

*Based on Isaiah 9:2, 6. Shining Light in the Darkness.*

We cannot sing tonight of a child born in Bethlehem without hearing the cries from that city this Christmas.

Gone are the massive throngs who normally congregate in Manger Square. Gone are the feasts and the parades, the carols and the candles, gone is the festive celebration announcing the birth of the Prince of Peace.

What remains in the Little Town of Bethlehem this Christmas is in fact a more genuine meaning of it all, stripped down of its pomp, and focused instead on the actual conditions into which Jesus, himself, was born: with global colonial powers carving up the land we call Holy; with military occupation endorsing the violence of the state; with terrorist resistance rising up against the occupying power; with forcible displacement of vulnerable families simply seeking to survive at the whim of heartless leaders who *share a paranoia of losing their power, and will risk everything, including the lives of thousands of children, to stay in control* (Munayer, John S. and Samuel S. Munayer in *Cornerstone: A Publication by Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center*).

As the Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem admit, for them, this Christmas, *hope seems distant and beyond reach.*

Into that very hopelessness, the Scriptures insist, a child is born. Not just 2500 years ago in the time of Isaiah or 2000 years ago in the time of Jesus. A child is born right now, this very night, hidden from sight, in a UNRWA school turned into a refugee camp, or a besieged hospital, or even under the rubble of a destroyed house or a burned down Kibbutz. There is no CNN news flash or BBC Breaking News announcing the birth of this Anointed One of God. Not even Al-Jazeera or Ha'aretz knows the name of the child that is given to us this night.

What we do know for sure, the Scriptures assure us, is that a crowd of angels surround the child's mother, perhaps in the form of Doctors Without Borders - supported in part by our Christmas Eve Offering - perhaps in the form of whomever is nearby to help, perhaps in the form of a simple spirit of strength that somehow sustains her through it all.

And that child, this night, in a miracle of miracles, the Scriptures assure us, LIVES!

Tomorrow, our CNN and BBC and Al-Jazeera and Ha'aretz headlines tell us, a real live flesh and blood woman, twenty-three year old Rouaa Hassana, will sing to this child for hours. Three hours a day, according to UNICEF, day after day after day, Rouaa Hassana will musically encircle the child born tonight with hundreds of other children caught in the balance of war. With Rouaa's stringed instrument and her calm call to serenity joining with the companionship of other children, her circle of music will block out the sound of violence as harmonious tunes hold out hope for harmonious living. As Rouaa songs to the child born tonight, Mary's Magnificat is made real for our time.

Someday, our Scriptures and our headlines alike assure us, a smile will emerge on the face of the child born into these genuine Christmas conditions. The words of the song will begin to sound familiar. The beat of the song will begin to sound eternal. Voices will join together and hands will begin to clap. Shakers will celebrate love, light, peace and joy.

Carried away by the music and the warm atmosphere, our Scriptures and our headlines alike assure us, the child born tonight will start to dance among the crowd. Light will begin. A new creation will dawn. A pathway to peace will emerge. Not from the halls of power in this Western world. But from the voice of a child born into genuine Christmas conditions, whose modern day Magnificat teaches us to respond to terror with love instead of with vengeance.

It turns out the genuine meaning of Christmas, stripped of all its pomp, comes down to a choice. We choose tonight to open our eyes, in the words of the poet, *to learn to see what has forever shimmered in front of us*: a pack of angels and a singing circle and the resilience of a marginalized family amidst agonizing hardship. No army, no government, no religious institution can silence this message.

Choosing Christmas tonight means turning our eyes toward the real Bethlehem and proclaiming the possibility of the prophet made manifest NOW. Choosing Christmas tonight means we proclaim *this* is the day all violence must come to an end. *This* is the day we must learn to walk with each other in justice, mercy, and peace.

Because *this* is the day a child is born among us, Immanuel, God With Us, shining a light in the darkness. We who choose the genuine meaning of Christmas must do whatever it takes to keep that child safe, so that the child might one day - may it be soon - lead us all into peace.