

Christ Under the Rubble A Christmas Message on 12-24-23

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Merry Christmas to you and to all those whom you love and care for!

Christmas is the season which engages the whole world in a conspiracy of Love: Love for our families, love for our neighbors, love for our parishioners, and love for God who came among us in the person of Jesus. This love of God continues to move throughout the world, transforming the hearts and minds of those who are open to this divine grace. It is this kind of love which will ultimately bring peace on earth and good will to all people. "The true light, which enlightens everyone, has come into the world...full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."

(John 1)

Yet, for so many, "justice seems far away. For the world, peace seems improbable. Hope seems a faint flicker. And yet, we get glimpses - Glimpses of kindness, Glimpses of reconciliation, Glimpses of swords being turned into plowshares. Each glimpse whispers to us that God's word of grace is the final one." {CDL} So thank you for coming tonight to get a glimpse of what is possible when we place our faith in the Prince of Peace. Thank you for coming tonight to cultivate hope for a new future and to receive the grace needed to courageously move forward in a broken world. Thank you for coming tonight to strengthen your resolve to strive for justice, peace, and the dignity of every human being.

A few minutes ago, we assembled the creche scene while singing the song "The Friendly Beasts." This creche scene reflects the Christmas narrative found in Luke's gospel. It was Saint Francis of Assisi who began this tradition in the year 1223. It dates back to a cave in Greccio, Italy, where St. Francis had visited to celebrate Christmas. This ritual continues today in many churches and homes to remind us of a scandalous story that continues to offer hope to those who are oppressed. I am thankful that the folks at St. Luke's embrace this tradition as it can encourage us to take up the mantle and spread the good news in Christ among those who struggle in the darkness.

Lest we get sentimental about the birth story of Jesus, the gospel reminds us that Joseph and Mary set out from the town of Nazareth to the city of David, called Bethlehem, to be registered for the purpose of taxation. Imagine being nine months pregnant and having to walk for 10 days to reach your destination! Mary and Joseph lived in an oppressive society, taxed by rulers who demanded as much as 50% of what the common people grew and owned. Those who could not pay these taxes had their lands confiscated. Being occupied by Rome, these Jews from the land of Palestine were denied a voice, a vote, and a dignified life. Unfortunately, this oppressive scheme (which existed in the time of Jesus), continues to operate against Palestinian Muslims and Christians in the West Bank and Gaza, many of whom have been killed, jailed, or displaced.

Each year on Christmas Eve, we read the birth narrative according to the gospel of Luke. It is a hopeful story for those who are oppressed and downtrodden. It is a joyful story for those of us who follow in the footsteps of Jesus. It speaks of the Divine Word entering into human history through a helpless, brown, middle eastern, Jewish baby, born of a yet-to-be-married couple.

Jesus' birth would have gone unnoticed had it not been for some dirty, smelly shepherds watching their flocks out in the fields. They were the ones who recognized the voice of God spoken by some unlikely messengers. And yet these lowly outcasts were able to look beyond the humble beginnings of this newborn child and recognize that God had entered into human history through a most unlikely candidate.

Slipping unobtrusively into this small province of the Roman Empire, the spirit of God descended upon this child who would grow up to be a prophet, the anointed one who identified with the powerless, the oppressed, the poor, and the homeless. This is the one whose birthday we celebrate on December 25th. Unfortunately, many people celebrate this special day but do not invite Jesus to the party.

In Bethlehem today, the place of our Savior's birth, Palestinian Christians have decided to cancel their public celebrations of Christmas. (Yes, there are still Christians living in the Holy Land.) They say that they cannot celebrate while the lives of thousands of Palestinian children are snuffed out by Israeli airstrikes; while the West Bank faces some of the worst outbreaks of violence against Palestinians by settlers and the Israeli military. The nativity scene in Bethlehem, and in many other churches around the world, have intentionally been replaced by a solitary baby lying amidst the rubble of a bombed out building.

This symbol of solidarity, of *Christ buried among the rubble*, urgently calls attention to the horror of war and killing that has claimed the lives of over 20,000 people, most of whom are women and children. And yet the Christians in the Holy Land, are holding onto hope; hope that there will be a cease fire and that food and medical supplies will be delivered to the displaced population in Gaza, 80% of whom are now homeless, seeking refuge wherever they can.

Visualizing this image of the baby Jesus lying amidst the rubble of a destroyed neighborhood, breaks my heart. As I look at our own nativity scene placed under the altar, I recognize a similarity between a baby laid on a pile of straw and the babies who are being born in the Gaza Strip. If Christ were to be born today...he would probably be born under the rubble of a bombed out building!

So as you go home tonight to celebrate the birth of Christ, to feast with your families, and to exchange tokens of your love, take a moment to pray for peace. Pray for those who suffer, for those Palestinians who are displaced, for the Israeli families who are experiencing trauma, and for the souls of all the departed. Take a long and loving look at our world today and light a candle this Christmas for its healing. Light a candle of hope where despair keeps watch. Light a candle of joy despite all the sadness. Light a candle of courage where fear is ever present. Light a candle of peace for those who live in war-torn countries. Light a candle of grace to ease the heavy burdens. Light a candle of love to inspire you to spread the good news by seeking and serving Christ in all persons.

And remember, our world is just too dangerous and yet too beautiful for anything but love. So love freely in this season of hope and generosity. Blessed is this season which engages the whole world in a conspiracy of Love! Have a blessed Christmas.