Opinion
Voices of Sisters
Social Justice
EarthBeat



A young girl walks through a flooded street following overnight rainfall at the refugee tent camp for displaced Palestinians in Deir al-Balah, central Gaza Strip, Dec. 31, 2024. (AP/Abdel Kareem Hana)



by Sr. Mary Ellen Gondeck

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

January 2, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

An unexpected Christmas gift this year: This season is helping me reflect on my responsibility as a citizen of the United States.

As a religious sister, it may seem natural that faith integrates with other aspects of my life, but the question I now ask myself — I also ask you — is: How should Christmas relate to politics? I'm not talking about a politician having a photo-op at a Christmas tree lighting. I mean finding hope, stamina and unity in the midst of an endless, divisive and harrowing news cycle. Christmas can bring a new birth (new life?), even to the world of politics.

Finding hope is hard. Take, for example, the fact that our world is facing worsening natural disasters and extreme climate disruption. Certainly, I pray our future leaders will continue investing in clean energy and cooperate in international efforts to curb climate disasters.

However, I also pray we won't succumb to political polarization on issues like climate change, but instead see them as moral issues. What does Christian witness call us to when observing the suffering in Ukraine or the Middle East? What of the hardship that prompts many immigrants and refugees to seek a safer shore, only to be met with contempt in many of our communities? Can those wandering families encountering "no room" remind us of a story we hold sacred? If we can see Christ in others and have compassion for their suffering, we can change how our nation and government functions.

Advertisement

How do we find this compassion? A quote from Wangari Mathaai, the Kenyan activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, resonates: "In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other."

I believe it is fear that holds us back. My view from the battleground state of Michigan is that there's a deep-seated angst in this country about difference and belonging. This angst can be triggered by anything from crudeness on social media

to noticing more people speaking Spanish around us. Our primal instinct to regard some as outsiders or "other" might be the greatest obstacle to truly loving our neighbor.

I feel the angst at times, too. However, I want to embrace, in the words of Mathaai, a new level of consciousness. I believe creation is unfolding with God in an evolutionary process, which includes an evolution toward higher consciousness. If we have hope for a better world, if we have faith in God and one another, then we can pray, then act, over and over again, helping to birth a better world with each effort. We can find inspiration for this journey in the incarnation. God enters into humanity in a shocking sharing of love and union. He joins us in physical human form on our path of evolution. We, therefore, are part of the Christmas story ourselves and it is still unfolding.



"Rest of the Holy Family on the Flight into Egypt" (1869) by Robert Zünd (Artvee)

Let's return to Jesus' birth story and the journey of the Holy Family. Mary and Joseph had to travel for the census when Mary's final weeks of pregnancy made it

dangerous. There was no room for them at the inn, but God made a way. Jesus entered the world in the humblest of shelters, perfectly loved and safe.

Afterwards, when the threat of a massacre targeting the young Jesus loomed, Mary and Joseph made a daring flight into Egypt and again kept Jesus safe. They must have been at the mercy of strangers in this foreign land and found kindness along the way. Mary and Joseph persevered and trusted under the most dire of circumstances. We, too, can grow our trust in one another, no matter how much we might differ, and help the world renew.

This is why I even believe there is hope — through Christ — for politics. We are the ones who can make change by participating in God's action in the world. One year ago, Pope Francis wrote in his apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*: "Unless citizens control political power … it will not be possible to control damage to the environment." And that's true for all the issues we care about. In the Gospels, a new paradigm didn't come from political and religious leaders — it came from a baby, his mom and his dad. God says again, "Behold, I am doing a new thing" (Is 43:19).

Indeed, Christmas hope and love can spark new unity across political divides. That kind of hope and love cannot be contained just in our family or in our local parish. No, it must spill out into all of our relationships — from the stranger at the grocery store, to the stranger without shelter for the night. We must invite Christmas into every corner of our world. For though the world cries out, a love so great can change everything.