

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2017 Christmas Message from Bishop Dr. Munib Younan

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Matthew 1:23

Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',
which means, 'God is with us.'

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At Christmastime, many Christians decorate their homes with creches featuring figures of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Here in Palestine, these nativity scenes are often made of olive wood. In other places, the same scene may be fashioned out of fabric, carved out of stone, or molded out of clay. If we were to visit Christian homes across the globe, we would find depictions of the Holy Family in many styles and many colors, which reflect the diverse cultures and ethnicities of our faith family.

However, these beloved nativity scenes are far more than home décor. They are important reminders that the Christmas season is about more than parties, gifts, and dazzling trees. We surround ourselves with mangers to remember how, in great love, God was born among us. The Son of God was born in Bethlehem, and was laid not in a bed fit for a king, but in a place for feeding animals. This unexpected scene—the King of Kings lying in a humble manger—is still one that captivates the world.

Even so, we must also remember that the manger is not actually made of olive wood, stone, fabric, or clay. The manger is not found exclusively in Bethlehem, nor is it a static object at all. The manger is found everywhere and in every place, for Christ is always being born among us. As the great spiritual writer Thomas Merton proclaimed:

“Into this world, this demented inn in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ comes uninvited.”

Wherever we are in the world, Christ is always Emmanuel, God-With-Us. Wherever we celebrate Christmas in spirit and in truth, there is Emmanuel, God-With-Us.

This concept of “Emmanuel” comes first from Isaiah chapter 7, where it is written:

“Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”

At Christmas, we celebrate the Good News that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy. At long last, God has been born in Bethlehem. This baby called Jesus is the promised Emmanuel, God-with-us. In fact, the whole of the Gospel according to Matthew, from the day of Jesus’ birth to the day of his passion, points us to the news that Jesus is the One we’ve been waiting for. Jesus is Emmanuel, God-With-Us, the One who was, who is, and who is to come. “Lo, I will be with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:11)

This biblical interpretation of Jesus as Emmanuel is very important, because there are those who wish to claim “God with us” as a political motto. Today there are many extremists who claim God is “with them” –and only with them—in their wars, in their hatred, in their racism, in their xenophobia, and in their oppression of others. Instead of recognizing Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy, they hijack the idea of “God-With-Us” to justify their apocalyptic scenarios.

These false theologies are far from any biblical witness, and unfortunately, they have consequences for real people today. We have seen this reality in the recent unilateral announcement on Jerusalem. Some world leaders are speaking about the Holy City in terms of regional politics or eschatology, but for those who live here, Jerusalem is a matter of justice. Jerusalem must be a shared place for three religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and two people (Israelis and Palestinians) and historic status quo of Jerusalem must be respected.

This Christmas, we remember that even when there is conflict and uncertainty about the future, Christ is Emmanuel, God-With-Us. God is in the midst of the city, and it shall not be moved. Jerusalem must be the city of peace, justice, and

reconciliation for all people, for there will be no peace in the Middle East without a just peace in Jerusalem.

This past year, as we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we were reminded of Martin Luther's admonition for Christians to always seek "was Christum treibet", or "what promotes Christ." Our religion should always be about those things which promote Christ, and him crucified. Therefore, those who think they find religious justification for political oppression and injustice have abandoned the manger for palaces and halls of power.

In fact, the story of Christmas has taught us that God is never tribal or narrow-minded, and shows no preference for the powerful or the privileged. The Christ Child is for all people, regardless of race, nation, class, or gender. Perhaps for this reason on Christmas night there was "A multitude of the heavenly host" – a great number of angels, representing all the world!—singing "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth." (Luke 2:13-14)

The fulfilment of prophecy took place in Bethlehem, as a baby lying in a manger. This was a shock to many who expected the Messiah to come in a different way. It is still a shock to people today, to realize that the power of God is owned by no government and is a member of no political party. Still today, Jesus is being incarnated in the most unexpected places. Where is the manger found today? Perhaps Jesus is born today in a refugee camp. Perhaps he is born in a warzone. Perhaps he is born among the oppressed—or perhaps he is born in the midst of the oppressors, that they may change their ways for justice and reconciliation.

Perhaps Christ will be born again in this divided land. Perhaps he will even be born in a new manger, in Jerusalem.

Actually, we will find the manger, and the newborn Christ Child, in every place where love needs to be born again. Sometimes, the place most in need of that love is the church! But be assured: Jesus is always being born among us, even in his church, and even if our own fears and self-interests keep us from seeing him.

On Christmas Eve in 1978, the first year that he was archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero encouraged his church, which had seen so much violence and bloodshed, saying:

“God keeps on saving in history. And so, in turning once again to the episode of Christ’s birth at Bethlehem, we come not to recall Christ’s birth twenty centuries ago, but to live that birth here, in the twentieth century, this year, in our own Christmas here in El Salvador.”

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, as you gather with family and friends and in your respective churches this Christmas, remember that the miracle of Christmas was not a one-time event. Christmas is the ongoing miracle of God’s love for this broken world. Wherever you are, and whatever you are going through, Christ is born among you today! Jesus is still Emmanuel, God-With-Us.

The little town of Bethlehem is your town,

The stable is your home,

And the manger is your heart.

Christ is always being born into the lives of those who need him.

Therefore, from Jerusalem and Bethlehem and to the ends of the earth, let us repeat with sounding joy:

Jesus, Emmanuel, is born today! God is with us!

May there be mangers ready to receive him this Christmas: In our homes, in our churches, among the poor and oppressed, in the halls of power and seats of authority, and especially in our hearts.

Merry Christmas!

Kul sane wa intou salmeen!

Frohe Weihnachten!

God Jul!

Joyeux Noël!

Feliz Navidad!

Hyvää joulua!

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.