



“WE SAW THE STAR IN THE EAST...”

Reflecting on the Experience of Christians in the Middle East
and the Theme of the 2022 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

By: Rev. Dr. Rima Nasrallah

As we [participants from the Middle East Council of Churches on the international Week of Prayer for Christian Unity team] came together to write the text of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, our region (the Middle East) was in disarray. Not only did we start working during the early days of COVID-19 lockdowns, but our own countries were deeply shaken by geopolitical changes and tensions.

Lebanon in particular was witnessing a popular uprising. Years of corruption, incompetent leadership, and clientelism pushed us to the limit. So [many in Lebanon] burst into the streets asking for change, asking for justice, asking for the removal of despotic leaders.

A few months later another event shook us to the core. 2700 tons of ammonium nitrate irresponsibly stored in warehouses at the Port of Beirut exploded in a quasi-nuclear fashion, demolishing homes, churches, shops, schools, hospitals, and killing, injuring, disabling, dislocating hundreds of people.

With masks on our faces and ache in our hearts, we [participants from the Middle East Council of Churches on the international WPCU writing team] came together from the different church families of Lebanon and the region to compose a prayer, and propose a theme so that the world would pray with us for unity and for the church worldwide.

On the one hand we could not blot out the political and regional worries—nay, grievances. On the other we were longing for God’s gentle presence in the midst of our pain. And so this theme [“We saw the star in the East, and we came to worship him” (Mt 2:2)] was borne out of a scriptural text that joins political challenge with humble worship of a new-born babe. So let us take some time to stop at some of the themes that the chosen text from Matthew 2:1-12 offered us, I will share those with you hoping this can inspire you for your own context.



GEOGRAPHY

The wise men or Magi came from the east to *te Anatole*, “the rising,” the place of the star’s rising—or simply the East—looking for a special king. The actions of this narrative take place in the East by people from the East. Tradition says that the Magi came from Persia, they brought with them myrrh and frankincense, both trees grow in Arabia. They visited Jerusalem and Bethlehem. And after their departure, the Holy Family went down to Egypt.

It is as if they have been moving among us and between us, in the area we inhabit.

Sadly, this geographic area—which possesses a long history of Christian presence, rich and diverse liturgical traditions, and where Epiphany is the more important feast—is being steadily emptied of its Christian population.

The 20th-century massacres and revolutions eliminated a sizable portion of the Christian population from this area, and the 21st-century wars and crises seem to be finishing off the rest. For the Christians of the Middle East, this has become an existential struggle, one that asks: *What if there would be no more Christians in the East?* No more Christians who know frankincense or who can daily walk the flight route in Egypt. What about the star who appeared in the East and the baby born in Bethlehem? Does this place not matter? Are we or are we not the guardians of that light in the place where it had first appeared?

DEMOGRAPHICS

But then we realized this light—though it appeared in the East—is not only for the East. Nor only for Christians. We looked at the Magi, those strangers, those outsiders, and we were humbled by the fact that they not only were hungry for the light, but could also recognize it, even when those close by could not. The insiders had no idea, and did not see the extraordinary [miracle] that was among them.

And so, thinking of the Magi, we had to reflect on the universality of the grace of God, not only geographically but also to all the people. Here in the text, it might be a reference to the Gentiles, which is not only another ethnic group, but also a group of people with other religious practices: star Gazing, reading the signs of time almost as a kind of priestly ministry. It was an activity



that was frowned upon by the Jews. After all, the Hebrew Bible forbade divination and astrology (Deut 4:9; 18:19; Isa 47:13). Yet, it is not the kings of the Jews, nor their priests, nor wise-Hebrew-people close by who were attracted to it but those “others.”

Meditating on the Magi, we were also driven to think about how sometimes we tend to claim the light that came to dispel darkness through Christ. Assuming it is only for us and behaving as if we alone understand its value. In the Middle East, we are surrounded by Muslims and Jews as well as other smaller religious groups. What have we done with that light in their midst? Have we assumed that they could not see it?

Some commentators point to the fact that the Magi relied on *natural* revelation (the Star) to get to the region, but that they needed *special* revelation (recalled by Herod’s chief priests and scribes) in order to find the exact location of Christ, Bethlehem of Judea. Though this separation between natural and special revelation is a divisive discussion among us Christian, it raises for us the importance of our special revelation as we gather around Scripture. The light is for everyone, but our Scripture should also be accessible and understandable to everyone, particularly in our dark world, a world becoming darker today as confusion reigns (no one seems to know the way) and despair is rising with the aftereffects of COVID-19.

POLITICS

For the Middle East, this darkness seems to be our steady companion. Since the days of Herod, one empire after the other took turns occupying and oppressing our people. Of course, we have to admit that as Christians we sometimes cooperated with the oppressors and sometimes made big compromises. But the fact remains that up till today leadership and Kingship are thorny topics.

As we were writing our text, we were looking at the world leaders around us and at the models we find. Not only in politics but also in the Church and we were wondering from whom have we learned our models of leadership: from the self-emptying Christ—who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited (as we read in Philippians)—or from the Herods of this world?



Herod, that despotic leader, made king over his own people with the aid of the imperial occupier Rome and through warfare—he was not there to serve others but to serve himself. He was paranoid and insecure, fearing the one born king because he knew he did not deserve leadership. And so, in order to safeguard his position, he resorted to lying and deceit. He pretended to be religious, claiming that he, too, wanted to worship the new king, a ruse that ultimately helped him kill and retain power.

Eventually, he executed a massacre. Many innocents were killed so that one person could remain in power. And no one seemed to be bothered by it except the wailing parents—so many wailing parents, not only in Judea, in Gaza, in the West Bank, in Aleppo, in Beirut, in Baghdad, in Cairo. The sound of wailing parents fills the air.

Herod's despotic rule drove the Holy Family—just like so many other families in their circumstances—to become refugees. So they went to Toronto and Vancouver, they joined the Syrian community in Ottawa and Halifax, or the Iranians in Calgary.

What a terrible scene! And just in the midst of all this injustice and violence is the serene Christ, the one who makes wars cease to the ends of the Earth. The One who presents us with a completely different kind of kingship than that encountered in Herod or the Herods of today. A King who came not to be served but to serve. He was born on the margins to be with those in the margins, in the small town of Bethlehem—an insignificant place, and in an unusual family.

His birth and His life brought both peace and disruption.

And with Him we feel called, together as churches and communities of faith, to bring peace and disruption! The disruption of oppressive structures and systems of injustice that permeate our world. And by disturbing we also work towards peace for those who are downtrodden, pushed to the margin, robbed of their humanity, massacred, traumatised, starved, and impelled to become refugees of war or of climate change.

SIZE

As we face this challenge, we in the Middle East have asked ourselves, can we speak of such callings—such tremendous callings—to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. To stand



up in the face of tyranny and challenge systems. We—Middle Eastern Christians who are shrinking by the hour, and are weakened with every new blow?

And so before being discouraged we thought of Bethlehem. “You Bethlehem, . . . are by no means least.” Being small, being weak—a little flock, a grain, a bit of salt—has never been a problem in Scripture; on the contrary this has always been a means for blessing. In a consumerist world where we are taught to think with the logic of the market, we have come to confuse numbers with success. To think that bigger is better. This has not only been a discouraging point for us, but we see many of our friends and partners in Europe and other places where secularism has slimmed down their numbers, stand paralyzed—terrified of the smaller flock. The focus on numbers has blinded us from focusing on our gifts. Gifts that we bring together. Gifts that are unique and which as we lay down together at the feet of the new born king and which can tell a story and witness to the royal and divine child who would die for the life of the world.

Finally, we pondered upon the other way.

A little detail in the story that was probably intended to reveal the evil of Herod and the saving message of God speaks of the Magi returning “through another way.” Though making a little hermeneutical jump, we were very inspired by that sentence. It made us think and ask whether God is maybe calling *us* to take another way—a new way.

Different from what we have been doing so far. Particularly in these COVID times, in crisis times, in changing times. In times when maybe some of us are tired of talking about the same things and same topics and going about things in the same old way.

So we placed that in our prayers asking the Lord to show us a new way and to give us creativity as we seek to walk together in our ecumenical journey following the light of the star so we can “rejoice with great rejoicing”!

This was our journey with this text. We hope that gathering around this text it will inspire you along your journey.

*This is an *approximate transcript* of a talk delivered by Rev. Dr. Rima Nasrallah (Professor at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut and participant from The Middle East Council of Churches on the 2022 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity International Writing Team), at the November 2021 Governing Board Meeting of The Canadian Council of Churches.*