



SABEEL'S CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2011

Envisioning a world where peace with justice reigns

The message of the angel to the shepherds was one of liberation, “Fear not, for I bring you tidings of great joy which will be for all people...” As the company of angels joined the first messenger and gave glory to God, they emphasized the gift of peace and goodwill. The only possibility for peace and goodwill is through work for justice; work that moves the world in a direction away from empire, away from war, and toward God’s vision of peace and reconciliation. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem embodies this movement.

Sabeel started the year 2011 in a way that reflected this embodied movement with its 8th international conference. Titled “Challenging Empire: God, Faithfulness, and Resistance” we gathered over 300 participants from around the world to give glory to God, and analyze the situation of empire which makes the realization of peace with justice difficult in Palestine-Israel.

We continued throughout the year to examine the concept and reality of empire through Sabeel’s grassroots programs (for the community, women, clergy, and youth). As 2011 approaches its end, we offer the following Christmas message:

The Christmas narrative according to the Gospels paints a realistic picture of the historical contexts in which Jesus was born. The greatest empire the ancient world had known, the Roman Empire, was in complete control. Caesar Augustus stood at the top of the hierarchy. Herod is named as a client king, and the text mentions religious leaders who collaborate with the imperial system. This system created an environment of total domination; many were oppressed and caught up in these damaging societal structures. Others rejected the system and engaged in occasional uprisings against the Romans; while others retreated into the desert to escape oppression. Into such a milieu, Jesus was born.

The message that the Gospels record about Jesus’ birth include words that ordinary people living under occupation and oppression long to hear, “Do not fear! There is good news that will give joy to all people, a savior is born!” God has sent a liberator, and he is born in a humble setting. Indeed, liberation will neither come from the king’s palace nor from the courts of religious leaders but from among the people. In addition to being a message of comfort, it is a word of invigorating challenge: a strong invitation for each person to take part in and witness to the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God.

This message brings to mind the vision of a world transformed, without war, a world of peace and security. This vision was already articulated by some of the prophets in the Old Testament, a vision of a world without violent conflict in which people change their weapons into farming tools, and instead of bloodshed, a life of peace and security emerges (see Micah 4:1-5; Isaiah 2:2-5; Psalm 46:9-12).

The message of the angels at Jesus' birth and the vision of the prophets about peace, both reflect the accumulated experience of people through the journey of history: wars, violence, and corrupt economic systems fail to achieve an enduring peace.

How long will it be until we learn the lessons of history? How many more Christmas readings of the Gospels will occur before we jump out of our pews and run with the message?

Alas, the peace of empire is achieved by the crushing of the enemy; and it does not endure. The angels were shouting about a different kind of peace. Perhaps it sounded like the shouting of the millions around the world who have taken to the streets from Tahrir Square in Cairo to New York City to Brisbane to say "*Khalas!* Enough is enough!"?

Though justice, peace, and security for all continue to be elusive, we live in hope and act in confidence. To be sure, peace for the state of Israel will not come through eliminating the Palestinians, denying their political rights, and stripping them of their human dignity and land. Peace will not come by building the separation wall or expanding Israeli-only settlements and bypass roads in Palestine. Peace will come when the government of Israel implements the demands of international law and shows respect for the humanity of the Palestinians.

In a gesture for peace and reconciliation, the Palestinians have recognized the state of Israel and accepted a much smaller share of historic Palestine. It is time for the government of Israel to recognize the people of Palestine and their right to sovereignty and statehood. It is then that people can sit under their vine and fig trees and not be afraid. The message of the angels at the birth of Jesus Christ will be realized and peace on earth can become a possibility.

The challenge of the Christmas message for this year is to envision a world without empire, without war, without nuclear weapons, and without destructive arms. We must envisage a different world where peace is built on justice.

Sabeel wishes all of our friends a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Sincerely,

Naim Ateek
Sabeel, Jerusalem
5 December 2011