

## **Christmas Eve 2016 Reflection, St. Catherine Chapel**

*By Sister Patricia Siemen*

*Isaiah 9:1-6; Timothy 2:11-14; Luke 2: 1-14*

As I begin tonight, let me again say how honored we Adrian Dominican Sisters, Associates, and Co-workers are by your presence with us as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, God among us. He is called a Prince of Peace. However, this prince comes from a humble birth. He shows us how to love and how to bring peace on Earth for all humankind, and all creation.

The Psalmist tonight reminds us that even the heavens are glad and the Earth rejoices at this ruler. The sea, and all that fills it resounds with joy. Even the trees of the forests exult because they know that this One shall rule the Earth with justice and right relationships. And so we celebrate as well!

We sometimes hear that celebrating Christmas is for children. It's true that many children seem to innately recognize magic and wonder long before us grownups. Or perhaps we lose that ability. Christmas, however, reminds us to reclaim the joy of wonder! Just hearing the sounds of favorite Christmas carols can lighten the heart and bring joy and laughter.

The hidden mystery of Christmas, of God incarnated among us, takes a while sometimes to sink into our consciousness. Pope Francis, in his 2017 World Day of Peace letter, reminds us that Christ's birth gets lived out within non-violent, peacemaking communities. He says that it takes the whole community to manifest the presence of God in our broken world. When a people, or a community, are united in communion and lovingly address the needs of the vulnerable ones around them, then Christ is born anew in that community. And where God is born, hope is born anew.

In the Gospel, we hear the words of the angel to the shepherds in the fields, "Be not afraid." These words ring in our ears as well, this night, for the promise of the birth of One who heals the broken and makes the world whole, is indeed good news for all. Isaiah's words in the first reading hold promise for us as well: "The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwell in a land of gloom, a light has shone."

I found it interesting to discover that these words of Isaiah were addressed in the 6th century BCE to the people living in the region of what is Syria today. They were in the midst of warfare then, as they are today. Indeed, many people walk in a world of gloom and fear around the world today: Syria, Iraq, the Philippines, Ecuador, Peru, Liberia, homelands of indigenous peoples, inner city neighborhoods, rural communities, and other parts of the world as well. For many, both in human and in other-than-human communities, the world is not safe.

As Janet Schaeffler reminded us in her Advent reflection this morning, we are living in the midst of violence and abuse. War, terrorism and ecological degradation are becoming more common. The oppression of people who are poor, of refugees and immigrants, is mounting globally. Expressions of racism and sexism seem to be more acceptable, and an overall lack of reverence for life, for people, and other members of Earth community gives rise to feelings of distress, anxiety, and concern.

And so we are not much different from the people that Isaiah was speaking to. Yet he promises them that a "great light has shone." God will bring them abundant joy and rejoicing. They will celebrate as at the harvest, yielding its fruits, and the yoke of oppression will be lifted from them. And why? Because a child is born; and upon this child dominion, authority, rests. His reign is vast and forever peaceful. He is the Prince of Peace. This new born child is God-with-us.

But is this just a feel-good, worn-out story that gets repeated every Christmas? Is it a story of no consequence?

Let me tell you a story. Yesterday's *New York Times* featured an article on the plight of the Iraqi Christians amidst the destruction in Qaraqosh, Iraq. It is a heartbreaking story of continued war, destruction of homes and churches by ISIS, displaced internal refugees, and the many people who have fled their country. The newspaper story ends with a quote from one of the Iraqi Dominicans, Sister Huda Khudhr. "They (ISIS) can destroy our houses, our things, but not our souls."

Her hope is real. It is gritty. It is of today. It is grounded in the promise of the Christ Child, the Prince of Peace, believing that even in the midst of destruction and powerlessness, Divine Presence shows up and is manifested through the lives and faces of those who stand with those who grieve and accompany them in solidarity and relief.

As I was preparing my homily for tonight I had already included this story about our Iraqi sisters. And then this morning I received Sister Clara Nancy's Christmas letter. Sister Clara is the Prioress of the St. Catherine of Siena Dominicans in Iraq. I want to include it here, even though some of you may have read it this morning, for I submit, there is nothing more relevant to the Christmas story today, than her heartrending reflection, as Christmas unfolds across her war-torn country this day, December 24, 2016.

Here is her message: Christmas Message from Heaven,

*As we approach Christmas day to celebrate the birth of our Lord, many of us join the shepherds with our questions and concerns:*

*Shall we return to our towns?*

*Shall we stay where we are?*

*Shall we leave the country?*

*Shall we stay in this country?*

*Is ISIS still there on the Plain of Nineveh? Is ISIS out of Iraq?*

*Shall we restore our houses and churches?*

*If we return, would we be safe?*

*If we stay, what will happen to our homes on the Plain of Nineveh?*

*With all these questions, God in His mercy looks upon us and sends His angels to announce the Good News confirming that:*

*He is Emmanuel...God is with us,*

*If we return, He will be there for us.*

*If we stay here, He stays with us.*

*If we leave the country, He will guide our steps.*

*If we stay, He will open our eyes to see signs of his love amongst all this destruction.*

*If ISIS is still here, He will send His angels to protect us.*

*If ISIS is out of here, He will give us courage to start again.*

*If we start restoring, He will send his messengers to give a hand.*

*If we worry about safety, He is trustworthy... and He will never let us down.*

*If we do not find answers to all our questions, He will give us peace in our hearts to sing with the angels:*

*Glory be to God in the highest, and peace be to His people on Earth.*

Her final words bear repeating:

*If ISIS is out of here, God will give us courage to start again.*

*If we start restoring, He will send his messengers to give a hand.*

*If we worry about safety, He is trustworthy... and He will never let us down.*

*If we do not find answers to all our questions, He will give us peace in our hearts to sing with the angels.*

Let this be our faith, too. Let us trust the power and presence of God born anew within each of us this Christmas, and working through us, to bring forth peace on Earth. As Pope Francis says, "Violence is not the cure for a broken world."

And so we join in prayer with the people of Iraq, and of our Sisters in the Philippines, and of all the war-torn and violent places on Earth. We join with all people of good will across the Earth and we ask, "O come, prince of peace. Come into our world, through us, and through all people of good will. Move our hearts to welcome you, the one who put aside divinity and became a helpless child in order to make yourself known to us. Move our hearts to become your presence in the world today, as we too sing with the angels, and the shepherds in the fields, and with our sisters in Iraq: "Glory be to God in the highest, and peace be to all people on Earth."