



*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.*

It's hard to start Advent, the time that we look forward to Christ coming, with the land of his birth at war yet again. I don't mean "yet again" as in the area has been under war and turmoil for thousands of years. It hasn't actually had much more war than most other parts of the world. The idea that Muslims and Jews or Arabs and Jews have been fighting since the days of Abraham or Mohammed is false. There have been periods of hundreds of years that people have lived in peace and harmony with one another in "The Holy Land."

What I mean by war "yet again" is based on the conflict surrounding the founding of the modern state of Israel in 1948. Earlier in the century, the British and French empires assumed control of the area. Before that, the Ottoman empire, and before that the Mamluks, Crusaders, Arabs, Byzantines, and Rome. (It was Rome that labeled this area of the world Palestine.) In the early part of the 20th c. the British Empire promised the area to the Arabs for their support in WWI, but then, after the war made an about face and issued the Balfour agreement establishing a Jewish homeland in the Palestinian area. When the world saw what happened in the holocaust of WW2, the newly formed United Nations supported a new state of Israel.

The Jews needed a homeland in a safe place, but instead European colonial powers with the guilt of a Jewish genocide on their shoulders, gave away Arab land to make it happen. It didn't turn out to be a safe place at all. There has been a whole lot of war ever since. Palestinians have been having their homes and land stolen. Israelis have been bombed in their buses and shot on their way to work. The violence keeps happening because each group keeps doing the same things over and over and over. The Israelis promote immigration of Jews and set them up on stolen land. The Palestinians become desperate enough to lash out from a position of less power, which depending on one's point of view, is either guerilla warfare or terrorism.

Even if Israel succeeded in destroying the land remaining to Palestinians, they still wouldn't be truly safe, because they are surrounded by Arab countries and Muslim countries with whom they have a very fragile peace. And the same United

Nations that gave them the land in 1948, is now pointing to *their* actions as war crimes and attempted genocide. Peace is proving elusive for a people that have been treated atrociously for a very long time.

I, honestly, don't know if the Israelis and Palestinians are ever going to be able to find peace. They want the same land. I don't have any answers, but I am confident that God loves every single person in the midst of this conflict. The Jews are still the people of God and Jesus Christ came into the world out of love for the world. So, while I don't have faith in the people living in "The Holy Land" to fix the mess, I do know that Jesus is always with the suffering.

This Advent, as we think about Jesus being born a Palestinian Jewish baby 2,000 years ago, we also have to be thinking and praying about all the Palestinian and Jewish babies being born today. The fact that the conflict is decades old and so incredibly complicated doesn't give us a pass from praying and doing what we can to work toward peace. We can't just look away, because we don't understand or because it makes us uncomfortable. Jesus never looked away from pain. He didn't avoid pain. He confronted it head on and, in the face of it, loved people.

It seems impossible – ridiculous even – but, love is the only possible answer. You can't bring about peace on earth, but you can love people. You can pay attention to the suffering in the world and do your own little bit. As Jesus's birthday looms close, focus on what you can do to make a difference. It's probably more than you realize.

