

Jesus of Palestine: “For Unto Us a Child Is Born ...”

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Every now and then an image perfectly captures the moment, in all its light or darkness. I was struck by the creche that was set up in Bethlehem’s Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church after that city’s Christians canceled this year’s Christmas celebrations. You’ve probably seen it: it shows the Nativity scene, as all such displays do, but the newborn infant Jesus is lying in the ruins of a concrete building.

“God is under the rubble in Gaza,” says the pastor who created the creche, Rev. Munther Isaac. “This is where we find God right now.”

I’m not a Christian, if Christianity means embracing the theology of a threefold God and the idea of Jesus as the sole source of personal salvation. But I love the teachings of Jesus as they’ve been conveyed. And I’ve been deeply moved by the meaning of the Christmas story, even if I can’t accept it literally. It says that God, the most powerful entity that ever was or ever could be, chose to enter this world in the most helpless form we humans can imagine: a newborn infant. And not just any infant, either. A Jewish infant. A homeless infant. A refugee infant.

A Palestinian infant.

Rev. Isaac, whose last name once meant “he who laughs”, has touched the world. That’s not due to any artistic skill. On the contrary. Not to be unkind, but the creche is not an aesthetic triumph. His execution and framework are awkward. But his heart is pure, and it shows.

Look at it again.



The animals in the manger are at the bottom of the ruins and the Three Wise Men are in the upper right. But what's most striking is the sight of Joseph and Mary in the upper left corner, separated from their child by the rubble and unable to reach him. I imagine them not knowing if he's dead or alive. Perhaps they wrote his name on one leg to identify him if the worst happens, like [so many other Palestinian parents](#).

The childlike simplicity of the creche stays with me: the toy figures, the candles, and the doll itself, so unlike any real child — but so like a toy a real child might have.

According to the story, Jesus was born in a manger because the Romans forced everyone to return to the city of their birth to be counted in the census. Historians say that's not true; people (only men, actually) were counted where they lived. But it's true that the occupiers demanded that they be carefully counted.

That particular colonial practice hasn't changed. As Israeli architect and author Eyal Weizman writes in his book, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*:

An important aspect of Israel's overall domination ... is manifested in its control of the population registration. Every Palestinian birth in Gaza, death in the West Bank, marriage in Jerusalem, or change of address in Galilee must be entered into Israel's Interior Ministry database in order to exist. No one can travel, work, open a bank account, or even emigrate without it.

We know how the Christmas story ends. This child becomes a leader, a prophet, the epitome of marginalized humanity: despised, hunted, convicted, and sentenced to death.

Nothing in this story -nothing - teaches us to side with the oppressor against the oppressed.

Joe Biden is Catholic. So was one of my grandmothers. (The other was Jewish.) Like many a Catholic grandmother, mine terrified me with the prospect of damnation at a very young age. But people carry their own kind of hellfire. The Catholic faith and litany is also rich with

beauty and profundity. My life has been enriched by its art, music, and literature. A Catholic monsignor helped me recover from drugs and alcohol. I know the dark side of the Church's history, but I know its other side, too.

I can't help but wonder how the president reconciles his faith with his support for today's occupiers. Pope Francis, the Holy Father, [said](#) of the conflict: "we've gone beyond war. This is terrorism." He used the word "[terrorism](#)" again after Israeli snipers shot and killed two women sheltering in a Gaza church – "in cold blood" and "without warning," according to Church officials there.

I believe the president is a sincere Catholic. That's why I don't understand how he can reconcile his actions with his faith. I don't know why he isn't moved by the image of the infant in the rubble, even after 8,000 children – perhaps many more – have died. I don't know why he sides against the homeless, the refugees, the laboriously counted and still unseen people suffering under occupation.

I'm grateful to Rev. Isaac, "he who smiles," for creating this work. I hope he and his neighbors can smile again someday soon. I'm haunted by his portrayal of two parents unable to reach their child under the ruins. Of the mother — the divine mother — who for Christian and Muslims is a uniquely sacred figure for all of humanity. Of the mother, afraid. Of the mother who is every mother living under oppression.

By most Christian accounts, Mary was a teenaged girl – probably no older than 14 – when an angel appeared and revealed her destiny. That's a heavy weight to place on a young girl's shoulders. But it's no heavier than the weight a mother or father carries when they hold their dead child in their arms.

As for the president, perhaps at some point he learned the Litany of Loreto, one of the prayers of praise for the mother, Mary. It includes these words:

Mother of hope.
Mirror of justice.
Mystical rose.
Gate of heaven.
Morning star.
Solace of migrants.
Comfort of the afflicted.
Queen of Martyrs.
Queen of peace.

And it concludes:

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world

— R. Eskow, Christmas, 2023

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