

Dateline, Baghdad:

For Iraq's battered Christian community, threats of attacks from al-Qaeda and mourning for the victims of an October massacre at a Baghdad church have turned a normally festive season into one of fear and sadness.

Many mass gatherings in Iraq were cancelled on Friday....

On October 31, militants laid siege to Baghdad's Our Lady of Salvation church, leaving 44 worshippers, two priests and seven security forces personnel dead in an attack....

Ten days later a string of attacks targeted the homes of Christians in Baghdad, killing six people and wounding 33 others, writes AFP journalist W.G. Dunlop. ("Xmas joy mixed with threats for Mideast Christians," W.G. Dunlop, AFP, Dec. 24, 2010)

The attacks have led to a new exodus of Christians to neighboring Jordan, Syria and Iraq's relatively safe northern Kurdistan region, adds Shashank Bengali for McClatchy

Newspapers. ("For Christians in Iraq, a Christmas of mourning and fear," Shashank Bengali, McClatchy, Dec. 24, 2010)

The United Nations refugee agency said that more than 1,000 Christian families have arrived in Kurdistan since November, many after receiving direct threats.

Dateline, Bethlehem:

Surrounded by heavy military presence, thousands of residents of this occupied territory have been relocated or displaced by a government ordered registration.

Living with a constant threat of racially and religiously motivated violence, practicing Jews remain worried that this latest imperial edict is another thinly veiled persecution of their illegal religion, and civic authorities are especially concerned given the town's linkage to Jewish royal history and widespread rumors of political uprisings.

There is particular concern for safety and security given the sudden overcrowding of this small hamlet as distant relatives of local families descend from all directions to be registered.

One young couple from out of town was forced to endure childbirth in a cattle stall because they could find shelter nowhere else.

The woman gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Christians with no place in Iraq are quite literally following their Lord.

The Christmas story is happening all over again.

No one is reporting it as good news.

Perhaps it takes the eye of angel to peer into the violent chaos of our world, now as much as then, and to see in its swirling madness the presence and peacemaking activity of God.

It happens beyond, really beneath the view of politicians and journalists, on the margins occupied by displaced travelers, pregnant teenagers, and men who spend the night with sheep.

Christmas smells like animals and looks like the drawn, shivering faces with deep, sunken eyes we try so desperately not to look into.

God's salvation pageant stars mythical beings who look like Fear itself and marginalized roamers with no credit rating or credibility.

This, of course, is why the messengers of God, and Mother Church ever since, insist that this story is *good news of great joy*.

This is a story *for all the people*, including and especially the people born in vulnerability, people torn from their homes by circumstances beyond their control, people sleeping beneath stable lofts and open sky because they cannot get a room anywhere, people caught and carried and crushed by social forces and faceless systems orchestrated by emperors and CEOs in fancy homes furnished by holiday bonuses.

There is a place in this story for everyone for whom there is no place in this world.

There is room in this baby's birth and life and death and resurrection for everyone, even for the bigwigs like Augustus and Quirinius who are marginalized by its telling.

There is room for the loud, bombastic, uneducated but talkative shepherds.

There is room for the pensive, quiet, deep-hearted mother.

There is room for the silent man who stands with her, and for the chorus of angels who fill the skies with song.

There is room for foreign dignitaries making their tenuous way by starlight, and there is room, as Jan Richardson suggests, for the wise women as well:

Wise women also came.

The fire burned in their wombs long before they saw the flaming star in the sky.

They walked in shadows, trusting the path would open under the light of the moon.

They came in quiet, spreading no rumors, and they brought useful gifts: water for labor's washing, fire for warm illumination, a blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came, at least three of them, holding Mary in the labor, crying out with her in the birth pangs, breathing ancient blessings into her ear.

There is room in this story for the silent servants, the unspoken heroes, the unheard angels.

There is room for the donkey, the cow, the ox, the sheep, the grass of the field that swaddles the Christ, the flora and fauna of a beautiful and battered creation as bloodied and ravaged as the sanctuary of Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad.

There is room in this story for the Christian for whom there is no room in Iraq, like the member of Our Lady who now studies theology at our Lutheran seminary in Hyde Park.

There is room in this story for you and for me and for our neighbors, the ones we love and the ones we avoid, because this story is ultimately about God making room for us all.

This is the story of the God we cannot find a place for in our chaotic daily lives coming to live and breathe and burp and sleep and cry and sweat and shiver and listen and speak and move and suffer and laugh and worry and eat and drink and die with us, for us, among us, hand-delivering an invitation to find our place with God.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, says the baby all grown up to the friends who hear the soldier's footsteps outside and squirm on the verge of betraying and abandoning him.

Believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places....

I go to prepare a place for you.

And what a journey he makes to do it.

From heaven to a hay pile.

From a barnyard cradle to a roadside cross.

From an unmarked grave to unmeasured glory.

From eternity to time and back again, displaced and disappointed and mistreated and misunderstood, living our story, suffering our life, dying our death, pitching tent in our calloused skin so that we might know that even when no one else does, God has a place for us.

There is room for us in God's story to be who we fully are, without fear, even fear of death. Take it from someone positioned to know only too well.

Father Saad Sirop Hanna, the priest of the Saint Joseph Catholic Church in central Baghdad, told his congregation at a Christmas Eve service: "Do not fear -- that is the message today." (Dunlop article cited above)

Somehow, somewhere, everywhere, that message once sung in the sky is still the good news on the ground.