

Christmas presence

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [December 20, 2000](#) issue

There will be no Christmas celebration in Bethlehem's Manger Square this year. The annual festivities have been canceled because the organizers have deemed it inappropriate to celebrate in the midst of the conflicts and violence.

It is difficult to understand the political complexities of the Middle East and easy to feel despair about any possible solutions. The loss of a Christmas celebration in Manger Square is a particularly troubling symbol for the region, and a painful sign of the Palestinian plight.

Might it also be a troubling sign theologically, especially for Christians who live outside the Middle East? It is troubling in the first place because so few of us are aware of the plight of our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters. For too many people, a Palestinian is a terrorist. Palestinian priest Elias Chacour often begins addresses in the United States by opening up his jacket and saying, "I am a Palestinian. I am not a terrorist." Too many of us have an image of Israel and Palestinians that precludes recognition of our historical and contemporary ties to Palestinian followers of Jesus. As a result, we do not recognize what is at stake for a Christian presence in Bethlehem.

Many of us have sentimentalized Christmas in Bethlehem. Dorothy Jean Weaver, an American New Testament scholar currently on sabbatical in Bethlehem, diagnoses the problem in an e-mail newsletter:

It was not an especially pretty world. . . . The Palestine of Jesus' day was a world of grinding poverty for the masses, hard labor for a daily pittance, wealthy tax collectors who made their fortunes by extorting money from the impoverished, and brutal military occupiers whose preferred method of crowd control was crucifixion. . . . Nor was the town of Jesus' birth an especially peaceful place, and hardly the idyllic Bethlehem of our beloved Christmas carol, lying "still" under the "silent stars" in "deep and dreamless sleep."

Weaver then describes present realities: “Two thousand years later the picture looks strangely similar. The Palestine of Christmas 2000 is a world of massive unemployment and growing poverty. And the Bethlehem of Christmas 2000, with its sister cities Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, knows only too well the terrifying sounds and scenes of war.”

When we sentimentalize that “little town” of Bethlehem, we also sentimentalize the Jesus who was born there. As Weaver puts it:

When God comes to be with God’s people, it is not to an idyllic, fairy-tale world. . . . There would in fact be no need for “God with us” in that “never never” world. The world that Jesus Emmanuel comes to is rather the real world . . . of poverty, extortion, callous cruelty, unrelenting terror and inconsolable grief. It is this world and none other into which God comes to be with us in the person of Jesus, the defenseless child and the crucified Messiah.

Weaver offers a powerful reminder that Christians cannot understand Christmas apart from Good Friday and Easter. An unsentimental Bethlehem, then and now, ought to call us to approach Christmas not only with joyful song but also in a spirit of repentance, forgiveness and faithful witness to God’s costly, life-giving love.

Jesus’s injunction to love one’s enemies is as integral to the celebration of Christmas as it is to Good Friday and Easter. It was no easier then than it is now. Both Jesus’s birth—in a dirty manger in the midst of an occupied Bethlehem—and his life of unstinting love challenged established patterns of hatred and bitterness that eventually nailed him to a cross. Yet we are empowered by the giving and forgiving love of Christmas, Good Friday and Easter to love our enemies—especially the concrete enemy who is all too present to us.

Perhaps such understanding might help us stand in solidarity with our Palestinian brothers and sisters while also offering a glimpse of hope for peace among warring peoples in the Middle East. Earlier this fall, Rabbi Michael Lerner offered a courageous vision grounded in his own tradition’s high holy day of Yom Kippur:

Given my own outrage over the killing of Israeli soldiers, this is a moment when it seems easier to just forget my faith and stay in my anger. But I

also know that when the Jewish people can only see our own pain, however real and legitimate, it is time to atone.

In the United States we have become so focused on Christmas presents that we have lost sight of the significance of Christmas presence—the presence of the real Jesus, born in the midst of suffering and death in order to announce and embody a kingdom of life even to the point of his own suffering and death. Might it be time for us to repent of our sentimentalized and commercialized Christmas, to atone for the fact that we find it all too easy to celebrate the birth of Christ without seeing anyone's pain? Perhaps we should begin by bearing witness to the tragedy of Christmas being canceled in Bethlehem's Manger Square.