

Glory

to God in the highest and
on earth peace, good will
towards men and women.

Sabeel Christmas Message,

2016

Dear Friends,

Christmas is a time of joy. Amid the sorrows and hardships of daily life, we need the Christmas spirit, the good news and gladness of Christmas. The birth of Jesus Christ gives us joy and hope, “to you is born ... a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Christmas never fails to refresh and renew us so that we can cope with the difficulties of daily life.

Yet the Christmas story is also full of trauma and tragedy. The beauty and innocence of the Christ child is juxtaposed with the selfishness and cruelty of Herod and the callousness of the people of power.

As we reflect on the Christmas story this season, what are some of the relevant lessons that we can learn?

First: The census decreed by Emperor Augustus required people to register in their own towns. *The Caesars and emperors always pass laws that disrupt and even ruin people’s lives.* Joseph and Mary had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered, a distance of over 160 Km (100 miles). It was not easy considering that Mary was due to give birth.

It has been a very long time now, that Palestinians have had to bear the brunt, pay a

heavy price and suffer grievous consequences due to unjust laws and regulations decreed by the governments of Israel. Those who pass laws against the occupied, sit in their comfortable offices and do not care about the consequences of their actions upon the poor and oppressed. In the conflict over Palestine, not only Zionist leaders and Israeli officials took decisions that negatively affected our Palestinian people, even more drastically, western Christian leaders destroyed Palestine and its people through their outrageous and immoral resolutions such as the Balfour Declaration, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and the unjust 1947 Partition Plan, to name only a few. These decisions were taken by foreigners but turned Palestinians’ lives upside-down forever.

Second: “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened” (Matt. 2:3). *Seemingly powerful kings, presidents and prime ministers feel threatened by the nonviolent acts of the humble and the meek whose only weapons are truth and justice:* the truth about the harsh reality on the ground, and the justice of a new and transformed reality acceptable to God and humanity. The powerful are threatened by whatever they perceive as a threat to their

power, interest, and ideology. It can lead them to violent and cruel action against others. They can go to extremes in order to do away with the threats. This is the way King Herod behaved. He killed the infants of Bethlehem in order to eliminate what he saw as a threat. In 1991, the western powers went to war against Iraq and killed millions of people in order to eliminate what they perceived a threat to themselves and to Israel. Israel's intelligence agency, assassinated many Palestinians because it perceived them as threats. This is the way of empire. This is the way people of power behave. They do not see human beings, families and children, they only see obstacles that need to be eliminated.

Third: This is not the way the God of love acts. In the midst of the oppressive military and economic might of empire, God's concern is for the poor and the oppressed. The message of Christmas

is always "Good news for all the people". While the powers make decrees to oppress and dehumanize others, it is God who works for their salvation and liberation. "Do not be afraid", said the angel. "God is with us". I am sending you a savior, a liberator. These words were spoken to people living under occupation and who were longing for freedom and liberation. This message is still relevant to our people today. God works through us to witness for the truth, to take a stand against the evil of occupation and oppression. Our hope is not in the power of the "Herods" and the "Caesars," it is in the baby who is "wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." It is not in the power of military might, it is in the power of love and nonviolence. It is not through the oppression of others and the negation of their rights. ***It is through giving glory to God and doing justice to the neighbor. This is the recipe for peace and security for all the people of our land.***

Sabeel wishes you all a merry Christmas and
a Happy New Year

Naim Ateek
Chair, Sabeel Board
Jerusalem
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*Based on a Sabeel Bible Study

