

*“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit.”*

Isaiah 11:1

## The Gift of Hope

Guess I had it wrong – interpretation of the Christmas poinsettia, that is. According to legend, Pepita, a young girl from Mexico, visited baby Jesus on Christmas with only a bouquet of weeds to greet his birth. But because of her sweetness and sincerity, the weeds were miraculously turned into gorgeous poinsettias. The traditional gloss on what this means is that the shape of the poinsettia leaves represents the Christmas star, the red represents Jesus’ blood, and, if the leaves are white, they are said to represent Christ’s purity. There is also a redemption message embedded in the poinsettia. Where others see Christ’s blood on the cross and God’s redeeming love, I see red flower against white snow and feel hope.

October is usually the driest time of the year in Timor (Indonesia), but this year it has stretched well into November. Throughout Timor much of the landscape is barren, the land cracked deep, no color but brown. Cattle have died of thirst, tempers run short, emotions high, constructive energy low.

But some gifts are given only at this hottest time of the year, like the bougainvillea plants, their flowers glorious in shades of pink, orange, and white. The bougainvillea flowers remind me of the Christmas poinsettia – in the midst of a desolate landscape, there is always, year after year, this sign of hope that life persists and will flourish again. Bougainvillea is a tough plant with big thorns that run all along its branches. Its blossoms stand out against a dominant backdrop of monotonous brown.

That’s the thing about hope as well. Often it is more thorny than velvety and can be difficult to handle. It often seems prickly because it must push back against all that threatens it. To be hope in the midst of pain, denial, or just dull oblivion may not always appear as an oasis or feel comfortable. Hope stands, speaks, and expresses itself in flamboyant contrast to the dryness and monotone resignation that often surrounds it. It is hope, in large part, by virtue of its contrast to the dominant landscape.

Christmas poinsettia, Timorese bougainvillea — these plants remind me that God so loved the world; God still does. May Christmas renew our hope to keep struggling for peace, justice, and the integrity of God’s good creation.

*Karen Campbell-Nelson and her husband John serve with the Evangelical Church of West Timor. Karen’s appointment is supported by One Great Hour of Sharing, Our Churches Wider Mission, Disciples Mission Fund and your special gifts.*



JOHN & KAREN CAMPBELL-NELSON

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