

## How Can We Celebrate Christmas This Year—Luke 2: 1-20 (December 24, 2023—Christmas Eve)

Parents, we're idealists, aren't we? We raise kids to kids to question, to be curious, to challenge authority when needed. Yet, it takes us by surprise when they take those lovingly cultivated traits and turn them on us, pointing out inconsistencies in our worldviews, exposing blind spots in our thinking, gaps in our knowledge. Such is the case this week when one of my bright, sensitive, politically aware children, whose been devastated by events in Palestine and Israel asks, 'how can we celebrate Christmas this year?' How can we celebrate Christmas when the birthplace of Jesus is bombed and it's people killed, maimed and livelihoods destroyed?

It's a good question, and other than thinking, 'it's my job' I go silent, struggling to answer. It's a good question because Christian churches in Palestine have cancelled Christmas celebrations. It's a good question because it frankly does make me uneasy and even queasy to think of the excess of Christmas in the west in contrast to the horrific realities in Jesus' place of birth.

This question sits with me. I'm helped along in my questioning by the words of Pastor Munther Isaac of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, whom I now follow on Twitter. He says, "We need to de-romanticize Christmas...In reality, it's a story of a baby who was born in the most difficult circumstances under occupation, who survived the massacre of children himself when he was born."<sup>1</sup> That part at the end there, that's the story we never read on Christmas Eve, King Herod massacring babies out of fear a new king is about to be born. Pastor Isaac goes on to say, "If Jesus had been born in the year 2023...it would have been natural for him to find himself among the oppressed and displaced Palestinian people."<sup>2</sup> The deeper we allow ourselves to settle into the political and social realities of the Christmas story the more we realize that there is very little difference between Palestine today and Palestine over 2,000 years ago.

But the affluent world prefers a romanticized Christmas. Perhaps it's to spare ourselves the judgement that comes with realizing who we might be in the Christmas story as people of relative power, wealth, and privilege. 'It's about family' we say, 'it's for the kids' we say. The affluent church is no different, relegating the Christmas story to a one-time, unique event in history that buttresses the cherished belief that at a certain point in time God entered humanity so we could all belong to this club of the saved we call Christianity. This club of people who all believe the right things. When the horrors of the world stare you in the face these, to me at least, are not compelling reasons to celebrate Christmas.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Munther Isaac (@MuntherIsaac on X, formerly Twitter), 6:50 AM · Dec 18, 2023

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Munther Isaac, [Christmas celebrations canceled, Christians in the Holy Land still find hope in the season](#), *Religion News Service*, David Kuttub, December 18, 2023.

What makes Christmas worthy of celebration this year, or for that matter, any year? The truth is the world always has horrors; some are more evident than others. What is the life-altering good news of the Christmas story? Because it must be life altering if it's going to be good news, especially this year, right? How about this? Jesus isn't a one-time event of history; Jesus is a revelation of God. This is what I come across this week in the work of poet, author, and theologian John Phillip Newell.<sup>3</sup> He uses the word "revelation" in the biblical sense from the Greek origin which means to uncover, to lift the veil on what is already there. Jesus lifts the veil on, uncovers the truth that we all—Palestinian, Israeli, Muslim, Jew, Christian—have God within us. We are all children of God. Jesus simply lived this most real of all realities to the fullest. Another Lutheran Pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber says,<sup>4</sup> this has implications for relationships. These implications are the life altering good news that the Christmas story asks us to take beyond the holiday season.

If Jesus is God's great unveiling, great revelation, of who we all are then there are no children of light and children of darkness, no woman deserves to be raped in the name of any cause, no children who can be bombed, no people who should ever be walled in. If Jesus is God's unveiling of who we all are then this calls for a radical solidarity that changes the questions we ask ourselves; not just the reflexive and reactionary question of 'how do I defend myself and what I believe?' But rather 'how do we honour the sacredness that we each carry within us?' If we ask this latter question often and early enough in our relationships, there will be no need for that first question. That there, the transformation of our relationships by living into the sacred reality Jesus uncovered is the Christmas fulfillment of the Advent promises of hope, peace, joy, and love in our lives and our world. Jesus is God's great unveiling. Take off your masks and disguises, the Christmas story calls to us, to embrace this life altering revelation.

Why celebrate Christmas this year? Why celebrate Christmas any year? Because in the face of the world's Herod's, consumed by fear, protecting power and privilege, lashing out in violent spasms, we need, the world needs, to know there is another way. So, every year we tell this story of a God who willingly divests themselves of power, who comes vulnerable—vulnerable as a baby, pulling us into the shared awe at the miracle of life, asking us to engage in the loving labour of caring for the weakest amongst us not as an act of sacrifice or charity but as a way to engage with the divine and be brought into community. This is worth celebrating. I'm thankful for the question, 'how can we celebrate Christmas at this time?' To which I say, especially at this time, the world needs Christmas. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

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<sup>3</sup> John Philip Newell, [All Matter Matters](#) (video), Work of the People (subscription video service).

<sup>4</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, [Home Within Flesh](#), Work of the People (subscription video service).