

Blue Christmas

Hitachi, MJCF December 24, 2023

Matthew 2:1-23

In Bethlehem, Christmas has been cancelled! Or, at least the Christian leaders in Jerusalem have made the decision to cancel the decorating and special festivities this year, in order to stand with the thousands of people who have lost so much in the war in Gaza. Here is a statement sent out by the church leaders in Jerusalem:

Each year during the sacred seasons of Advent and Christmastide, our Christian communities throughout the Holy Land take great delight in their preparations for the commemoration of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In addition to attendance in religious services, these celebrations have normally involved participation in numerous public festivities and the large-scale display of brightly lit and expensive decorations as a means of expressing our joy at the approach and arrival of the Feast of the Nativity.

But these are not normal times. Since the start of the War, there has been an atmosphere of sadness and pain. Thousands of innocent civilians, including women and children, have died or suffered serious injuries. Many more grieve over the loss of their homes, their loved ones, or the uncertain fate of those dear to them. Throughout the region, even more have lost their work and are suffering from serious economic challenges. Yet despite our repeated calls for a humanitarian ceasefire and a de-escalation of violence, the war continues.

Therefore, We, the Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem, call upon our congregations to stand strong with those facing such afflictions by this year foregoing any unnecessarily festive activities. We likewise encourage our priests and the faithful to focus more on the spiritual meaning of Christmas in their pastoral activities and liturgical celebrations during this period, with all the focus directed at holding in our thoughts our brothers and sisters affected by this war and its consequences, and with fervent prayers for a just and lasting peace for our beloved Holy Land.

Moreover, during this season of giving, we also invite the faithful to advocate, pray, and contribute generously as they are able for the relief of the victims of this war and for those in dire need, as well as to encourage others to join them in this mission of mercy.

In these ways, we believe, we will be standing in support of those continuing to suffer—just as Christ did with us in his Incarnation, in order that all of God's children might receive the hope of a New Jerusalem in the presence of the Almighty, where "death shall be no more, neither mourning, nor crying, nor pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

—The Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem

The Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem has modified their traditional nativity scene to put baby Jesus in, surrounded by a pile of rubble, representing the fact that Jesus is near to those who are suffering because of war. (Here is the image...<Christ in the rubble>)(MJCF)

Throughout the world there are people who are suffering. We can think of those who suffer because of war, those who suffer because of unjust imprisonment, or those who are suffering because of poverty. There are those who have suffered the loss of homes due to wildfires, earthquakes or flooding. In addition to this, in our churches and communities there are many people who suffer because of personal reasons.

Have you ever heard of “Blue Christmas” worship services? They are special worship services where the focus is on lament for those who have experienced the trauma of a loved-one dying, or the loss of a job, or serious trouble with relationships or other negative experiences. Not everyone, feels peace and joy during the Christmas season. For some, who for example, have lost family members to cancer, Christmas may be a painful time as they remember how they once had been together. The

whole world seems to be celebrating while they can only pretend to be happy. Traditionally, some churches have had Blue Christmas services around December 21st because it's around this time that we have the longest night of the year. After that, the days start to become longer and the nights shorter. During the service people remember the darkness of our lives. Yet, there is also an element of hope. We know that in Jesus Christ, we have the light of the world. The darkness we experience is not the end. God already has the victory over the darkness which is all connected with the darkness of sin, affecting us all. We see God's victory through Jesus' resurrection after his death on the cross. Knowing this, we live with confidence as we wait for Jesus to come again to finally set up a new community where our darkness is restored to light and all things are renewed...

In the four gospel accounts of Jesus' life, Matthew and Luke are the only ones that give details on his birth. The most famous story is found in the gospel of Luke, where we read about angels appearing to shepherds. The angels announce the birth of Jesus. The shepherds hurry to Bethlehem to see Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus who was born in a stable, because there was no room for them to stay in an Inn... This scene of Jesus' birth has been sterilised and domesticated by Christmas card publishers. So, many people have an image of a peaceful scene, where there are friendly animals quietly observing this holy child of God. We may imagine the sweet smell of fresh hay, Mary and Joseph smiling and relaxed, shepherds kneeling reverently around them, angels flying around above them, and maybe three wise men at the edge of the scene. But, the reality may have been that Jesus was often crying (as babies do), and being in a stable there may have been the smell of cow poop, mixed with the smell of shepherds who may not have had a bath for a very long time. Mary and Joseph may have been exhausted after a long journey and giving birth in a barn. And then, the wise men likely arrived one or two years after Jesus' birth, and there's no where in the Bible that says how many wise men were there.

The warm and cozy Christmas card image shows us one side of the Christmas story, which may feel good for people for whom everything is going well. But, for those who have experienced the trauma of bad experiences, especially those who have had a difficult time during the Christmas season, the picture-perfect images of peace and joy may feel far from reality. Today, I'd like to look more closely at the reality of the world where Jesus was born, and I hope this will help us to better understand how Christmas can fit with the realities and challenges we face in our lives. Matthew's account of the birth of Christ, and the coming of the magi (or wise men), shows a few more of the harsh realities of the world into which Jesus was born.

Already in chapter one, we have a story where Joseph plans to send Mary away quietly after he hears she is pregnant even though they had not slept together. It would have been a huge disgrace to Mary if people found out she was pregnant. God understood the situation, and so in a dream, an angel reassures Joseph that Mary is pregnant through the Holy Spirit. He is to name the baby "Jesus", which means "the Lord is salvation". Jesus would save people from their sins. Joseph then decides to continue with Mary, rather than breaking up.

In chapter two of Matthew, we have the story of the magi. When King Herod learns that they had tricked him, and wouldn't be coming back to let him know where Jesus was, he was furious. He orders all the children in the area two years old and younger to be killed. What a terrible massacre! Many would weep for their children. Along with this, because of Herod's treachery, Joseph is warned by an angel in a dream to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt so they can be safe from Herod. So, they become refugees. This would not have been an easy life! Sadly, similar kinds of things happen all around the world even today. So sad!

This is the kind of world and situation into which Jesus was born. The King of Kings, the Son of God did not come to earth as a strong mighty warrior hero. He came as a vulnerable baby, born into a poor family who became refugees, with basically nothing. Jesus was there when the universe was created, and yet he was not born in a palace in Jerusalem. Instead, he was born in a smelly stable. The most amazing thing is that as an adult, after three years of ministry, he was put to death on a cross. He

faithfully allowed this to happen because God's way is not one of violence, but one of sacrificial love. Without the cross, and Jesus' resurrection we'd never be able to see that God is more powerful than sin and death. The cross represents the worst that can happen to a person. It's been described that in Jesus, God became "breakable." As a person, Jesus was someone who could be hurt. No other religion has a belief in a God that is vulnerable to be hurt. God came to us as a real person, yet he was also God.

We live in a world where darkness and pain is all around us, but because of Jesus, we have deep hope, peace, and strength to face it honestly. Excerpts from a poem called First Coming, by Madeleine L'Engle describe God's coming to us in Jesus:

God did not wait until the world was ready, till nations were at peace...

God came when prisoners cried for release.

God did not wait for the perfect time.

God came when the need was deep and great...

In joy God came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.

To a world like ours, of anguished shame,

God came and God's Light would not go out...

In the mystery of the Word made Flesh,

the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane

to raise our songs with joyful voice,

For to share our grief, to touch our pain,

God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

Through Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection, we have the hope of the world. Looking at the reality of Jesus' life, we see that God understands our suffering and our pain. He experienced it in Jesus. Jesus brought the light of God's love into our darkness. And as it says in the gospel of John, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." Even when we experience the darkness of life's challenges, we have the light of Christ within us, and the promise of restoration, a day "when God will wipe away all our tears." Let's pray.

Loving God, there is so much suffering in our world. Sometimes we go through difficult times when we wonder where you are, or why this is happening. May we put our trust in you. Thank-you, God for the gift of your Son, Jesus. Thank-you for stepping into our darkness and opening up to our pain. We are humbled when we think of the sacrifice you made in order to draw us to you through Jesus. Help us to not forget that you are ultimately in control, that in the end you promise that all things will be restored, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.