



Christmas Message 2013

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:8).

“...after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem...” (Matthew 2:1).

The fact that the Christmas story mentions only two groups of visitors to the Christ child in Bethlehem, has, I believe, a theological significance. The shepherds in first century Palestine represented one of the lowest social strata in society. Religious tradition of Jesus' day labeled them as unclean. They were marginalized, poor, and considered as the scum of society; while the wise men represented the well to do, the educated, and the scholars of their day. The theological implication is clear: God's love for all people was expressed in and through the coming of Jesus Christ. This love welcomed both the shepherds and the wise men. True love does not differentiate between God's children. In Christ, the evil of discrimination and bigotry is obliterated.

Moreover, the shepherds were presumably Jewish, while the wise men were foreigners. Since the wise men came from “the East,” a number of New Testament scholars have suggested that they came from Arabia. There is a further theological significance here. Both Jews and Arabs came to offer their homage to the Christ child. When we stand before God, not only do our social differences lose their importance, our racial differences are also eradicated. God's love for all people was being communicated regardless of social and financial status in society and regardless of racial background. Not only do rich and poor, Jew and Gentile stand before God as equals, there are also no political boundaries. All are welcomed and accepted. In other words, when we stand before the holy, our racism and bigotry should melt away and we should become authentically human recognizing the other as a brother and a sister.

One of our most disturbing issues during this Christmas season is the situation of the shepherds and farmers of today, namely, the Bedouins of the Negev who are citizens of Israel. The Israeli government plans to Judaize the Negev by forcibly relocating tens of thousands of Bedouins from their ancestral lands on which most of them have lived for hundreds of years, long before the state of Israel came into being. Israel wants to force them away from their lands and traditional way of life for the benefit of Israeli Jewish citizens. It is essentially a land grab.ⁱ Many local and international human rights organizations have condemned Israel's actions and policies as discriminatory and in violation of international law.

During this Christmas season, Sabeel calls attention to the plight of the Bedouin community of the Negev that numbers between 160 to 200 thousand, and where thousands of them are

living in villages that the government of Israel does not recognize. Consequently, Israel deprives them of basic services like education, electricity, running water, and sanitation.

This year's Christmas message emphasizes the fact that our faith demands of us to champion today's shepherds and farmers—the Bedouins—and advocate for their rights. The appalling irony is that what the Jewish people longed for over the centuries when they were weak, they are unwilling to give to others now that they have become strong. For hundreds of years, Jews wished and longed for human dignity, equality, and respect for their human rights, but tragically, the Israeli government today is unwilling to grant the same to its own citizens, the Bedouins of the Negev.

Christmas affirms God's love and concern for all human beings and especially to the most vulnerable, today's shepherds and farmers, the Bedouin community of the Negev.

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On behalf of Sabeel's board and staff, I extend our best Christmas and New Year wishes to all our friends. I would like to seize this opportunity to thank all those friends who joined us at Sabeel's 9th international conference in Jerusalem last month when we addressed the theme of the "Bible and the Palestine-Israel conflict."

Naim Ateek
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ⁱ Nov. 12, 2013 editorial in the Israeli Haaretz newspaper.