouse, toward children who set a place at the table for a parent who will not come home, toward communities fractured by systems designed to divide rather than embrace.



The Advent story begins with Mary and Joseph, far from home, seeking refuge and safety as they awaited the birth of their child. Their journey mirrors the plight of countless families today, who face a life without the support and presence of loved ones due to conflict, economic necessity, or unjust policies. The trauma of such separation—whether in detention centers, across borders, or within communities—leaves deep psychological and emotional wounds that persist for years.

Monarch butterflies.
Photo: Erika Lowe /
Unsplash

This is a season of expectant waiting and hope for the coming of Christ, a time when our hearts yearn for the peace and wholeness that only God can bring. Like monarch butterflies scattered by unexpected winds, carried far beyond where they ever expected to be and yet, even in separation, having an internal compass with a pull toward home and toward one another.

Advent is that God-given instinct: a quiet, persistent orientation toward reunion, following a hope that refuses to disappear. Just as the butterflies navigate thousands of miles by a sun they cannot always see, we listen as Advent whispers that the winds will shift, even when they feel stronger than one's own wings. We wait for God to gather every heart – every fragile, beautiful wing, back into the warmth of community and belonging.

Prayer

God, this season let us hold the pain of separated families in our prayers and in our advocacy, working as an Epiphany light to guide all toward hope and safety.



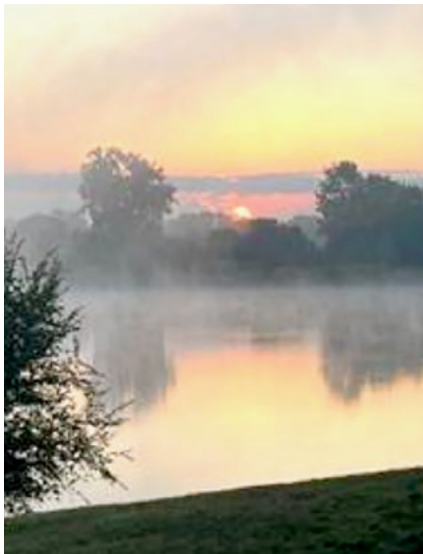
The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

Letting Go

Most mornings I walk a path around a pond that's close to my home in Goshen, IN. Sometimes I change up the location, but I like rhythms and patterns. This path is circular, and something about walking in a circle is comforting.



Sunrise at Fidler's Pond by Joanne Gallardo

It's at that early morning hour that I gather with all in the natural world. Trees, grass, ducks, rocks, bushes, and plants. I gather with a diverse cross section of fellow walkers, people who speak Spanish, Ukrainian, or Pennsylvania Dutch. I'm also in communion with the un-natural world—trains, cars, and semis that line the major highway nearby. It's a small price to pay for a beautiful park.

What gathers this group of people together is nature and beauty. Sure, some are exercising, others are getting some time outside, but for whatever reason we do what we do, we're all at that place at that time of the morning for a purpose. That purpose is bigger and broader than us, whether we recognize it or not. We say hi, we wave, sometimes we stop to talk. And, it's ok to look down and focus on your own trail. There's no judgement.

Isaiah 43:5-7 is a call to bring God's children back to God. Verse 6 says, in the Common English Bible, "I will say to the north, Give them back! And to the south, do not detain them!" The word "detain" carries a lot of meaning right now in our

country. For some, the powers and principalities in our government are detaining people from their lives and families, and we rebuke that as the antithesis of the prophet Isaiah's words. For those of us for whom that is not a reality, detention of a different sort can happen.

What's holding us back? What are we allowing to hold us back? You can have all the privilege and freedom in the world and not live your life. Lately, I've been feeling being held back by grind culture. I've girl bossed, I've hustled, and I'm tired. I feel called to live a softer life, one where I'm more gentle to myself getting more in tune to the real reason I get out of bed in the morning.

God calls us to live and gather, and to not hold ourselves back. God wants us to give ourselves into communion, with God's people (both like and unlike us), nature, and God's work in the world. For me, this happens at a little pond close to where I live in my very midwestern town. For you, it may be somewhere else. Wherever you are being called to commune, don't hold yourself back.

Question: What holds you back? What calls you to gathering?

Prayer: Dear Creator, as we commune with you and your natural world, help us give ourselves the permission to let go and to gather.



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

Connecting Our Challenges and Suffering

As I look back, 2025 has become a year of reflection. On June 07, 2025, my beloved mother, Katsi Ndandu, was rushed to the Emergency Room. I never thought that she would not return home again. This was followed by days and weeks of heartache, pain, and uncertainty. Then I realized: it was not only my family that was facing challenges, but thousands of other families felt my same pain and uncertainty.



Mother's home village of Balu, DRC taken by Helen Mfwilwakanda

Immigration issues dominated the news this year. ICE raids were taking place in several cities. Families were being separated, loved ones taken away. ICE agents didn't care if it was a parent, young, or elderly person. The brutality of the raids was senseless. What happened to democracy and the American dream? Why so much pain, heartache, and desolation around?

On Tuesday, September 09, 2025, my beloved mother, Katsi Ndandu passed away. As we went to say goodbye, she looked calm, peaceful, just as if she was fast asleep. Then, I remembered the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up" (John 11:11, ESV). Yes,

indeed, Jesus is the Life and the Resurrection. He is our hope, the only hope. He is the one who will gather us all home. He is the only One who can heal the brokenhearted. Who else can change the hearts of those who are in authority? Who else can fill their hearts with love, mercy, and compassion?

My brother, my sister, and I took my mother back to the Democratic Republic of Congo to be buried in her village, Balu. After the burial, we went back to Kinshasa, the capital city. From the window of a high-rise restaurant, I looked down at the city and saw so much misery. If the leaders of nations were God-fearing, their people would happily live in their countries and not go to other countries in search of a better life and become targets of discrimination.

Let us continue to pray for justice and become a voice for the voiceless.

Questions:

How can your present sufferings connect you with the sufferings of those impacted by ICE? How does Jesus bring you hope in the midst of these sufferings?



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5–7

God is with us



"Do not fear, for I am with you." These words echo throughout the scriptures, spoken to people living in the heartache and complexity of life, from those living in exile, to a teenager who finds out she is pregnant from an angel appearing to her. I both find comfort in these words, do not fear, and sometimes feel confused by them. There are times that it is reasonable to fear and cry out in fear, anger, and confusion. I appreciate that Isaiah does not stop at "do not fear", but continues, I am with you and will gather you.

The season of advent offers a space to reflect on the significance of these words: "I am with you."

Image by Christie
Dahlin

Part of the beauty and profoundness of the incarnation is that God loved us so much that God wanted to be with us, wanted to fully experience what it means to be human and so came, as a fully human baby, born into the complexity and messiness of the world. Since Jesus came and experienced what it means to be human, in our times of loss and suffering, we can know that Jesus knows what it is to suffer, to have pain, to have longings. For me this deepens the words, "I am with you."

Part of why I love advent is because it offers a space in the church calendar to name the areas of longing in our lives, to slow down, to wait and wonder at what could unfold. All is indeed not well in our world and in Advent, we can name that, while holding the tension of the possibility of new life, of hope, of the incarnate Christ coming to dwell among us.

Take a moment to practice this breath prayer, breathing in and out these phrases:

Breath in: *Do not fear.*

Breath out: *For I am with you.*



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5–7

Gathering Us Beyond Borders



Image: Blue mussel shell ephemeral art on a beach in Maine by Julia Baker

I wasn't expecting my day as a hospital chaplain at a small hospital in quiet Portland, Maine to thrust me into global politics. I learned in morning medical rounds that a patient was here from the correctional facility held in detention by ICE. My heart beat quickly as I took notes, learning a boiled down version of M's story — how he was picked up last week with a few others on a roofing crew and had since developed an infected wound. I learned the rest of M's story as I sat by his bedside that week, all the things that can't be written in margins, all that falls beyond words.

It was a gift to use my rusty Spanish, to speak of shared love of the Guatemalan mountains where M grew up. It was aching to sit with M's wrestling — did he fight his case or did he accept deportation and see it as an opportunity to be with his aging father through his last years of life. It was an honor

to witness his deep faith and grace, his forgiveness to the systems that had him here, his humility as he explored ways God was using even this to bring him closer to Love.

So far from his Guatemalan village, so far from justice, together we prayed to the God who we knew gathered us beyond human-made borders and held us in these heart-rending choices.

Always, and this Advent especially I feel the mingled hope, longing, good news and the gulf of the not yet as I read Isaiah: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you..." Holding hands with the M's of the world, holding a hand on my own heart with the parts of me that go easily to fear, I breathe in Isaiah's steadfast promise of accompaniment, of God's gathering us ALL into her wide lap of love.

Prayer

God of all, may the fears that bind us individually and our systems be transformed by the light of your, I am with you, presence.

Julia Baker

Poet, hospital chaplain, and collaborator at Church by The Waters, a Wild Church in Portland, Maine



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

Thistle House



One year ago, our church and wider community opened the doors of a house for asylum-seekers: Casa Cardo – “Thistle House.” Thistles grow in difficult soil. They bloom with lovely purple flowers and hold medicinal properties. The single mothers and their children who live in the five apartments of this house have each, like the thistle, survived the harsh soil of traumatic events and migration dangers. Like the purple thistle flowers, these women bloom with beauty, humor, and strength of character. And, like the thistle, they offer restorative medicine as they share their wisdom from their life stories.

We gather with laughter and joy in this community for birthdays and celebrations. We gather praying for hope and safety, showing up for high stakes asylum court hearings and appointments with ICE. We gather in commitment feeling many emotions to try to work out with God’s help the knots

of conflicts that sometimes rise among us. We gather recognizing the burdens of the sadnesses, trauma and stress we live with, in the different levels of risk and kinds of wounds that we carry.

We are able to gather because we belong to a Restoring God whose love gathers us, just as the Holy One promised to gather family members so long ago from exile. We gather because Jesus first came to Mary, a teenage girl who was socially, economically, and legally vulnerable. We gather because the Spirit of Love speaks, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

Questions

During this Advent, how can we slow down to take time to be present with those who may be grieving, including ourselves? When relationships feel thorny, how might we find gentle ways to listen? What has caused this person – or me – to move into the fight response, or perhaps the flight response, brought on by unhealed trauma? How might God’s Spirit bring further healing, through coming together in respect and gentleness?

Image of thistle
from Scotland trip
taken by Tina
Schlabach



Tina Schlabach
Retired pastor of Shalom Mennonite Church

The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

A Circle of Care



Image of thistle
from Scotland trip
taken by Tina
Schlabach

"Don't fear, I am with you." (Isaiah 43:5) I cling to that promise for myself. I know that God with me. Sometimes, the harder part is trusting that God is also with my adult children- even in the pain of not knowing what is happening day to day when they are far from me.

We used to live in Thailand. One day, as I sat in a bicycle shop waiting for a repair, a young man sat down beside me. He seemed to be about the same age as one of my young adult sons, who lived far away on the other side of the world from me and who did not communicate with us often. I asked the young man where he was from. I learned that he was from Australia.

That opened the dam and the words began pouring from his mouth. He told me that just that morning, he'd been in a scary bicycle accident as he came swooping down the hairpin turns from the top of Doi Suthep mountain. He remembered and recounted every detail, still shaking and amazed that his life had been spared. After a while, I realized that my part was to simply bear witness and to be present with him as he processed that frightening experience.

I found comfort in thinking that God also provides strangers to listen to my own children as they lived far on the other side of the world from me.

Even when I cannot be present, God is present with healing and love. God often provides the right caring person at just the right time to complete a circle of care. In I Kings 17:1-16, Elijah was alone and in need. God used a stranger's presence to care for him by sending a widow to provide Elijah with food.

Question

When you cannot be with your own loved ones, whose beloved children will you meet today to give a listening ear, a word of comfort, or the needed thing?

Prayer

God of all comfort, we pray for our loved ones who are far from us today. Please send your messenger to care for them today. Please let me be a part of the circle of care for someone else's loved one.



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5–7

Gather My Beloved



Photo: Val Vesa /
Unsplash

For many immigrants in 2025, "this here place" is not a clearing in the woods but a stretch of desert, a chain-link fence, a temporary holding area. Yet the truth of Beloved's Baby Suggs still applies. "Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it."

But she pleads still: "Love your hands! Raise them up and kiss them... You got to love it, you!" In the context of today's immigration struggle, this becomes a call to affirm humanity wherever it is denied. Each step across a man-made border, legal or physical, is an insistence that humans are always

worth protecting. She herself had been a slave. But no longer. She is a reverend, an unchurched preacher whose legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue had all been busted by slavery. Suggs calls out with her heart, words that gather African descendants to a clearing place in the woods where she delivers embodied sermons to a broken-bodied and scattered people. Your flesh is good.

Like the African people of Baby Sugg's time, immigrant bodies are despised, reduced to physical labor, voices diminished to noise. U.S. policies built upon the abuse and exclusion of black and brown lives...unwanted bodies... mouths that should not speak.

And still, they gather. Immigrants gather. Migrants gather. Carrying children, water jugs, memories, and stubborn hope resisting the omnipresent messages that their flesh is unworthy. The people gather. The people eat. The people laugh and dance in defiance. The people are worthy, full of God. And in Baby Sugg's words:

"Here in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs, flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you!"

This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, love you."

Baby Suggs, from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)
There, with the unchurched preachers, gathered in the clearing, loving God-made flesh.



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5–7

I AM With You: A Promise for the Scattered



Photo: Unsplash

Isaiah 43:5 opens with a steady promise: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you." In a season when so many families ache from separation – parents detained in ICE facilities, children lying awake unsure what tomorrow will bring – these words arrive not as simple comfort but as sacred presence. They do not erase the weight of deportation or the grief surrounding an empty chair. But they speak into the fracture with a truth that refuses to be extinguished: even here, even now, God draws near.

As I linger with these verses, I hear echoes of God's self-disclosure in Exodus: "I AM WHO I AM." The one who is Being itself – Presence, that cannot be confined by borders or contained by walls. When Isaiah says, "I am with you," it is this same I AM revealing a nearness that accompanies families in their waiting, their longing, their fear. This is not thin reassurance; it is a fierce, steady love that honors lament while refusing to abandon the possibility of restoration.

"I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west..." These words reach into the deep longing I've witnessed in pastoral moments: the whispered prayer of a mother separated from her son, the child clutching a photograph of a father he cannot embrace, the quiet sigh at a family table where someone is missing. God's promise to gather in not only geographical – it is relational, dignifying, and tender. It speaks to the holy desire woven into every human heart: to be reunited, seen, held.

This is the pulse of Advent. Mary and Joseph knew displacement, pressed by imperial decree to travel far from home, then fleeing with their newborn as refugees. The shepherds gathered in darkness, drawn toward a light they could not yet name. Their stories remind us that God's gathering often begins in hidden places, in the shadows of systems that wound. And still, God moves. Still, God gathers.

In our communities, I have seen glimpses of this gathering presence: churches praying for those detained, meal trains forming for families left behind circles of support surrounding children whose loved ones are far away. These acts do not erase the pain, but they testify that God is at work even in places of fracture – knitting us to one another, expanding our sense of family, and teaching us to wait with compassion.

Isaiah's promise stretches across centuries and borders. It speaks to every family lighting candles for someone not yet home, every parent longing for reunion, every community refusing to forget those who are scattered. Advent dares us to believe in God's gathering love – a love that reaches east and west until all belong.

Prayer: God who gathers the scattered, draw near to every family separated this season. Heal what injustice has broken, cradle those who wait in fear, and lead us toward the day when all are safely gathered in Your love. Amen.

Rev. Rosalind Young
Program Director, MCC, Great Lakes



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

Experiencing Hospitality



Every year, I have the opportunity to be in Bethlehem, the city of Jesus' birth. It's the place of Jesus' birth, where shepherds met the angels, and where Mary and Joseph escaped with the infant, Jesus, when Herod plotted to kill him. It's where Ruth, Jesus' Moabite ancestor, met Boaz.

All of these stories rely on kindness and hospitality for the survival of the most vulnerable. Jesus' birth and escape all necessitated welcome and aid from strangers, Ruth and Naomi's survival required the kindness of Naomi's suspicious kin. The welcome and hospitality in these stories seem embedded in the land itself. I have experienced this same unwarranted kindness from Palestinians whenever I travel there.

A few days after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, I was in Bethlehem, stuck behind the wall because all of the checkpoints were locked up. I was leading a delegation, and was worried about how I was going to get them home in emerging retaliatory attacks on Gazans.

Photo: mana5280,
Unsplash

I walked through the old city in the early morning two days after the violence began, and I wept with anxiety and exhaustion. I was embarrassed by my tears, because I knew I had so much less to lose than any Palestinian in this ancient city. Nevertheless, each shopkeeper I encountered was ready to offer me help and support. One gave me a cold bottle of water, and wouldn't accept payment, while another handed me his card and offered to help me find food or a taxi if my group needed it. The owners of the hostel where we stayed conceived a plan to get us out of the West Bank, expending precious gasoline on our exit while others were waiting in line for the last chance to fill their cars with fuel.

The ways I am welcomed in Bethlehem and throughout Palestine is always humbling. My tax dollars go to pay for Palestinian displacement, and yet when I walk the streets of Bethlehem, Palestinians look out for me. They see me with belovedness, when the news in the USA calls Palestinians "terrorists" and wants me to hate them.

These biblical stories that take place in Bethlehem are about crossing borders and boundaries to welcome. To receive that welcome has been such a gift to me, and having received it, I am invited to welcome as I have been welcomed. Imagine if all of us who have been gathered and welcomed with this love, dared to pass it on? This generous welcome is surely what the reign of God is like.

Prayer

God who welcomes us,
As we experience your gathering,
your care, and your unending love,
May we share it with others.
May each act of hospitality be a sign
Of God's reign, in Bethlehem and beyond. AMEN.



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

Gratitude for the Gatherers



Our passage from Isaiah 43 presents God as One who gathers. And I never realized, until thinking about this reflection, just how often the Divine gathers. It starts in Genesis 1 when God gathers the waters to create dry land—a gathering that makes possible our future gatherings. God gathers the people to free them from slavery. God gathers those who were scattered in exile. Jesus gathers a motley crew of followers and speaks of how he longs to gather the people together “as a hen gathers her brood under her wing” (Matthew 23:37).

I am grateful for those who gathered me into my new church community last year. (And for Brenda, cake-maker extraordinaire!)

As children of God, as followers of Jesus, we are invited to participate in this sacred work of gathering. And in this holiday season I am particularly grateful for the many gatherers who enrich my life:

- For my aunt who started the family group text (even though I am generally not a fan of group texts) to invite us all over for Thanksgiving dinner;
- For community organizers who bring people together to advocate for justice;
- For the church member who has arranged a fun small group outing;
- For the library staff who plan book clubs;
- For friends who host dinner parties;
- For the worship leaders who gather our spirits together each Sunday morning;
- For tech people who allow us to gather across distances.

From our mothers' arms to the waters of baptism to a shared meal—there is nothing quite like the feeling of being gathered in by a loving and powerful presence.

“Do not fear,” says God to the people, “I am with you. . . . I will gather you.” (Isaiah 43:5)

There is a feeling of peace, of safety, of belovedness that I experience when someone gathers me in. It is lovely when that gathering means physically sharing space with others—but physical proximity is not necessary. Mother God gathers our spirits under her holy wings. Through communion, song, liturgy, and prayer we can gather in spirit with people who are miles away.

Whether it is solemn or silly, planned or impromptu, each time we gather in love we are accepting a gift from the Divine Gatherer.

Thanks be to God. And thanks be to all the gatherers.



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

Bendicida



A couple of years ago, I attended a local art show and was drawn to a piece created by Sandra Y. Perez. I remember first noticing the Latina vibes with the dark brown skin tone, the big flowers, and the vibrant colors – I thought, “that could be me.” Then I saw the single word – “Bendicida” – the Spanish word for blessed. It was at that moment I knew I needed this piece of art.

Below are my reflections that I invite you to ponder as you periodically gaze at the artwork: At a time when there is so much separation and polarization, isolation and loneliness, fear and hate – imagine with me what it is to be bendicida.

“Bendicida,” spoke to my soul, like a voice saying, “I see you, I know you, and you matter.” It reminds me of the way that I believe God sees, knows, and cares about each one of us. There is nothing

I can do or say to gain or earn this importance. I matter simply because I am made by God-uniquely shaped and molded to be me; blessed just as I am.

This then begs me to go a few steps further:
If I am uniquely shaped and molded, then you are too.
If I matter just by being, then so do they.
If I am blessed, then so are we.

God’s creation of us is not about the individual; it is about the collection of us. God calls to each and everyone of us – gathering us in, piece by piece, to make the whole. Together we form the community God intended: family, widows, neighbors, enemies, orphans, immigrants, friends, and ourselves...

All of us matter. All of us are blessed.

Bendicida.

Question

Who in your community is God calling you to see, know, and recognize as “blessed”?



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

When We Return, We Demonstrate Hope for Our Oppressors

For a people to gather, they must first endure being scattered.

Indigenous peoples in North America and around the world have endured a diaspora brought about by settler colonialism. It is estimated that we numbered 100 million before Europeans developed nautical technology to transport armies across oceans. By 1900, only about 5 million Indigenous people had survived the assault of settlement.



"Orange Shirt Day" march in Ontario, September 30 2025. Orange Shirt Day commemorates the history of boarding schools in Canada and honors Indigenous children forced into these schools. Photo by Sarah Augustine

By that time, the allotment and assimilation era was well-underway in the United States. Removing us from our lands and scattering us was a policy priority. A primary tactic of assimilation for my people is child removal. The federal government removed children from our lands, tribes, and families and incarcerated us in boarding schools. We were denied access to our families; we were punished for speaking our languages and praying the way we had been taught to pray. To this day, our children are removed from our homes to foster care in greater numbers than any other group.

Isaiah 43 has been a source of great comfort over hard years of struggling for decolonization. Decolonization I define as the relinquishment of a subjugated people; my people. *I have called you by name, you are mine*, the psalmist writes. *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.* I have held these words in my heart during difficult times.

And these words I have dreamed: *Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, "Give them up!" and to the south, "Do not hold them back." Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth.* I have dreamt of Indigenous Peoples returning, gathering on our lands, which to us are sacred.

In my dream we demonstrate a pathway toward hope for the mighty who have scattered us, for they are without hope.

Sarah Augustine, Executive Director
Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

Holding Hands

As we waited in line to pass through the metal detectors, three little hands reached out to grab mine. I could feel them trembling with fear. The oldest looked up and asked me, "Are they going to take my parents away?" I felt my heart sink to the pit of my stomach and the only words I could give was, "Everything is going to be okay, God is with us."



With the rapidly changing laws and growing hostility toward immigrants, no place feels safe. These parents had been detained at a hospital while seeking medical help for their two-week-old baby, who was literally dying and needed to be transferred to a specialty hospital 200 miles away. A nurse called the Department of Homeland Security, and border patrol detained the parents there, then escorted them to the hospital. While their son was in surgery, the parents were taken in and processed for deportation proceedings. When the family finally returned home, they found a letter giving them thirty days to report to immigration court.

When we reported to the immigration court, it felt like an eternity. The three girls never let go of my hands since their mom had to care for their six-month-old baby brother. After four hours, an officer came out to call us in. I was instructed to sit at the back of the court with the baby and three little girls. I was scared because I didn't know what was going to happen, Then the judge called the children up to ask them questions.

Photo:
SeljanSalimova,
Unsplash

"What are you names and ages?" she asked.

They answered, "Sophia – 7, Belinda – 5, Maria – 3, that's our brother; Isaiah – 6 months old."

"What do want to be when you grow up, Sophia?"

"I want to be an attorney so that I can defend people like my parents."

The judge chuckled, "That's a smart and ambitious answer. Are you scared Sophia?"

"I was but.... we prayed together and I was told that God is with us, and everything is going to be alright."

Today, I encourage you to live out the words of Isaiah 43, welcome the children from the east and gather you from the west. Hold their hands and tell them "I am with you."

Prayer

Loving God, hold our hands and give us courage as we walk alongside your children who are reporting to immigration court. Give the peace and may they hear your words "Do not be afraid." Amen.



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

A God who creates communion from torn pieces



My husband, Santiago, and I startle awake around 6 a.m. to the sounds of our neighbors screaming. I take the baby and try to look out the window. Santiago grabs his passport and rushes outside: it's another ICE raid in our neighborhood. This time, two neighbors on their way to work are kidnapped by masked agents. Soon we hear of three more taken from the corner across the street, where Maria (name changed), our neighborhood tamale vendor, had just served them breakfast.

The park – usually full of kids playing soccer or climbing on the playground – is silent and deserted when we walk over to check on Maria later. She tearfully shares how she watched her clients abducted before her eyes, zip-tied and shoved into the back of unmarked vehicles.

I am shocked to see several tamales, the remnants of their breakfast, scattered on the ground where the men were taken. "We are just trying to earn our daily bread," says a man who stops by the cart to buy breakfast. Daily bread, scattered and stomped on, lies before us.

Together with our neighbors that day, we lament, organize, and take turns walking the block, scanning for more potential raids. Together, we start planning a vigil with faith communities and the

National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON). That evening, at least 300 people show up at the park, holding signs: "We are human!" "ICE out of 'Dena!" "Immigrants are welcome here!" and from our church: "God's Love Knows No Borders!"

Where families and their daily bread were scattered and torn apart, we gather together through the Spirit of a God who creates communion from torn pieces. Cumbia music swells from a local band that performs, resisting despair and powerlessness with hope and joy. Clergy voices lift prayers for the disappeared, and we speak their names, remembering them as the first step of restoration. The vigil turns into a march, taking over the street with immigrant women at the front, holding hands and unifying us as one.

Prayer

Gathering God, vigil with us as we remember those who have been taken. Restore us to a holy communion with one another as we grieve, pray and act with love for our neighbors. Amen.

Katerina Gea

Pastor of Pasadena Mennonite Church

Image 1: PMC members Emily, Santiago and Sue hold vigil at the site of an ICE raid in their neighborhood. Image 2: Immigrant women clergy lead the march for those abducted. Photos by Katerina Gea



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

Living Rooms

I love living rooms
But to be more truthful
I love the living rooms
That belong to my daughters'
Aunties
The most

Where they roam free
Knowing they are seen
Knowing we are safe
The homes that
Challenge me when I'm stuck
And let me rest when I
Am exhausted

The places I go
When I am weary
We find one another
Here
In a place like home
As close to our
Own as it can feel

A wholeness that I
Find impossible to describe
But my body recognizes
An ease that
Brushes my shoulder
Loneliness escapes my body
Through my fingertips

I love living rooms
And for the ones
We built together
I'll travel across the world
To sit for one night
Exchange plants to
Grow in each others
Earth



To laugh harder
Than we have all
Month
Celebrating our joy
Success
And every little thing
In between

Run our hands
Through each others hair
And say it out loud
I'm so happy you're here
It is here that
I put my bags down
Where it feels
Like I exhale more
Than I inhale

I always hoped
Teaching love
Would be this easy

Photo: Myriam
Lazaro Moreno



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5-7

You Are Not Lost



Babylonian conquest of 586 BCE shattered Judah. What they had known—Sabbath rhythms in their own land, festivals at the temple, Hebrew spoken freely in their streets—had been violently disrupted. They found themselves strangers in Babylon, their mother tongue reduced to a minority language, their worship practices viewed with suspicion by those who held power over them.

Many of us who are immigrants recognize this dislocation. We watch our parents gather with others from “back home” and glimpse what it might have meant to live where your whole self could simply be, without translation or explanation.

I have returned to my family’s homeland twice. Each homecoming carried its own complexity. At the port of entry, paying fees and presenting documents, I was reminded: you are a visitor here. Embracing relatives, I caught sideways glances marking me as different. In moments of sharing stories, my eyes would fill, one tear for familiarity and another for the distance that had grown between us. I felt what

I missed while recognizing values that no longer fully aligned with who I had become. At departure, embracing loved ones in goodbye, I knew: a part of me has always stayed behind, and always will.

Into this experience of displacement, God speaks words of gathering, naming the four directions, calling forth the scattered ones. This is not merely a promise of physical return, but a deeper truth about identity and belonging. We who have been scattered know that return is never simple restoration. The exiles who returned to Jerusalem were not the same people taken into exile. Babylon had changed them. New homes inevitably reshape us.

Yet God’s promise holds: you are not lost. However far we have traveled, however much we have been changed, we remain called by name, created for glory. The grief we carry is real and demands our attention. We honor it by remembering, reclaiming, reimagining. Wherever we are, whoever we are becoming, there is no distance that places us beyond God’s sight. Divine love follows us into every new home, every hybrid identity we forge. When the time comes, we will be gathered, not simply restored, but made whole.

Prayer

Spirit of God, give us courage as we encounter grief and longing. In our scattering, remind us we are not lost. Hold us in hope until all the scattered ones are gathered home. Amen.

Abby Endashaw, Summer Service National Coordinator
Mennonite Central Committee



The GATHERING

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west"

—Isaiah 43:5–7

Living Stone



"Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
Walls made of living stone.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts."
—*Longing for Light* by Bernadette Farrell,
Voices Together 715

If the stable walls could talk, I wonder what they would say. How many calves and lambs breathed their first, sheltered by the smelly, mossy, living stone of those stable walls?

Photo: Erica
Lea-Simka,
Israel, 2014

This Advent, and every Advent, we are invited to join the cattle and the mice, the goats and the horses, in making space for strangers in a land foreign to them, during an hour of mutual distress. Just as Mary's labor pains could not wait, the cries of our community, of immigrant siblings, can not wait.

In the darkness of night, the animals gathered together for warmth in the stable, protection from wind and wolves. These hospitable animals made room for the Holy Family, you and me, for all families of various shapes and sizes, to gather across differences, knowing that the other's well-being is intertwined with their own.

Congregations are called, especially now, to be "walls made of living stone", stone by stone bound together by the mortar of the Holy Spirit's empowerment, mustering all the creative courage necessary to birth the most vulnerable so they can breathe new life.

Question

How are you and your community being led to be nurturers, protectors, advocates, gatherers, witnesses, Christ's light during this long, cold night?

Erica Lea-Simka
Southwest Representative
Mennonite Women USA

