

Advent IV – Christmas Eve – We’re so Ordinary, will God really work through us?

A sermon preached by Zac Klassen on December 24th, 2023

Good morning,

Last week during the experiencing the story time in our worship service, I showed [this picture](#). It is a provocative picture – a picture displaying Mary’s strength and power rather than her meekness and humility – a picture that goes well with the hymn we just sung – a familiar tune that was given updated lyrics by Sarah Kathleen Johnson for *Voices Together* in order to more faithfully depict an empowered Mary as she is presented in scripture. Personally, my favorite part of the picture is Mary’s head on the Skull and the Snake, images of evil and death. Here, Mary, this ordinary young Jewish woman is shown to have God-given power and strength – ordinary though she may have been, God chose her to be a crucial part of the world’s transformation. This image also challenges us with words of Mary’s song written along the side, declaring good news for the lowly and the hungry in our world of brutal hierarchies that create and sustain poverty. Images like this are provocative because they have the capacity to activate our imaginations, to wake them up from their slumber and complacency, and enlist them in the battle for minds and hearts that goes on in our world constantly. Images don’t always have the capacity to wake us up in this way, of course. Sometimes images, especially conventional ones, can keep us asleep. During Advent one of the themes we’ve been exploring is the need for us to stay awake as disciples of Jesus. Jesus asks us to be watchful and expectant for that “new” thing that God will do; to be watchful as we wait for God to show up in our midst. The Advent season is a season filled with many familiar images – images of angelic visits, of the humble Mary and startled Joseph, of a bright star in the sky, bewildered shepherds, and royal wise men, of stables

with animals and the holy family gathered peacefully, in awe of the birth of Jesus. Do these images wake us up? I suspect a lot depends on how they are presented.

I've already shown you a non-conventional image of Mary that I think wakes us up to new learnings about her power and strength and God's decision to work through her for the world's transformation. I have a few additional sets of images to share this morning that I hope will further wake us up to the full significance of this season. For each image that I'm about to share, there is a bit of a story that goes with them. I hope these images and their stories help us wrestle with our Advent question today: "we're so ordinary, will God really work through us?" The first two sets of images I want to share with you this morning come from non-conventional nativity scenes. [This image](#) displays Jesus wrapped in a Palestinian scarf, alone in the rubble – some of you may have seen this image throughout the last couple of weeks as it has circulated online. The image comes from an evangelical Lutheran church in Bethlehem in the West Bank. Here's a second view of it, this time with the full set of nativity characters around the rubble. The Pastor at the Church, Munther Isaac, said this regarding the unconventional nativity:

“While the world celebrates Christmas with big festivities, in the homeland of Christmas, children are being killed, homes are being destroyed and families displaced,”... We want to remind the world of the suffering of Palestinians, the injustice we go through so it can hopefully challenge the world to work for peace.... Our only wish and prayer this Christmas is that this genocide will be over.”¹

This provocative display was set up as a “reminder” of the suffering of ordinary Palestinians – of the fact that many of them will not experience the “comfort” and “joy” of the season; that many of them are not seeing their ruins rebuilt, are not experiencing freedom from captivity, are not able to say that they are “blessed” with a house or that they are experiencing rest. These words

¹ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/palestine-israel/2023/12/07/baby-jesus-lies-amid-rubble-in-bethlehem-church-christmas-nativity-scene/>

that I just used like comfort, joy, rebuilding, freedom, blessing, and rest are all words we've been using during advent, words deeply rooted in the promises declared to God's people by the prophets. The prophet Nathan, for example, talked of God building for David and his lineage a house and a kingdom that would endure forever. In previous weeks this Advent, we've been hearing scriptures from much later in Israel's history after the fall of the Monarchy and the exile of Israel. Through the prophet Isaiah we heard God's promises of a future of comfort and peace for the people of Israel in their time of exile and oppression under a foreign power. And then of course, the last couple of Sundays we've heard Mary echo Isaiah as she declared God's faithfulness to all prophetic promises in the coming of her unexpected child.

For many Palestinians, including Christian Palestinians, prophetic words of good news like these from Nathan, Isaiah, and Mary, words that were supposed to be good news not only for Israel but for all the nations, have been buried, lost deep beneath the rubble. And for many ordinary Israeli's and Jewish people around the world these words of good news in the prophets are also overshadowed by the realities of loss, fear, and violence. All the while, powerful leaders make world-changing decisions, often invoking the bible to justify the horrific violence that make the promises of scripture seemingly ring hollow.² In an interview with Pastor Munther Isaac in Bethlehem, he noted that all the heads of churches in Jerusalem have decided that "Christmas celebrations" are not something the churches in that region can justifiably participate in with everything going on. And so, in solidarity with those suffering, services will be scaled back and focused on prayer. Acts of solidarity like this, solidarity with those who suffer, are important because they seek to tear down hierarchy for the sake of justice – acts like this tear down hierarchies between those Christians who *can* celebrate and those who *can't*; hierarchy

² See this article regarding Benjamin Netanyahu's dangerous comparison of Hamas with "Amalek": <https://jweekly.com/2023/11/02/comparing-hamas-to-amalek-our-biblical-nemesis-will-ultimately-hurt-israel/>

between human beings who *can* enjoy comfort and rest, and those who *can't*. Dare I say that the response the churches in Jerusalem are giving to the suffering overtaking the Holy Land right now, suffering that spans Palestinian and Israeli borders, is a response that demonstrates what it looks like to pay attention to God's presence and work in the ordinary lives of people made in God's image, whether they are close to us or far away. While Christians need not mute their inner-joy and confidence in God's salvation brought through Jesus at Christmas, it is important that we recognize fully the experiences of this season – experiences that are not just joy and happiness, but also mourning, pain, and loss. As Christians who celebrate the birth of a child under a cruel political leader who sought to eradicate him and so many others, we must pay attention to and acknowledge God's presence with those suffering and fearing. In addition, we must trust God's presence and work enough to be courageous while we join God in being present, even from afar, to those who suffer. And, we must, like Mary, trust God enough to step out in courage to live lives that challenge deadly politics, embodying Good News in a world that lies under the shadow of death.

The second set of images I want to share with you similarly focuses on the nativity and specifically the Holy Family. The first image comes from artist Irenaeus Yurchuk, who was born in Ukraine during World War II and later raised in central New York. He created this image called [Nativity](#) in response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The image has its parallels to the previous image – although contextually the location now is Ukraine, not the middle east. The same dynamic is at play though, is it not? Here the Holy Family does not gather in a peaceful, pastoral setting. Rather, the Holy Family finds its makeshift shelter under the rubble. Images like this challenge the sentimental language of “no room in the inn” as they make us face the reality of war that so many face – the reality of “no rooms” at all – no houses left. Another

similar dynamic between these last two images of the Holy Family amid destruction is the dynamic of political powers that brutally destroy – in both cases, governments use weapons to achieve what they claim will bring “peace on earth” for their people, but at immense cost.

The second image in this set titled [*La Sagrada Familia*](#) (or, The Holy Family), was painted by artist Kelly Latimore. Now the context is not the Middle East or Ukraine, but rather the troubled relationship between the United States and Mexico. On her website, Latimore tells this story about this painting:

I painted " La Sagrada Familia" the day after the 2016 Election. It was mainly inspired by a trip with my partner Evie and encountering some undocumented immigrants. We were sitting around a bonfire one night with this young man from Guatemala who told us why he was in the United States, his struggles, his hopes, and fears. He had come here as a teenager, only to be de-ported and then almost beaten to death in Mexico. He eventually crossed the desert again to the United States. Everything about him broke us. He has the image of God within him. As we were hearing all of the hateful rhetoric that was anti-immigrant, anti-stranger, his experience immediately came to mind while creating this modern holy family image and how the refugee Jesus, Mary, and Joseph must have felt fleeing from Herod 2,000 years ago.³

These two images should provoke us as Christians who hope to sing of peace on earth today.

They should help us remember that our advent and Christmas calling is to see God’s face in the face of the poor, the refugee, the homeless, and in those who have been victims of war. These images should also help us remember that our advent and Christmas calling is to challenge those who would build their political platforms on xenophobic and hateful speech, and to challenge those who would claim that weapons and violence can achieve peace. We may proclaim joyfully Isaiah’s words about a wonderful counselor and a prince of peace given to us in Jesus, but we must do so without omitting the powerful verse that comes before that one. Listen to what it says:

For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority

³ <https://kellylatimoreicons.com/en-ca/products/la-sagrada-familia>

rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

The third set of images I want to share with you today are not of unconventional nativity scenes or paintings of the Holy Family. And the context of these images is not the Middle East or Ukraine or Mexico or the US. Rather, these images come from closer to home and I hope they provoke us as Christians to think differently about what it might mean to sing “peace on earth” at Christmas. [This image](#) was taken at Waterloo City Hall near the office of Waterloo’s Member of Parliament Bardish Chagger. The gathering you see in this and other pictures that I’ll show in a minute, was a gathering called “Hymn Sing for a Ceasefire.”⁴ Lorna and I both attended and saw former BMC pastor Mary Mae there too. The gathering was organized by a group called [Mennonite Action](#), whose stated mission is to take “public action to stop war and end the occupation of Palestine.” What more Mennonite way is there to act politically than to sing in public, and so they organized a hymn sing at the offices of public officials in 42 communities in Canada and the US, calling for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza. At that meeting, among many familiar hymns sung, there were also prayers spoken for Israeli’s and Palestinians experiencing violence; there were denunciations of the rising tide of Islamophobia and Antisemitism around the world, and there were many truths spoken to power as our local MP was being called out for her silence in the face of such loss of life. One shocking statistic that was named and has appeared in the most recent *Canadian Mennonite* states that the total tonnage of bombs Israel has dropped on Gaza is upward to 1.5 times more than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima during World War II. In the face of this sobering statistic, Mennonites in Canada and the US are rightly asking themselves how we can be faithful to our convictions around peace and justice and what we can do so that we do not stay silent this Christmas.

⁴ See reporting on this event here: <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/mennonites-protest-waterloo>

Also named at this gathering was the fact that our own Region is linked to the line of production that makes weapons that end up in conflicts like the one in the Middle East right now – it might be hard to hear it, but our wealth and ingenuity and industries are wrapped up in weapons production. It was a sobering yet hopeful gathering. One particularly powerful moment, however, came with the singing of *Silent Night*. I began this sermon by talking about unconventional images during Advent and Christmas and if [this](#) isn't an unconventional image. In this image are people participating in what is called a “die-in,” a demonstration meant to give a visual representation of the civilian deaths in Gaza – well, what you can't hear from this picture is that “Silent Night” is being sung while these people lay there as if dead. As I draw our reflection on these unconventional images to a close this morning, I do so while leaving us pondering our question for today in light of these images: “we're so ordinary, will God really work through us to bring a kingdom of justice and peace?” While we ponder this question, I invite you to [watch this short video clip](#) of the moment we sang Silent Night at this gathering.