

COLUMNISTS

Nativity story has parallels for today

Sometimes I can make Christmas too sentimental a feast day. I look on its many images and themes with a perspective that puts only a "cozy glow" on the celebration. Indeed, the stories and readings associated with the season do comfort us, and in the best possible way. God is with us! God dwells right here where we live. God comes to save us: all the time, in the midst of everything that afflicts or threatens us. That is as comforting as any Good News ever has been or ever could be.

But I can go overboard in dwelling on the sweetness of the day and the season, thinking only of the warmth and friendliness of the celebrations I'll participate in during these weeks. Actually, the images of the season as presented in Scripture can be pretty challenging — this in addition to being very comforting.

So sometimes I play a sort of mind game thinking about the way the images of the Christmas story can get me to address some of the challenges of our world as well as some of its goodness.

Thinking of Mary as an unwed mother worrying about rejection and scorn helps me to remember women whose relationships do not support them, putting them in intolerable situations when they are pregnant.



BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SJ

Thinking of Mary and Joseph having to journey so far to register for a taxation census at such an inconvenient time helps me to remember people who struggle under oppressive political and economic systems.

Thinking of the Holy Family's exile to Egypt reminds me of the many refugees on our planet who are forced to leave their homes to face incredible insecurity and want because their societies cannot support or protect them, because their own governments threaten them, because economic conditions require them to migrate.

Thinking of Joseph's worry about the safety of his family reminds me of how many fathers worry about the safety of their families because they live in dangerous, oppressive or crime-ridden regions.

Thinking about Herod's treachery and deceit reminds me that many people in positions of power use their authority to seek their own advantage, and that innocent people suffer and die because of the will to power that so often drives those who control the seats of government and industry.

Thinking about the inn that was too crowded for God's son reminds me of the many ways I keep my days too crowded to make room for people who need "a place to stay."

In so many ways the Christmas story takes the side of those who are rejected or forgotten by most of the systems that rule the world today. The shepherds got it right, but the king got it wrong (shepherds were poor and outcast — even dirty!). The wise men got it right, but Jesus' own people got it wrong (the wise men were from some "far out" religion). Anna and Simeon got it right, but Zechariah got it wrong (Anna and Simeon were well past their prime).

Some of the best stories ever written in any tradition are part of the Christmas event in the New Testament. Whether we've had great instruction on the Bible or practically none, the images associated with these narratives are unforgettable. To

let them sustain and nurture us as much as possible, we also have to let them shake us up a bit. They are surely comforting, encouraging and imaginative pieces of literature.

They are also demanding for those who read them with faith. The invitation in those stories — the "dare" almost — is to recognize that God is partial to the very people that we are so prone to overlook and reject. These stories might almost seem to present a kind of "road map" for those who are seeking God: If you're looking for God, go among those who don't have a room in the inn. If you want to find God, look for those in trouble. That's where God chooses to come among us. That's where Jesus was born, it's where he lived, it's where God dwells. In these stories you don't have to have access to the officials' houses to "get where the action is."

In God's terms unwed mothers, bathless shepherds, political outcasts and exiles of all sorts provide the proper dwelling place. Instead of going out of our way to avoid these sorts, at least part of the message of this season would urge us to "seek the Lord where He may be found..."

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

World seems ready for peacemaking

In late October I gave a talk at a United Nations conference on base closings and conversion from military to commercial production. The conference, in Kaiserslautern, Germany, had 180 participants from 32 nations: Albania, Argentina, Chechnya, China, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Ghana, the Philippines, Russia, South Africa, most of the European Union and several regions of the United States where bases are being closed.

My own talk was one of the few about industrial conversion. An Egyptian official with an 18,000-employee plant that is losing military subcontracts asked me if the concrete strategies we have used at small firms in St. Louis would transfer to his situation. I put together a breakfast meeting with the international projects director of Lancashire Enterprises in Manchester, England, and Rutgers economist Ann Markuson to sketch an initial action plan. We all shared our knowledge of successful conversions and venture capital funding possibilities, and we sketched some actions the Egyptian could investigate.

But at the same time that we talked about the technicalities, my heart was breaking. Finding new products and new markets here is tough. It's tougher in a poor nation. Public policy in Egypt pro-



BY MARY ANN MCGIVERN, SL

hibits layoffs; but policy can't prevent plant closings when the work runs out. And the work is manufacture of high-tech parts for weapons. It would take a lot of retraining and retooling to make and sell vacuum cleaners or kidney dialysis machines or even stable go-carts for crippled children. That's stuff we need; but the world has gone mad for militarization.

The Russian speaker said that his country had embraced conversion in 1990, but when other countries failed to convert and even increased their foreign military transfers, then Russia felt a moral obligation to continue supplying its clients with arms.

That's his wording: moral obligation. But he guaranteed that Russia would not privatize its arms industry.

The Ethiopian described his attempts

in the past five years to reintegrate soldiers into society. The official from Ghana told us about the destitution that results when firms sell weapons to military dictators. A couple of U.S. speakers described successful base closings. Most of the talks avoided descriptions of the failures.

But the speakers were willing to raise points of contention.

Kaiserslautern, where the conference was held, has experienced U.S., British and French base closings. One state official argued that Kaiserslautern needed more help than Brandenburg in the former East Germany because Kaiserslautern is losing thousands of direct and indirect jobs while the Russians in the former German Democratic Republic had never hired or purchased locally.

The Brandenburg minister countered that the East had carried a greater military burden because it never benefited from direct and indirect jobs. But then he said that the purpose of conferences like this one must be to ask why governments, especially the German government, continue to spend money to manufacture arms instead of creating peacetime jobs and cleaning up munitions sites the Russians left behind in Brandenburg.

That's the important question. Despite

the end of the Cold War, nations are continuing to make and sell weapons, from \$3 land mines to \$300 million submarines. Our governments seem trapped inside militarism.

Still, at one break, Ann Alarkuson said to me, "Look at all these people from all over the world. Despite the stubbornness of politicians and the profitability of arms sales, these men and women are creating a peacetime economy. They are doing it."

The Prince of Peace comes this year to a world that is a little bit more open to peace. We are a little more ready to ask for the grace to be peacemakers ourselves. The work is both technical and nitty-gritty, from teaching children about negotiation to clearing land mines and redesigning factories. It demands nothing less than our acceptance of grace.

The vespers antiphon for Christmas Eve says, "Who is this King of Glory? He is the Prince of Peace. Run to meet him, for he is the great beginning, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Our hope this Christmas is that we may share in the great beginning, doing the task of making peace.

Sister McGivern is the executive director of the St. Louis Economic Conversion Project.

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