



Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

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Bishop's Pastoral Letter Christmas 2023

*Silent night! Holy night!
All is calm; all is bright.
Round yon virgin mother and child!
Holy infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace!
Sleep in heavenly peace!*

This popular Christmas carol was first performed on Christmas Eve 1818 in Oberndorf, Austria. The lyrics describe the peaceful and holy atmosphere of the night of Jesus's birth as the Son of God, who has come to bring peace and salvation to the world.

These peaceful words might be challenging to sing, especially this Christmas, for we live in a time when it is not so calm and bright. The disruption of our lives with the pandemic, international war and domestic violence, political and personal uncertainty, a climate in crisis, and people worried about whether they can afford their next meal - are all reasons why the world is not so calm and bright at the moment.

This is especially true in many parts of the world this Christmas. The ongoing wars and violence in the Holy Land, Ukraine and Russia, Myanmar, Sudan, Armenia, Yemen, Ethiopia, and sadly, too many more to name have caused widespread suffering and devastation and have displaced millions from their homes. The violence and instability have particularly severely impacted children, who have experienced trauma and loss due to the conflict. Families have been torn apart by the mass migration of people fleeing for safety.

One Ukrainian Catholic Bishop, Jan Sobiło, recounts the situation in his diocese and the preparations for the birth of Jesus amid terror from bombings and the nuclear threat, saying that over 1,500 hungry and cold Ukrainians line up outside his window to receive a quarter of a loaf of bread that the Church is distributing.

When asked by the reporter how they will prepare for Christmas in the middle of a war, the Bishop said, "*Our preparations are first of all spiritual. Christ was born in a dark, cold cave with the light of a candle, and we will also welcome the newborn Jesus in the warmth of our hearts despite the cold around us. We are absolutely aware that Christmas this year will be different, so we are also preparing to help people experience it peacefully.*"

Another striking image came across my screen on my Facebook feed. This one is from Jerusalem and is a Nativity scene with the Holy Child lying among the ruins of concrete rubble from a bombed building.



As the Rev. Don Binder, the Chaplain to the Archbishop of Jerusalem, has said, referring to this shocking image:

"With Gaza in ruins and Christmas tree lightings in the Holy Land cancelled this year, the Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem set up their Nativity Set in rubble, expressing solidarity with the 6000+ children killed in the Gaza War in less than two months—the highest death rate in the history of 21st-century warfare."

It's an image of contrasts - the horror of war causing death and destruction in the Holy Land as the backdrop of the serene and peaceful figure of the Baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes. Even in the darkness of war and terror, there is the calmness and brightness in the face of the Christ Child.

Many still live in anxious and fearful times. People wonder if life will ever return to how we once knew it. For some, the world today is a scary place. The Birth of Jesus happened in similar fearful and anxious times. Mary, Joseph, and the other characters of the Christmas story lived under constant threat and fear. The Birth of Jesus reminds us that the message of hope, not fear, is the heart of the Christmas story. When they were fearful, the Angel of the Lord sent a message of hope. *"Do not be afraid," said the Angel, "I bring you good news that will bring great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."* (Luke 2:10-11)

As we remember the story of Jesus' birth, let us be reminded of the incredible gift that God gave in sending His son to earth. That's why we can sing and believe in a Silent Night and a Holy Night when there is so much noise and clamour, not only in Ukraine or the Holy Land and other places of war but also in our lives. As a Christian, I believe that Jesus not only died for us but, thank God, was born for us.

Christmas allows us to remember and celebrate the love and peace that Jesus brought into the world. It is a time to remember that God's love knows no bounds and that His light can shine through even in the darkest times.

Christmas is God being born in the muck and mire of this world to lift us out of the darkness and mess of our lives into God's glorious Light. The message of Christmas is that no matter who we are, what we've done or not done, and where we are, we're all invited to come, just as we are, to welcome and receive the Christ Child. What is born at Christmas is the promise of the resurrection to eternal life, which we all share. Ultimately, goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, and life is stronger than death.

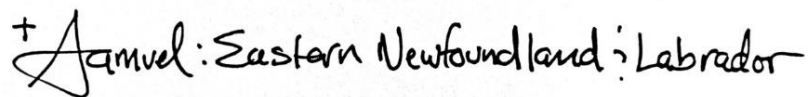
As we celebrate Christmas here, we pray for peace in the world and an end to the violence and suffering many have endured. Consider lighting a candle for Peace to symbolize that prayer and hope.

May the joy and hope of Christmas fill our hearts and bring us closer to God and one another. May we find comfort in His love and be reminded that even in the darkest times, God's Light will always shine.

So, as we sing these beautiful words this Christmas, may they be a heartfelt prayer for Heavenly Peace on earth and goodwill among all people:

*Silent night! Holy night!
All is calm; all is bright.
Round yon virgin mother and child!
Holy infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace!
Sleep in heavenly peace!*

On behalf of my family, I wish you holy and peace-filled Christmas,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samuel: Eastern Newfoundland; Labrador". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross above the letter 'S'.

The Right Rev. Samuel Rose
Bishop of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador