

Christmas Message 2023

December 22nd, 2023

Dear people of God,

As I write these words the final countdown to Christmas is on. It's been a busy time across the dioceses of Algoma and Moosonee as the pre-Christmas activities in our parishes are returning to normal following the years of pandemic lockdown. I remain grateful now, as I am throughout the year, for the love you have for one another and for the great and seemingly insignificant ways in which you serve the people within your communities. Through your acts of kindness and compassion you may have been the only visible face of Christ to many who are walking in darkness.

As we approach Christmas Day, our Advent hymns of longing will be replaced with "Joy to the World" as the aching world welcomes Emmanuel - God with us.

The way I see it, we have already experienced *God-With-Us* during Advent in countless ways. Here are just two that I experienced. God was with us as 200 community members in the Sault were caught up in the wonder of a simple but spiritually uplifting re-enactment of the mystery of Jesus' birth in the 'Christmas Walk' at the Cathedral.

God was with us as church volunteers and myself brought communion to the homes of the frail elderly in this week before Christmas. Although many people we visited are facing challenges, they had no problem joining in song to the familiar words of Silent Night and Away in a Manger, as their eyes twinkled with fresh memories of long-ago times.

How have you seen him, heard him, felt his love?

The Welsh poet, Ronald Stuart Thomas, writes about this in his poem, *Kneeling*. The speaker is in a church waiting for a message from God. As he waits in the silence, praying, he experiences the presence of God, and suddenly the air becomes a staircase to heaven. "The meaning is in the waiting," Thomas writes in the last line of the poem. The revelation he awaits has already come, in the silent waiting itself.

Wherever you find yourself this Christmas, in your lives and in your hearts, my prayer is that you too will experience firsthand the closeness of God-with us, and in these holy moments will find all the reasons in the world to lift your voice in song.

I must confess that even as I sing of hope, of joy, of love, and of peace, it is impossible for me to block out the darkness that is all around. Is it right that we should be rejoicing while others are engulfed in tragedy?

While we in our privileged lives are nostalgically decorating, buying and wrapping, preparing to welcome family and friends into the warmth of our homes and churches, hundreds of thousands of families have been displaced by this horrendous war in the Middle East and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. There are countless other asylum seekers forced from their homes on a daily basis because their homeland is unsafe. Between 25 000 and 35 000 people are homeless in Canada on any given night.

In response to what is happening in the Middle East, church leaders in Bethlehem have decided to 'mute' Christmas. Typically, the little town of 30 000 inhabitants welcomes over 3 million visitors every year at Christmastime. But this year there will be no carol singers, fireworks, or dancers. There will be no giant tree with a ruby star on top of it to illuminate Manger Square. Instead, the streets will be dark and hushed and worshippers will be invited to reflect on the true meaning of Christmas.

Pastor Nihad Salman has put out a banner with the words, "Let us arise and worship God" on it along with the picture of a woman fleeing from a shelled-out building. At the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, Pastor Munther Isaac's congregation made a mound of broken stone and concrete to represent the rubbles in Gaza, and on top of the rubble, placed a baby Jesus wrapped in a Palestinian keffiyeh. "God is under the rubble in Gaza," he preached. "He is with the frightened and the refugees. He is in the operating room. This is our consolation. He walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. If we want to pray, my prayer is that those who are suffering will feel this healing and comforting presence."



Manger scene - The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem



Christ in the Rubble
Created by Kelly Latimore

May these words be more than a faint hope for the millions of people around the world who are sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, but become a reality. May they truly experience '*God with them*' wherever they are as Emmanuel comes to them through the healing helping hands of friends, neighbours, strangers. And in this season of grace may we never cease to embrace the compassion that causes us to act and to work towards a more just and peaceful world. Our small and great acts of kindness, justice, and mercy may not bring about an end to the present conflict, but it may be the start of something new in our own neighbourhoods and result in the kind of world Jesus came to inaugurate. This new world order begins with you, and it begins with me. May it be so this Christmas.

And so we pray, “Wherever the world is in darkness, Lord. Let there be light.”



**A woman in a nursing home holds baby Jesus as the nativity story is told.
“Gosh, he’s cute”**



St. Luke's Cathedral's *Christmas Walk*
Angel created by Karen Nesbit

*Wonderful Counsellor, give your wisdom to the rulers of the nations.
Mighty God, make the whole world know the government is on your shoulders.
Everlasting Father, establish your reign of justice and righteousness forever.
Prince of Peace, bring in the endless kingdom of your peace.
Almighty Lord, hear our prayer and fulfill your purposes in us, as you accomplished your
will in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

With love and blessings this Christmas and in 2024,

+Anne