

4th Sunday of Advent 2016
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“She is to have a son and you are to name him Jesus—‘savior’,” Matthew’s gospel has the Angel of the Lord tell Joseph; Jesus will be the savior. We tend to use the word savior frequently and casually in society today: for the stranger who comes to our aid when we have car trouble on a rainy night; for the friend who gives comforting words during moments of sorrow; and for the athlete who propels our favorite sports team to that long awaited championship. These are all personal saviors who help direct us towards a better situation. But in this Advent season, we are a people who look East, and for the past century the people of the Middle East have longed for a savior(s) to lead their village, province, country, and region towards peace and freedom.

Since the establishment of most of the nation-states in the Middle East in 1920, following the First World War, we have witnessed countless rebellions, wars, and mass deportations throughout the region. With the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire and the development of the British and French mandate system, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon were under the complete control of these two European powers. The borders that were drawn to create these states did not fit any historic, ethnic, or religious pattern. As is all too common in matters of politics, the people in the region became secondary to the economic and political needs of the Great Powers. During this period the British and the French, in order to maintain control, exacerbated sectarian differences by pitting religious groups against each other. Different religious and ethnic communities that had lived side-by-side for centuries usually with little tension were now played off one another. It is at this time that we see rising levels of sectarian distrust throughout the region, and out of this we have our contemporary image of a Middle East in disarray. France and Great Britain were not saviors to the Middle East.

As such, today we see both the government and the media present the Middle East to us as a region of communal discord, where, in very general terms, Christians and Muslims or Muslims and Jews, have been fighting each other for over a millennium. Such statements are reassuring to those of us far removed from the areas of conflict since these problems are considered eternal and thus any solution is completely out of our hands and is not worth our effort. Yet, these problems are not eternal; they have become so imbedded in the region as a result of the mandate period which ended in the years after WWII and the politics of the Cold War that solutions are difficult to come by; in short, they need hope for a savior.

Joseph's mandate in the gospel to name Mary's child Jesus resounds in hope because he will be the imminent savior to his people. Yet, just as the Jewish people were hoping for the coming of the messiah to deliver them from Roman rule, today's Jews, Muslims (Sunnis, Shi'i, Alawites, Druze, Ismailis, etc.), the various Christian communities, and Yazidis to name just some of the religious groups represented in today's Middle East hope for a savior to bring peace and freedom for their people. Saviors have presented themselves in many different forms over the past century from authoritarian political leaders to humble activists.

The hope for a savior can be difficult, and as with any test of faith, it oftentimes leads people to search for easy solutions. When a political leader claims to have the power or knowledge to crush the supposed enemy or bring economic prosperity to the region, we oftentimes see the opposite occur. The number of Middle East leaders who fit this description is too many to recount here. Yet, many in society are drawn to these individuals because they are so desperate for a better future. This hope for the coming of a savior is not limited to political leaders. Probably the most compelling example of the search for a savior in the Middle East can be found in radical Islamist movements. It is a universal theme that in times of crisis and need people flee to new religious movements, especially when religions seem to promise them the answer they want or at least a better deal than they have. What better offer can a young person who has grown up in dire poverty with no political freedom and little hope for a better life

receive than the promise of eternal reward in heaven and being remembered as a hero/martyr?

We see that with the Islamic State, but we've also seen it in our church history such as during the long, bloody campaign of the Irish Republican Army.

Those are people who have traded in hope for a savior for a quick fix, have accepted an easy promise with a catch, and there's always a catch as a consequence of false hope. Think about it, as we hear reports of the millions of people fleeing the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, we have to understand that despite their dire situations they are moved by genuine and faith-testing hope. That sort of hope is foolhardy, but it's exactly the hope the prophet Isaiah speaks of in the first reading. It is why we are seeing now tens of thousands of people fleeing Aleppo, the largest city in Syria, because they had hope that the conflict would not reach their doorstep and they had hope the situation would improve. The immigrant crisis that we are presently witnessing in the Middle East is astonishing. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are 4.8 million Syrians who have fled their country, and 6.6 million internally displaced, in a country of under 23 million people (Think about that, almost fifty percent of the entire population of Syria are refugees). Despite the odds, the overwhelming hope of these immigrants is to return to their home when it is safe to do so. A sobering fact is that there are still over five million Palestinian refugees as a result of the fighting in 1948, one-third of whom still live in refugee camps. As we look to the East, these are a people who need our prayers.

As we prepare to celebrate the Incarnation, we must continually remind ourselves that like those fleeing violence in the Middle East, so did the Holy Family as they fled from the terror of Herod into Egypt where people spoke a different language and practiced a different religion. As Pope Francis has said, may we never close our hearts to those in need. By being open to others, our lives are enriched, our societies can enjoy peace and all people can live in a way befitting their dignity.

As Isaiah tells King Ahaz in the first reading, it will take time, eventually a savior will come (for Ahaz that meant about 700 years). Advent is a time of waiting and hoping, but also a time of preparation. We must work, and work hard, to prepare the way for our Savior. In the Middle East today, there is no easy solution; long, difficult preparations are necessary in order to create peace—a peace that demands compromises and sacrifices, where the best ideas may not arise from political leaders, but from those who have the courage to hope for the coming of their savior in the region where Judaism, Christianity, and Islam had their birth.

Amen.