Christmas Eve, 8:30pm service, 2017

Church of the Nativity-Episcopal, Indianapolis

The Rev. Susan M. Smith, Ph.D.

Readings I, all years:

- Isaiah 9:2-7
- Psalm 96
- Titus 2:11-14

“Light and Life to all he brings! Hail the Heaven-Born Prince of Peace! Let the world rejoice.”

In a recent ordination sermon, Bp Jennifer shared some words of a pastor from South Africa, who worked alongside Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela in the years fighting apartheid. The Rev. Dr. Allan Boesak is now the Desmond Tutu Chair of Peace, Global Justice and Reconciliation Studies at the Christian Theological Seminary here in Indy. He writes:

1. It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—
   *This is true:* For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

2. It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—
   *This is true:* I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

3. It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—
   *This is true:* Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

We gather this night, with Christians all over the world, in a powerful, beautiful, hopeful, but strange act of celebration. Tonight, Christians in Pakistan are gathering, quietly huddled, in private homes, no brightly-colored lights or wreaths outside—for to be Christian in Pakistan is illegal. But they gather, singing songs we would not recognize, but reading the same Scripture, and rejoicing, with us, in the birth of God as a vulnerable human baby.

In Palestine, where much attention is given to the enmity between Jews and Muslims, often forgotten is one of the oldest Christian faith communities on the planet: Palestinian Christians, who look like other Palestinians, and most speak Arabic, comprise less than 2% of the Palestinian population. They are called, in Arabic, *Nasrani,* from the word “Nazareth,” for they follow the Nazarene.

Tonight in Bethlehem, in spite of persecution from all sides and having been largely forgotten by Christians in the rest of the world, Palestinian Christians gather. They gather at our namesake, the Church of the Nativity, built in the very early period over the site where it is believed Jesus

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1 *Advent Credo.*
was born. Over 2,000 years, the Church of the Nativity has changed, been damaged, been rebuilt. [HOW MANY OF YOU HAVE BEEN TO THIS CHURCH?]

It is now a basilica. However, it suffered major damage in 2002 when some 50 armed non-Christian Palestinians escaped into the church seeking protection from an Israeli army. They holed up with 200 Christian monks and others who happened to be there. Food and communications were cut off. The siege lasted 39 days, and the church building suffered significant damage. Christians of every denomination from around the world collected funds, and eventually a plan was made and rebuilding began. It continues in the process of reconstruction.

Tonight, Palestinian Anglicans gather, speaking Arabic, in parishes in the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East: congregations in Palestine and Israel, Jordan and Syria. During one of my trips to England, missionaries had come from this Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem, asking for support for Anglican Churches in Israel and Palestine, and for the ongoing rebuilding of the Church of the Nativity. They had items for sale made by their people. One was the Lord’s Prayer in Arabic. It’s beautiful, that flowing script.

It surprised me. I somehow didn’t think of Christians speaking Arabic. But there are thousands who do, including our Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, Archbishop Dawani.

Tonight, Christians all over the world, where we are in the majority, like in Ireland; where we are just a handful, as in India; where we are illegal, as in Pakistan; where we are in danger, as in Palestine—we gather to celebrate God’s humility, shrinking down to human shape. We must sing this mystery, because it is beyond words. **God came to earth to be like us, so that we could be like him.** God became small and vulnerable to carry us to self-giving love.

God intentionally, purposely, made himself vulnerable, in order to show us an utterly different, counter-intuitive kind of power, that changes hearts, and lives, and changes the world over time.

God and sinners reconciled. Mild, he lays his glory by—sets it aside—not showing off. Born to give us second birth. **God came to earth to be like us, so that we could be like him.**

Love was born at Christmas: Love shall be our token, love be yours and love be mine; love to God and others, love for plea and gift and sign.

It does not bother us that what we do this night, and every Sunday, is strange to many, increasingly counter-cultural, not understood. We already know that God walked the Earth in Christ Jesus, and most of his own people **did not recognize him.** We still don’t always recognize him. But how blessed are we, for we, Christians around the world, know that the One we worship has brought us the ironic, mysterious truth that the **power of love can be found in vulnerability,** like a baby; **in need for care,** like a baby, **in utter cuteness and beauty,** like a baby. Love can make us tired, like caring for a baby. These are deep truths. And God entered these truths, on this night, to relieve us of all doubt and fear as to how the world really works.

*It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—**This is true:** To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.
It is not true that we have to wait for . . . specially gifted . . . prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—

*This is true:* I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

*It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—

*This is true:* Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

*It is not true that our hopes for liberation of [all creation . . . ], of justice, of human dignity, of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—

*This is true:* The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So let us join the angels from the realms of glory. Indeed: let us come and worship, come and worship, Worship Christ the newborn king!