

Peace on Earth in Bethlehem 2002. A Blue Christmas?

Colleagues,

Appended below is a message I received from Bethlehem earlier this week anticipating a “Blue” Christmas. Makes me think of an earlier text impacting that “little” town linked to political ordinances with military enforcement: “And there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus” to which everyone MUST conform. It was “taxing.” The Mangered Messiah and the heavy hand of Caesar were the original text and context for Christmas. So what else is new?

Reminds me also that the “Peace on Earth” present in Bethlehem that silent night patently did not need a peace-able Caesar as prerequisite. Nor—in today’s context—a friendly Israeli Defense Force. From the git-go, in the face of old-creation un-peace, new-creation peace happens. And Caesarian sanctions don’t change very perceptibly afterwards either. His legions just keep rolling along. Caesar-peace and Christic-peace were not corollaries at the premiere performance of Christic-peace. Nor are they now, even though both are “on earth.” But they differ from each other as—you guessed it—God’s law differs from God’s Gospel.

For their dis-congruence there is considerable evidence. Christ’s peace waxes, not wanes, in the face of Caesar’s opposing decrees—and IDF curfews and US war-madness and even the gates of hell. Jesus said so. Paul and Silas sang hymns (Christmas carols? It WAS midnight! Maybe even “midnight clear?”) when Caesar’s agent slammed them into solitary confinement (Acts 16:25). No matter how coercive the nemesis, it is structurally incapable of barricading what God’s up to at

Christmas. Both at the first one and at this year's Blue Christmas on Manger Square.

But such nemeses could mess up the Christic-peace of Christmas if Christians opened the doors of their heart, the God-box, and gave them entry. That's just as much a danger for Christic-peace among "secure" Christians in our land as it is anywhere in the world where Caesar sends tanks down the streets. 'Fact is, we're more vulnerable by virtue of Caesar's cajoling, then the siblings are when Caesar thunders his threats. Cannon in the streets makes for clarity of the alternatives—aut Caesar aut Christus. Au contraire, the conning of our own culture seeks to blur the difference.

So for coping with Caesar-hard (cannons) or with Caesar-lite (cajoling) we all need to sing "O come, O come, Immanuel." When Christians do sing that "O Come," HE does come—both through the walls of Caesar's cannon and curfews, as well as the walls of his cunning and conning to insure "homeland security." He comes into the God-box, the messy manger of human hearts. And he's quite at home there, as he has been ever since he first showed up.

Granted, it's dicey for an American like me with near global "freedom of movement" to be saying that to Christian siblings in Bethlehem. They can't even go to the store to buy groceries. And you reading this are most all in similar "free" situations. But vast differences in Caesar's machinations don't divide when it comes to the Manged Messiah. 'Fact is, it is finally the 2002 "shepherds" (=pastors and people) of Bethlehem today who give clear (even clearer?) witness telling us about Someone sustaining them. And we "who hear it are amazed at what these shepherds tell us." Though tortured by the non-peace on the immediate Caesar front, they keep on keeping on. They patently have Someone with them there in the fiery furnace. Look closely.

Isn't it someone (that fourth person ala Daniel 7) "who has the appearance of the Son of God?" Does that make for a blue Christmas or a blazing one?

The view of Bethlehem 2002 sketched above is not entirely clear in the pained report appended below. And my words should not minimize anything of the horrendous realities in the text of the report. But might it be true nonetheless, that Christic-blaze slices right through Caesar's blue—both in A.D. 1 and in A.D. 2002?

It is finally no one of us, but that Son of God in the furnace who finalizes the "distinction" between Caesar's peace (or non-peace) and the Peace of God. The Peace that comes with the Manged Messiah, a.k.a. God's mercy-management of sinners, is neither thwarted nor assisted by Caesar's decrees. If Caesar-oppression didn't thwart it the first time, it can't thwart it any time. Hither or yon.

When the heavenly messengers hyped "peace on earth," they were NOT talking about cessation of hostilities among conflicting humans. Their heavenly hype was for a peace more radical, more cosmic, a primal peace twixt God and sinners. And yes, they chanted, that primal peace was now "on earth," and not just in the mind of God, now "done on earth as it is (already) in heaven." And where on earth? In the Suffering Servant Savior "wrapped in cloths and laid flat" in a box in Bethlehem. Luke's baby-bed description is a pointer. It took his Good Friday (where for one final time he was "wrapped in cloths and laid flat" in a box) and his subsequent Eastering to bring it to completion.

Since THAT agenda, that primal peace, was what the Bethlehem broadcasters were singing about, it's no surprise that Jesus' first post-Easter words to his disciples (ala John)—and spoken

three times!—is “Peace be unto you.” His birthing brought it to earth, his Eastering makes it stick.

In that Peace and its Joy!

Ed

December 16, 2002

Blue Christmas

Holidays are ‘not as happy as usual’ in Bethlehem this year

by Alexa Smith

EAST JERUSALEM – Bethlehem isn’t skipping Christmas this year, exactly, but it isn’t clear how the town of Christ’s birth will observe the holiday.

What is clear is that many residents are finding little to celebrate this year.

Just eight days short of Christmas Eve, the Israeli government, the Israeli army, the tiny town of Bethlehem and the 13 Christian communions that call the Holy Land home were still discussing whether there will be a holiday break in the curfew that has had Bethlehem’s 28,000 residents under house arrest for nearly a month.

“It is going to be a very sad Christmas in Bethlehem,” a shopkeeper said the other day. “There is no Christmas. No trees, no lights. We were supposed to have some tourists, but they’ve cancelled. We are not allowed outside our houses. ...

“There is curfew. How can you have a Christmas celebration?”

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) reoccupied the city on Nov. 22, one day after a Jerusalem bus was bombed by a 22-year-old whose family had lived in a rented home on the outskirts of Bethlehem for just a few months. The army demolished the bomber's house and arrested his father. It also reimposed the curfew, brought in tanks and armored personnel carriers, began patrolling the streets in Jeeps.

For the sixth time this year, life in Bethlehem came to a dead halt.

Why the curfew was renewed is a matter of dispute.

The Israelis claim that militants from across the West Bank took shelter in Bethlehem when the IDF pulled out as part of a negotiated settlement three months ago. The Palestinians were drawn to Bethlehem, they say, because other West Bank towns, like Ramallah, Nablus and Hebron, were still shut down tight. City officials say that's a lie. Mayor Hanna J. Nasser argues that the crackdown is a political ploy intended to bolster the Sharon administration's hard-line image in advance of Israeli elections in January.

Nasser, long a critic of what he calls "the disastrous militarization" of the current Intifada, is furious that 150,000 people in the Bethlehem district are being punished for the actions of a few. With only intermittent interruptions amounting to three to six hours a week, the curfew is keeping Bethlehem's streets empty. Residents live behind shuttered doors and windows, unable to go to school or work, unable to maintain a routine.

Last Saturday and Sunday, the army eased restrictions from morning until early afternoon. It was the first time breaks were granted two days in a row. Whether this heralds a Christmas furlough remains to be seen.

With nine days remaining before Christmas, IDF troops have secured Manger Square, determined to prevent a repeat of the public-relations debacle of last spring, when Palestinian gunmen sought sanctuary in the Church of the Nativity, the basilica on the site where Christians believe Jesus was born.

A senior IDF official told a Jerusalem newspaper last Thursday that troops will not pull out of Bethlehem by Christmas.

That contradicted a promise made the previous day by Israeli President Moshe Katsav to Pope John Paul II, who had appealed for a holiday respite. Katsav said the IDF would redeploy outside Bethlehem for Christmas if there were no immediate threat of terrorist attack.

Yoni Peled, a spokesman for the Israeli Foreign Ministry, told the Presbyterian News Service that it hasn't been decided yet whether any special provisions will be made for Bethlehem at Christmastime. He said one thing is certain: Yasser Arafat, the chairman of the Palestinian Authority, won't attend the traditional midnight Mass at the Church of the Nativity, but will remain confined to his compound in Ramallah.

If Bethlehem stays "quiet and in order," Peled said, the IDF may allow civilians more freedom of movement. He said he expects a decision by the end of this week.

The birthday of the Prince of Peace seems unlikely to ease the discord here.

Christians in Israel say they don't believe the wider church understands how the occupation affects their daily lives.

"The gap between what people are singing about and the reality of life in this city bothers many people here," said the Rev. Mitri Raheb, the pastor of the Christmas Lutheran Church in

Bethlehem's Old City. Raheb said what should be under discussion is not a one-day lifting of the curfew for Christmas, but a lifting of the curfew, period.

"One hundred and fifty thousand people have been living under 24-hour imprisonment for three weeks," he said. "If Arafat comes or not, that isn't the issue. He shares the same destiny as the rest of us; he is imprisoned. And the issue is not whether we allow a few pilgrims to enter Bethlehem. ... Local people here are not allowed freedom of movement. What's the sense of opening Bethlehem up for one day for tourism, for people to be able to say that they celebrated Christmas here? "People need to see the ugly face of occupation. I wonder what songs President Bush will be singing this Christmas?"

Church leaders actually are negotiating three Christmases in Bethlehem. The Western one, to be presided over by the Latin patriarch, Michel Sabbah, takes place on Dec. 24 and 25. The second Christmas festival, whose leader is the patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, comes on Jan. 6 and 7. And the Armenian Christmas is celebrated on Jan. 18 and 19.

Greek Orthodox Archbishop Aristarchos said his church has a verbal commitment from the Israelis to lift the curfew for all three, so that people can worship at the basilica.

The chancellor of the Latin Patriarchate, Father Shawki, said he is unaware of any such commitment – and even if one has been made, it can be withdrawn in a heartbeat.

In any case, he added, "We don't just want them to lift the curfew. We want them out of Bethlehem. People are suffering. Really. Really. Really." Shawki pointed out the same is true of the residents of other West Bank cities, including Jenin, Hebron and Nablus. The patriarch said he will go to Bethlehem for midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, but that won't make it

Christmas. "Christmas means justice," he said. "No justice, no Christmas."

Mayor Nasser is upset about Israel's unilateral decision to nullify the "Bethlehem First" agreement of last Aug. 19, under which the curfew was lifted and Palestinians took responsibility for security in Bethlehem. The IDF withdrew to the city's perimeter. People were free to move inside the city, but not to leave it.

"I don't see the justification," he said, rejecting the notion that his town is a haven for extremists.

For the moment he's focusing on the smaller picture: How to plan Bethlehem's Christmas, if and when the curfew is lifted.

International choirs are awaiting the downbeat hold. The Christmas tree outside the basilica is bare. Holiday activities are on hold.

Eighty-year-old Michael Zebaneh said he has seen a lot of Christmases in Bethlehem since he moved there in 1950. He is hoping his permit will come through so he can visit his daughter in Jordan over the holidays. Yet another waiting game.

But he's done lots of waiting in his long life.

He wishes the international church would do more on behalf of the Palestinians under house arrest on the West Bank.

"Everyone knows that the only way to solve this is for the Israelis to withdraw from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip," he said. "It is the only way to stop the massacres every day, the killing of Palestinian people.

"Did you know that five Palestinians were killed yesterday? Did you know that a few days ago in Gaza, 10 more died? There is

killing every day, and among the dead are children.”

Zebaneh, who plays the organ at his church, said celebrating this Christmas will be a challenge: “The heart is not as happy as usual.”

(Alexa Smith is on long-term assignment for several months in Israel/Palestine, covering the situation there in depth for the Presbyterian News Service. She is based in East Jerusalem.)