

Christmas 2000 in Bethlehem

Colleagues,

Two years ago a dozen or so of us Crossings folks celebrated Christmas in Bethlehem. Our “home” during those days was the guest-house of the Talitha Kumi school in nearby Beit Jala. It’s mentioned in the final paragraph below. So the people and places mentioned below are woven into our own biographies. I receive messages almost every day from Christians in the Palestine/Israel war zone. This one from Lutheran bishop Younan came this morning. I pass his words on to you—weeping with those who weep—as the Feast of the Nativity comes toward us. But even tears, bitter tears, cannot eradicate the Joy to the World that came first to Bethlehem. That Joy is not a “no tears” smiley face, but faith’s confidence about the future—even as the tears roll down.

How so? With our God-problem healed by the manged Messiah (= the core meaning of the “Peace on Earth” announced by the angels), those entrusted to him have an upbeat future. Long term, big time—all the way through to resurrection. His life, now ours as well, trumps every messenger of death—snipers, missiles, gunships included. Two years ago the pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, Mitri Raheb, told us: “No, I’m not optimistic about the outcome of our conflict. Yet I still have hope.” And then playing on a Luther quote he said: “If I knew that the end of the world was coming tomorrow, I would today still plant an olive tree.” And he smiled. He trusts the Joy to the World that his congregation’s name celebrates.

God’s pacification program inaugurated at Bethlehem constitutes the grounds for the apostle’s incredible imperative in last Sunday’s second reading (Advent 3 in the Revised Common Lectionary): “Rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS!” Anticipating our “Huh?!” of disbelief he continues: “Yes, I said REJOICE, and I meant ALWAYS.” Even as the shelling

continues overhead? Yes, then too. Your Lord is “near” there as well. No matter how many volleys come out of the Gates of Hell, says this Lord, “they shall not prevail.” Oh, yes, he did say that. Could that really be true?

No, you don’t see that verified on CNN. But when you add God’s cradled Christ to even the most grisly slice of human history, that history gets re-worded. And if, as he says, “My Word shall never pass away,” then we won’t either when our story’s re-worded with his. As Bishop Younan says: “What word does God have for us at this moment? It comes to us from Bethlehem!” Read on.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

A Christmas letter from Bethlehem and Jerusalem 20 December, 2000.

**From the desk of Bishop Munib A. Younan
The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and
Palestine (ELCJ)**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Salaam and grace from the land of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A Christmas without festivities

This year’s Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem were originally planned to be the climax of the year-long festive Millennium celebrations. We are sad to tell you that this is not to be so. All the festive celebrations with concerts, shows, scout parades and activities in Manger Square and many other places in and around Bethlehem have been cancelled. This is due to the ongoing crisis situation which has until now claimed the lives of more than 325 people and wounded over 11.000 – the overwhelming majority of them being Palestinians. The entire Gaza strip – as

well as towns and villages in the West Bank – has now been sealed off for months by the Israeli forces. People are not allowed to move. Many cannot reach their places of work. The unemployment rate is now soaring in the Palestinian areas. Around a third of the entire population is at present living below the poverty level.

In this situation we ask ourselves how can we celebrate Christmas when there is no peace and no justice? How can we celebrate Christmas in a state of mourning, with bereaved families, injured youngsters, paralyzed youths and traumatized children? How can we celebrate when we are treated as prisoners and strangers in our own land?

When thinking about this year's Christmas, Psalm 137 often comes to my mind: "By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down and wept. Then our captors asked us for songs and our tormentors asked us for mirth, saying: Sing us one of your songs. But how could we sing the Lord's song in a situation like this?"

A Christmas in worship and reflection

My nine year old daughter, Martha, asked me: Is there no Christmas this year? I said: No, there are no Christmas festivities, but there is a real feeling of the people of the first Christmas.

Even with the festivity arrangements cancelled there will of course be worship services held in the churches during this Christmas. We will once again sing our Christmas hymns and listen to the Christmas story. And we will meditate and pray together as we normally do in our many liturgical traditions. But this year we will do this in a fresh spiritual way, as the difficulties we are facing give us all a possibility to reflect more deeply on the meaning of what happened at the First Christmas in Bethlehem 2000 years ago.

Then as today the situation was certainly not very romantic and beautiful. The people of the land were to register in their hometowns; thus they experienced what it is to be ordered around in their own country getting permits. The Holy Family was not accepted in any dignified inn; thus they experienced what it is to be marginalized. King Herod threatened to kill the children, thus they and their parents experienced the abuse of power by the strong against the weak. The Holy Family fled to Egypt; thus they experienced what it is to be refugees. People were under occupation and were not being respected by their rulers. There was no justice and no peace in the land. It was in the midst of this that the Babe of Justice and Peace was born in Bethlehem. It was in this situation that the celebration of the simple shepherds took place. It was in this situation that the Magi saw the star of Bethlehem and not the Apache and Cobra war helicopters. It was in this situation that the angels proclaimed what the people could not proclaim: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace amongst those He favors (Luke 2:14)

A special Christmas in a special time

Surely our Christmas will be a special one this year when we are facing the consequences of injustice and violence. But what is even more special is that it happens so that our Moslem and Jewish neighbors also hold special religious celebrations during this Christmas season.

Our Moslem friends will then celebrate the end of Ramadan. Their month of fasting is a time of repentance and renewal in faith; a search for a genuine spiritual closeness to God, and for a new commitment for Justice and Peace. It ends with a joyous three days celebration of Id-al-Fitr. At the same time our Jewish neighbors celebrate the Hanukkah festival of light, when candles will be lit in the homes and gifts exchanged between family members. We pray that these feasts will be an opportunity to

motivate the religions possibly to contribute to just peace and reconciliation.

What word does God have for us at this moment? It comes to us from Bethlehem! We saw it with our own eyes during a candle procession held there on the Second Advent Sunday. Around 2,500 people—Palestinian Christians and Moslems as well as a delegation of visiting church leaders from the US—walked in silence between the churches and the mosque with candles in their hands. We stopped at each house of worship and listened to Scripture readings, and sang and prayed. The message from Bethlehem that evening was: We want The Power of the Light and not the Fire of Might. This is the message of Christmas for the world. For all who believe in arms and find their security in them. For all who close their eyes to injustices; for all who are blind to the truth; for all who do not see the pain and suffering of their fellow human beings; for all who are mourning, for the bereaved, and for the victims of political structures.

The light shines from the great star that rose in the dark night of Bethlehem, announcing the good news that the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. – For as in the day of Midian's defeat you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Is 9:2-6)

This light of the Prince of Peace gives us hope in the dark and difficult times we are facing. And we are convinced that His

light shines in the darkness, and that the darkness has no power to overcome it.

We welcome all of you to join us in fervent prayers for a just and comprehensive lasting peace in the land of Incarnation and Resurrection. In the USA and Sweden people are taking turns to hold Prayer Vigils for Peace in churches country-wide, so that there will be people praying for peace every night and day somewhere in the world. And they will continue to pray until just peace and reconciliation will materialize. No power, no politician can deprive us Christians of the power of prayer, which is able to transform darkness into light, injustice into just peace, prejudice into friendship, fear into security, hatred into love, animosity into reconciliation, and hatred into seeing God in the other.

We thank God for each and everyone who keep us in their prayers. You are welcome to join in! Let me share with you all, a prayer by one of our children in our Lutheran school in Beit Jala:

O Lord Jesus, protect us from danger, and distance the bombs away from our homes because they have been destroyed and we are forced to leave our homes for the street. O, Jesus distance the evil from us and the missiles and the rockets so that we can go back to living peacefully and so that Santa Claus can come to us. Our teacher told us, that at the military checkpoint the soldier did not allow Santa Claus to enter Bethlehem. We want Christmas to come and want to decorate the tree like the rest of the children in the world. O, Jesus give us courage and strength to overcome fear and to live in peace and tranquility and freedom in our beloved land and precious Palestine. Amen. (Bisan Mousa. Third Grade. Talitha Kumi Lutheran School. Age 7)

I wish you all A Peaceful Christmas & A Blessed New Year full of Justice and Reconciliation.

Pray for us.

Your Brother in Christ,
Bishop Munib A. Younan
The Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem