

*The Evangelical Lutheran Church
in Jordan and the Holy Land*



الكنيسة الإنجيلية اللوثرية
في الأردن والأراضي المقدسة

Christmas Message 2020

Bishop Sani Ibrahim Azar

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land

Salaam and grace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 14)

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Each year at Christmas, our thoughts turn toward Bethlehem. Whether we can be there in person or not, our hearts are always there. This year—although so much has changed, and so much has not been as we hoped or expected—this one thing remains the same. As in years past, Christians everywhere gather near the manger with Mary and Joseph, to look with love upon the baby Jesus. Though we may be separated from our loved ones and friends, we are always one with the angels, the shepherds, and the visitors from the East, celebrating the birth of the Christ Child of Bethlehem, the One the world has been waiting for.

At Christmastime, it is natural for our thoughts to turn to the past. After all, we mark the passing of the years by the holidays we spend with one another: the food we eat, the songs we sing, the stories we tell and love to hear again and again.

And yet, although at Christmas we hear an old, old story—the greatest story ever told!—Christmas is not really a holiday about looking backward. Christmas is a story of life and birth and new beginnings. It is the story of God’s ongoing creative power, and how that creativity and love became flesh and lived among us here in Palestine. The birth of Jesus was new beginning, and a fulfilment of the promises of the prophets. As the prophet Isaiah said, “Behold,



I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:19)

This has been a very difficult year for us all. Because of the coronavirus, we are not able to celebrate Christmas in our homes, in our schools, and in our churches the way we have done in the past. In spite of this, the teachers, pastors, and families of the ELCJHL have found new and creative ways to bring the joy of Christmas to all. Of course, resilience and creativity are nothing new to Palestinian Christians. For two thousand years, we have found creative ways to exist and resist through difficult times! But this is also a reflection of the spirit of a creative God, who did a marvelous new thing through the birth of Jesus. The people were expecting a mighty king, and they received instead the Prince of Peace. They expected to see a ruler on a throne, and instead they saw a baby lying in a manger.

Do you have a nativity scene in your home? If so, I invite you to reflect on the manger this year. Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, even the shepherds and the angel, are usually the stars of the story. But when we see the simple bed where Jesus laid his head, we are reminded that our creative God is always doing something new. When we see the manger, we know that God makes a home in the simplest of places—even messy places, like a stable! Indeed, God is making God's home with us right now, even in this messy year, and in our broken hearts. Thanks be to God for Jesus, who is Emmanuel, God-with-us: not only once a year, and not only in the best of times. Jesus is Emmanuel every day, in every year.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus at the end of a year of unexpected trials and unexpected blessings, let us give thanks that Jesus alone is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He is the one who is, who was, and who is to come. He has loved us from the cradle to the cross and beyond. Let this Good News give us strength and courage, creativity and hope, as we welcome the New Year and all that it will bring.

My prayers are with each of you—with the members of our ELCJHL congregations, with our pastors, with our teachers and other staff. Thank you for your hard work, for your creativity, and for your faithfulness.

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I give thanks also for our international church partners, whose generous support through prayer, advocacy, and financial contributions have been a lifeline for our church during this challenging year. You also are in my prayers.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Merry Christmas! Happy New Year! Kul sane wa intou salmeen.