

## Christmas Eve 2008

“His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace”  
Isaiah 9:7

What a year it has been! National elections, recession, job and home losses – about the only thing consistent is the weather! On this Christmas Day we do can not forget our country and the turmoil that friends and neighbors are in. Remembering the purpose of this day is truly important – God did not forget us! He sent His son whose authority will in time bring endless peace to the world. That’s our faith and hope that we renew each year. And so today we remember the first Noel despite the condition in which the world finds itself. In today’s Bethlehem Christmas has taken a turn for the worse as well.

Tawfiq Salsaa is a Palestinian woodcarver in the city of Bethlehem; one of the craftsmen who carve those beautiful olive wood nativity sets that are sold to tourists. Like the other scenes found in the few open gift shops, Tawfiq’s scenes of Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus and the wise men are arranged in a familiar setting — Mary and Joseph looking lovingly down at the manger, the shepherds peeking in the door and the magi leading their camels toward the open stable.

But there’s one glaring difference in Tawfiq’s work that you notice right away. In Salsaa’s scenes there’s a wall between Jesus and the magi. “I wanted to give the world an idea of how we live in the Holy Land,” said the 65-year-old carpenter in his workshop, his sweater speckled with sawdust. “I was inspired by our own wall.”

The wall Tawfiq speaks of is the 25-foot concrete security barrier that surrounds the city of Jesus’ birth. Begun in 2002, the wall was built by the Israeli government to keep potential suicide bombers from entering Israel through Palestinian land. The Israeli government views the wall as necessary to their security and safety, while Palestinians see it as a form of apartheid. Bottom line is that if the magi were trying to get to Bethlehem today, they’d have to go through checkpoints and some serious security screening.

When you approach the wall from the Israeli side, there is a large, colorful sign painted on it near one of the guard towers saying, in English, Hebrew and Arabic, “Peace Be with You.” Approach it from the Palestinian side and you see darker images — a snake curling its way down the wall toward the checkpoint, a picture of a dove of peace wearing a flak jacket and signs spray-painted in English and Arabic saying, “God will tear down this wall.” The Bethlehem wall is a place of deep sadness and contrast for people on both sides, most of whom would rather simply live in peace. The wall represents fear and terror. Can you imagine what it must feel like to be so close to something you love and yet not be able to see or touch it??

In contrast, the famous carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem” betrays the images that the people long for who live there now:

O little town of Bethlehem,  
 How still we see thee lie!  
 Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
 The silent stars go by;  
 Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
 The everlasting Light;  
 The hopes and fears of all the years  
 Are met in thee to-night.

In the day of Jesus birth. the gift of peace was also betrayed by a man named Augustus. Augustus was called “a man of peace,” but his definition of peace was about victory — about military and economic security.

Augustus killed the opposition, occupied foreign lands and called it peace. He taxed those conquered peoples heavily in order to fund his military, his building projects, and his personal needs and called it prosperity.

Under Augustus, Rome erected a virtual wall of separation between those who were in and those who were out, those who were rich and poor, those who lived and died. Peace was the luxury of the powerful.

Jesus is born. Despite the times, no wall could separate God from His people. Peace and joy had been predicted for such a time in ancient Bethlehem. Ironically, Jesus parents arrived too late to find a room in which to give Him birth. A stable for livestock and a crib used for feeding animals filled with prickly hay was a rough place for a baby to lie. A world that knew only fear needed the peace He came to bring. Despite the fear, those who came to visit Him would know a few moments of joy. A few shepherds, Mary and Joseph, and later the magi. None of these could see into the future: that one day the joy and peace He brought Christmas Day for them could break down human walls.

God sent messengers called angels to announce this good news! This child would have the authority to break down walls that destroy peace in communities and in lives of its citizens. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace among those whom he favors!" God did the world a big favor! He gave the world a child that would have the strength to break down walls; not with the military might or wealth of a Caesar. He would break down the walls of despair with the word of God.

Wood in the hands of a master carver like Tawfiq releases the beauty of the Nativity story. The baby Jesus too, would release from wood the means to break down walls. From the wood that built a manger to the wood that made the cross, Jesus and His followers would answer the prayer of the sign on

Bethlehem's wall. "God will tear down this wall!" A crib cradled the new birth of hope and future for a dark world. The joy of homeless parents would usher in a re-birth of peace that could conquer fear, terror and death.

One day, perhaps in our lifetime, Tawfiq or his progeny will no longer need to live with walls that separate Jesus from the world. One day, perhaps, the crib that held the glory of God will once again be open for all to see, to touch, and to embrace. "God will tear down this wall." And then despite a divided city, the town of Jesus' birth will sing out the second verse of the carol:

For Christ is born of Mary,  
 And gathered all above,  
 While mortals sleep, the angels keep  
 Their watch of wondering love.  
 O morning stars, together  
 Proclaim the holy birth!  
 And praises sing to God the King,  
 And peace to men on earth.

This is the blessed hope we sing. Though this Christmas walls may surround us that need tearing down, remember the words of the angel of Christmas,

"Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

I urge you - go to the crib where He lay, embrace Him and put your hands in His this day. Will you and I with God's help, take down the walls that separate us from our neighbor? Is there a wall that blocks your view from the great joy, that God has not forgotten us? On this day the creator of the universe became a baby. No wall can keep Him from His people. Time marches on and "His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace" Isaiah 9:7. Come Lord Jesus! Amen.