



**Christmas Message 2023
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Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land**

Solemn greetings to you all from Jerusalem. I greet you in this Christmas season on behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, and our whole Palestinian Christian community, as the global church turns in prayer and worship toward the city of Jesus' birth—the holy city of Bethlehem.

Last month, the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, including the ELCJHL, announced that this Christmas in the Holy Land cannot be like any other. The stone walls of Bethlehem will not echo the joyful sounds of scouts marching, choirs singing, or holiday celebrations this year. In the face of tens of thousands of lives lost since October, we spend this Christmas season in mourning, and in prayer.

Our current reality feels as if it cannot be true. Yet in these terrible times we find echoes of the truth of the first Christmas, the story of Jesus' birth into a world that was also troubled and unjust.

In the same way that we see fear of “the other” driving so much violence in the Holy Land today, we remember the decree from King Herod ordering the death of all young boys in Bethlehem because of his fear of a new king. As Palestinians, we know all too well the sharp pain of losing thousands of children to state violence born from fear.

In the same way, Mary and Joseph's long journey to Bethlehem from Nazareth was due to governmental control; for if they did not register in Joseph's birthplace, their identity with the state would cease to exist. We also know the constant risk of losing our nationality and identity due to political agendas.

As we remember the journey of the Holy Family, our hearts are also with the pregnant women in Gaza today, who even in an age of modern medicine are undergoing dangerous and difficult travels to escape the endless bombardment of their cities, looking for a safe place to give birth. We have even seen donkeys used, as Mary did, to lighten the travel load.

Here in the Holy Land, we will mark this Christmas season without peace. And in times without peace, it is easy to feel like we are without hope, without faith, maybe even without God. This is when we must remember that God did not send his only son Jesus into a peaceful world. God's people suffered in this land at the time of



Jesus's birth. God's people cried out in lament in this land, and God's people struggled to find hope, to find faith.

In John 16:33 Jesus reminds us: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Through God alone, we have peace. God is larger than our human understanding, and our hope must lie in him. The violence and suffering we see today comes at the hands of humans, for reasons belonging to a human timeline and human understanding. But even if we cannot fully understand God, through the birth of Jesus we know we are loved by a God who fully understands us. And so, may we have faith that true peace and justice will come at God's hand, and may we not give up hope.

Despite everything, we believe that God holds the future; and we know this because on that night in Bethlehem, God sent Jesus to be born and live among God's people, to suffer and die, and to rise again to defeat the powers of sin and death. Jesus taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves. He taught us to pray. So we will love; and we will pray; in the name of Jesus who has overcome the world.

As we sing in the Arabic Christmas carol "Laylet Al Milad",

When we offer a glass of water to a thirsty person, we are in Christmas

When we clothe a naked person with a gown of love, we are in Christmas

When we wipe the tears from weeping eyes, we are in Christmas

When we cushion a hopeless heart with love, we are in Christmas

Amen.

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