

REFLECTIONS FROM
BETHLEHEM

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

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This has been a special, holy project at a particularly horrifying time in history.

As the world has watched the mass slaughter in Gaza and the escalating violence in the region, many people have been asking, “Where is God?” And our brother Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac offered the world an answer—God is in the rubble.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the deeply held conviction that God is with us—God is with the grieving parents in Gaza holding the limp bodies of their babies. God is with all those who suffer violence and feel the crushing foot of empire. It is something we remember in a particular way this season of Christmas—Emmanuel, God is with us.



The coming of Christ—and the way Christ comes—is the most profound act of divine solidarity the world has ever seen. God leaves all the comfort of heaven to join the struggle here on earth.

Of all the ways God could enter the world, God came to us as a baby born in the middle of a genocide. The Gospel of Matthew tells of a terrible massacre that occurred, an unspeakable act of violence as King Herod slaughters children throughout the land, hoping to kill Jesus, which the Church remembers as the massacre of the “Holy Innocents.”

Let this sink in as you read this devotional. The Savior of the world comes to us a refugee, born in an occupied land in the middle of a genocide. The Messiah is a brown-skinned, Palestinian Jew from a town called Nazareth from which people said “nothing good can come.”

From the cradle to the grave, Jesus felt the pain of the human condition. Indeed, if we believe the Bible is true, then Jesus felt the heaviness of the world in such a crushing way that even He asked, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” God felt the absence of God. That’s how close God is to the pain. And yet the Christ-story is the story of the triumph of God’s love over sin and evil and violence and all the principalities and powers of this world.

This Christmas we are grieving the mass slaughter in Gaza and the escalating violence

in the region. Over half of the more than 44,000 confirmed deaths in Gaza are women and children. The age group with the most deaths is 5 to 9 years old. Every Palestinian life is just as precious as any other life, just as holy and made in the image of God.

There are people who say, “All we can do is pray.” And that’s not true. *We can pray and we must. But we can also organize and boycott and march and participate in direct action.* In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Those who love peace must learn to organize as effectively as those who love war.”

As we pray through this season, let us ask, “Lord, what else would you have me do?” For we know that faith without works is dead. Sometimes we are waiting on God to act, and God is waiting on us to act. Let the words of this prayer book move you to action.

So this IS a prayer book. But it is also a call to action. It is a manifesto of love and justice, centering the voices of Palestinian Christians. They remind us of the deep roots of our faith that lie in the Holy Land, where so many unholy things are happening right now. And they remind us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in the West Bank, in the middle of a genocide.

May we have the courage to follow Christ, the Prince of Peace, in a world that continues to live by the sword and die by the sword. *There is another way. It is the way of Christ,* the refugee Savior born in Bethlehem.

Shane Claiborne





A WORD ABOUT ADVENT

Advent, meaning “the coming,” is a time when we wait expectantly. Christians began to celebrate it as a season during the fourth and fifth centuries. Like Mary, we celebrate the coming of the Christ child, what God has already done.

And we wait in expectation of the full coming of God’s reign on earth and for the return of Christ—what God will yet do.

But this waiting is not a passive waiting. It is an active waiting. As any expectant mother knows, this waiting also involves preparation, exercise, nutrition, care, prayer, work; and birth involves pain, blood, tears, joy, release, community. It is called labor for a reason.

Likewise, we are in a world pregnant with hope, and we live in the expectation of the coming of God’s kingdom on earth. As we wait, we also work, cry, pray, ache; we are the midwives of another world.

— From *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*

DEC 1

JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM

JOHN 1:14



By

Shadia Qubti

Shadia Qubti is a Palestinian Christian from Nazareth, currently

an arrivant on the unceded and traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. She worked in faith-based peacebuilding in Palestine/Israel for 15 years, focusing on amplifying women's voices through initiatives like the *Women Behind the Wall* podcast. Her recent MA studies at Vancouver School of Theology, exploring Palestinian and North American Indigenous understandings of land, inspired this land-based reading of the nativity. She serves as Community Engagement Animator at Trinity Grace United Church in Vancouver.

In the darkest nights of winter, Christians worldwide turn their hearts to a small town in Palestine called Bethlehem.

Yet this year, as we witness the catastrophic destruction and genocide in Gaza, Mary's journey to Bethlehem takes on deeper meaning. A young teenager, barely more than a child herself, traveling while pregnant, facing an uncertain future far from her home in Nazareth. Her vulnerability and fear must have been overwhelming—much like the fears of young Palestinian mothers today, giving birth amid destruction, displacement, and death.

The comfortable distance many maintain from this reality cannot hold, for a placeless nativity story disconnected from its land and people serves only to numb us to the urgent cry for justice rising from the grieving earth of the very place where “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

Creator's Word became a flesh-and-blood human being and pitched his sacred tent among us, living as one of us. We looked upon his great beauty and saw how honorable he was, the kind of honor held only by his one Son who fully represents his Father—full of his great kindness and truth.

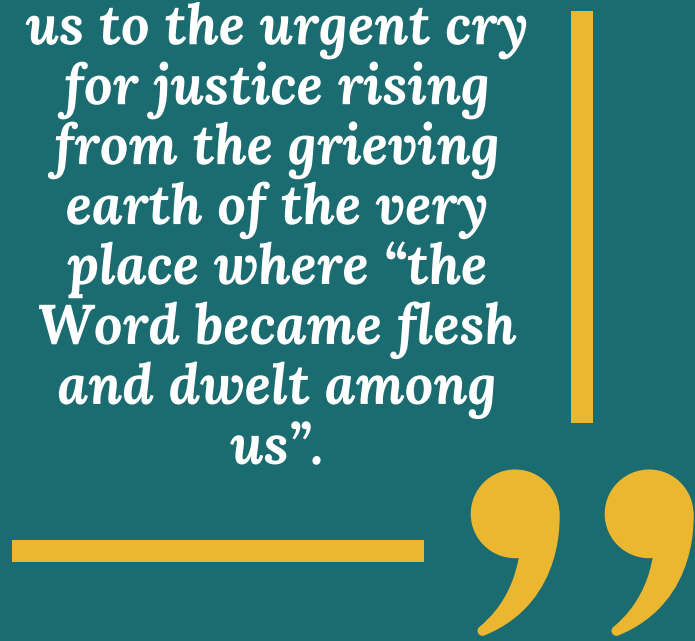
JOHN 1:14 (FIRST NATIONS VERSION)



The real Bethlehem remains a living tapestry of sacred relationships where Creator, creation, and humanity meet. Under Roman occupation, this humble town became a refuge where all creation fulfilled its spiritual responsibility to comfort a frightened young mother: The earth offered a manger—a feeding trough carved from local limestone that Palestinian craftsmen still work with today. The hay that cushioned the manger represents creation's nurturing abundance—the same hay that would feed the animals, now cradling the divine child.

The cosmos itself participated in this sacred drama, as “the star which they had seen in the East went before them” (Matthew 2:9). The same Palestinian skies that witnessed the angels' proclamation to the shepherds now light up with deadly explosions rather than heavenly hosts. Yet Palestinian Christians maintain their vigil beneath these stars as “living stones,” their presence a testament to divine promise amid systematic destruction.

The comfortable distance many maintain from this reality cannot hold, for a placeless nativity story disconnected from its land and people serves only to numb us to the urgent cry for justice rising from the grieving earth of the very place where “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”.



God of the Incarnate One,

God of Mary's vulnerability, God of Palestine's living stones,

In our rootedness, may we extend branches of solidarity with those uprooted from Gaza. From the womb of our safety, may we protect those giving birth amid destruction.

With the wings of our freedom, may we shelter young mothers fleeing with their children. Through the heart of our love, may we nurture those wounded by empire's violence.

In the embrace of our kinship, may we restore the dignity of all daughters of Mary's land,

Amen

The earth offered its treasure: gold from its depths, while the plant world brought frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). Through ancient trade routes, these precious offerings connected distant communities to this small town—from Arabian deserts to African mines to Palestinian hills. Even the name Bethlehem—House of Bread—speaks to the earth's provision and human cultivation. Each being in creation played its part in co-creating this holy moment, teaching us that shalom cannot exist alongside the destruction of any of its parts.

When we separate the nativity from its place and its peoples, we risk losing these profound truths about creation's harmony and human witness. A placeless theology inevitably

becomes a rootless spirituality, unable to hear creation's groaning under the weight of destruction (Romans 8:22). Yet as Bethlehem's inhabitants have long understood, empires and their violence do not last forever. This Advent season calls us to reconnect with the real Bethlehem—not as a distant symbol, but as a living place where heaven and earth met in perfect shalom, where a young mother found refuge in creation's embrace.

Like Mary, we carry creation's sacred wisdom in our hearts: the safety of a womb, the freedom of a bird, the love of a child, the equality of siblings, the rootedness of a tree. Like the community of creation that welcomed her, we are called to be midwives of hope in a land crying out for justice.

DEC 2

HOPE UNSEEN

ROMANS
8:24-25



By

Muna Nassar

Muna Nassar, a Palestinian Christian woman from Bethlehem, advocates for justice for the Palestinian people and has worked as a project coordinator for Kairos Palestine. In 2021, she obtained an MPhil in intercultural theology and interreligious studies from Trinity College Dublin. In December 2022, Muna joined the World Communion of Reformed Churches based in Hannover, Germany, as Executive Secretary for Mission and Advocacy. As a writer, she aims to articulate and represent the diversity of Palestine and Palestinians, highlighting their voice and agency.

In a world that is significantly different, changed and drastically shattered, this Advent season comes as a time to reflect where humanity stands, where morality lies, and where can one find hope. This is usually the time that the world turns its attention toward the little town of Bethlehem for a story of hope and renewal. However this Advent season arrives at a very different junction.

The year 2024 has been a year of videos and soundbites of Palestinians in Gaza being mercilessly murdered in numerous unfathomable ways, while the whole world watches. And here we are: still watching the round-the-clock onslaught on the Palestinians in Gaza.

To witness how our people have been mercilessly murdered, obliterated, and wiped



For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

ROMANS 8:24-25 (NRSVUE)

off the face of the earth with the most brutal weaponry, supported by a Western racist ideology of the Other, has inflicted a new level of fear that we Palestinians have never lived through before. Nothing can come close to imagining the enormity of suffering that Gazans have experienced all of their battered and brutalized lives, but for over a year, a new level of ferocity has been unlocked.

Here, I find myself wrestling with the questions this past year has forced me to ask. Questions like: What is it about our suffering as Palestinians that no one is able to stop?

How is it that our extermination is so normalized?

And where can we ever find hope?

How can we describe this state of hopelessness when we see that there are no red lines that Israel will not cross? How can we feel that we

have any control over anything when hospitals are bombed? When churches and mosques are bombed? When schools where people are sheltering are bombed? When people praying are bombed?

As they always have, our lives as Palestinians have been defined by apartheid and occupation. And Christmas arrives as yet another reminder to us and to the world of the story of hope



Lord,

Grant your people hearts that weep, voices that speak truth, and hands that work for justice.

Renew in us hope, strength, and courage to resist injustice.

Amen

How can we go back to a time when we could not have imagined patients would be shot while inside a hospital ward?

As they always have, our lives as Palestinians have been defined by apartheid and occupation. And Christmas arrives as yet another reminder to us and to the world of the story of hope—a story of continuation, a story of constant adaptation and in constant construction. We as Palestinian Christians are not able to see hope, and have not been for a while now, but hope is a defining characteristic of our Christian faith, expressed both individually and collectively as a community.

The Christmas story is a reminder for humanity all over the world to reorient its compass and ask: What can we do to build hope, to reconstruct it collectively?

Sumud forms our collective Palestinian response to the everyday systematic oppressions that we go through.

It forms our stand and our journey toward what we cannot see.

It forms our inability to sit with hopelessness—it is a way of saying that hope will always have the final word.

DEC 3

OUR REFUGE & HOPE

LUKE 1:38-40



By
**Shireen
Awwad Hilal**

Shireen Awwad Hilal is the Director of Bethlehem Bible College Community & Outreach. She works with women and is involved in ministry that works for rights/reconciliation and leadership. Shireen has a BA in English Literature from Bethlehem University, an MA Degree in Educational Administration from Texas A & M University, and a Masters of Business from Sofaer International at Tel Aviv University.

Mary has just received the news that, through the Holy Spirit, she will become pregnant and give birth to a baby boy—‘the Son of the Most High’, whose Kingdom will have no end. She has humbly accepted this mission. In her excitement she immediately travels to give the news to her cousin Elizabeth. What a beautiful picture we have here.

This is such a natural dynamic for family—making a visit to share good news. Of course, the same would also apply if the news is not so good. In our culture in Palestine, visits to family are a part of life. We also share in celebrations such as weddings and baptisms,



*“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered.
“May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel
left her. At that time Mary got ready and hurried to
a town in the hill country of Judea, where she
entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth.*

LUKE 1:38-40 (NIV)

as well as coming together to say farewell to loved ones when they die.

My aunt Elaine and my uncle Fraig were both killed in Gaza during the early days of the present war. They were sheltering in the Holy Family Parish Church when it was shelled. My aunt was killed at that time, and my uncle later, due to lack of treatment.

It has been almost a year since we lost both of these dear family members. It is hard to say goodbye to someone whom you have not seen for many years. The occupation did not allow us into Gaza for many years before the war. Now in the war, we lost them, and we were not even able to attend their funeral to say goodbye.

Our hearts are broken. This is especially so for my mom, who lost both her sister and her brother. May the Lord have mercy.

How shall I remember them?

I thank God for faith and a belief in another life. It is important to believe and to hold on to hope. How else can we continue to live in such difficult times? Our eyes are fixed on the Lord, who is our refuge and our hope.

“I am sure that nothing can separate us from God’s love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God’s love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!” (Romans 8:38-39)

This is the hope of new life that we receive through Christ Jesus.

Lord,

“I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.” (Psalm 91:2) Our trust is in you. No matter what the world may bring to us, we know we can trust you at all times—even to the point of death, and beyond.

Amen

DEC 4

ACTIVE HOPE

LUKE
2:10-11



By
Jamal Shehade

Jamal is the Director of the House of Grace Foundation in Haifa, a

charitable association dedicated to rehabilitating prisoners, supporting low-income families, and empowering children and youth at risk. He is Chief Scout of the First Greek Melkite Catholic Scout Group—Haifa, and has been serving as the Honorary Consul of Switzerland in the Haifa region since January 2023. Jamal holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Haifa University, and is married with two children.

The angel's words to the frightened shepherds—"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people"—speak not only to shepherds, but to all of us today, especially as we experience the current tension in Israel and Palestine. In these words, we find a great message of hope during fear, conflict, and uncertainty.

The shepherds the angel visited lived in an occupied land, with fear and uncertainty. The angel's message pierced through that fear, announcing that a Savior had been born, not just for a few, but for all people.

This message of universal hope was not limited to the shepherds of Bethlehem; it echoed through the ages, offering us a profound reminder that even in times of deep division and suffering, hope remains at the core of the Christian faith.

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

LUKE 2:10-11 (NRSVUE)



The angel’s command, “Do not be afraid,” resonates powerfully in this context. Fear often drives division, perpetuates violence, and blinds us to the humanity of the other. In the Holy Land, fear has led to walls both physical and emotional—walls that separate people. Yet the angel’s proclamation offers something else: good news of great joy. This joy is not a superficial emotion that ignores pain, but an entrenched assurance that God is at work, even in the darkest places.

The birth of Christ just where today’s conflict unfolds, reminds us that God’s love is born into the most unexpected and humble circumstances. It is not through political might or military power that salvation comes, but through a child born in a manger. This humble birth challenges us to see hope not in the grand gestures of the world but in the quiet, steadfast promise that God is with us. The name “Immanuel” is a testament that even in the deepest suffering, God has not abandoned us.

Today, the situation in Israel and Palestine reflects a deepening of division, fear, and sorrow. The region, long a symbol of holy promise, has seen decades of violence and

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Lord,

As we prepare our hearts in this sacred season, we ask to become a place of welcome, a Grotto, for Your light. May Your birth dispel the darkness over our land and bring courage as the angel brought it to the shepherds, proclaiming, “Do not be afraid.”

Let us be like Your angel, bringing hope to those in despair, reminding them that You stand with the suffering and guide them to salvation.

May Your peace touch all, especially where conflict endures, as we await the day of Your promised peace.

In Jesus’ name we pray,

Amen

loss, with lives shattered and communities broken. The results of conflict can make hope feel distant, even elusive. But Advent calls us to remember that Christ entered a world full of division and suffering. The announcement of His birth is a declaration that hope is not a luxury but a necessity, especially in times of crisis.

For Christians, hope is not passive. It is active, daring us to believe that peace is possible and that God’s kingdom is breaking into the world, even when we cannot see it.

In the Israel-Palestine conflict, hope does not mean ignoring injustice, but believing that

reconciliation and peace, though difficult, are achievable. It means standing against violence and oppression, trusting that the Prince of Peace, born in Bethlehem, will one day bring healing to this fractured land.

In this Advent season, as we reflect on the angel’s words, let us hold tightly to the hope that Christ’s birth brings. Let us pray for peace in the land where He was born and for all who live there today. And let us live out that hope, embodying Christ’s love and peace in a world that so desperately needs it. For, as the angel declared, this good news of great joy is indeed for all people.



DEC 5

PRACTICING FREEDOM

LUKE 1:50–53



By
**Lisa Sharon
Harper**

A prolific speaker, writer and activist, Lisa Sharon Harper is the founder and president of FreedomRoad.us, a consulting group dedicated to shrinking the narrative gap in the US by designing forums and experiences that bring common understanding, common commitment, and common action. Lisa is also the author of the critically acclaimed books, *The Very Good Gospel* and *Fortune: How Race Broke My Family and the World*. Check out Lisa's column, "The Truth Is..." on Freedom Road's Substack.

The same year that Mary was visited by Gabriel and told she would bear the son of God, she and Joseph experienced profound grief.

The ancient historian Josephus tells us a Roman general came through the region and squashed an attempted insurrection by crucifying 500 people per day. No family would have gone without having lost someone to the cross—to an instrument of state-sanctioned terror. Like the lynchings that followed Denmark Vessey's attempted insurrection in 1822 and like the genocide that followed October 7, Roman centurions hoisted dead and dying Hebrew men and boys

*His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their
hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

LUKE 1:50-53 (NRSVA)



onto crosses; terrifying their families into submission to the empire.

Rome saw Mary as an object in its story. Mary was a thing to be manipulated for the gains of the state. She existed on the margins of their story. Or she did not exist at all. She was merely an inanimate object—the enemy, not a human being. As Dr. Emilie Townes might put it, based on her treatise, *The Cultural Production of Evil*, in the eyes of empire—in the eyes of whiteness—Mary had no “Is-ness”—no actual “being”.

In that context, on the dark side of the partition wall of empire, Mary practices freedom.

1. She listens to the prophetic word. Because on the dark side of the wall we need the light of prophetic words. We need the promise of God that God will be with us! We need to know there is meaning in this suffering.

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God,

In the shadow of the wall, dear God, give us the strength to practice freedom.

Help us look square in the face of those who tell us we are mere objects in their story and say, “No.”

Help us declare from the marrow of our bones, “We are the subjects of our own story. We are human. We have agency. And God is with us.

And God, help us sing like Brown Mary, The low will be brought high and the high will be brought low!

Amen

2. Mary goes to her Auntie Elizabeth and she connects. Because the first requirement of freedom is connection. On the dark side of the wall, Mary connects with her family, with her elder, with her loved ones, and her community.
3. Standing on the dark side of the wall, Mary believed the word from God that came to her through Gabriel. She believed God was coming to earth—that God would be with her scattered people.
4. And Mary sang what she heard in God’s word. She sang in the midst of the grief.

She sang in the face of the terror. She sang the truth in the face of the lie.

Ultimately, Mary sang herself to the center of her own story! She snatched back the narrative from the halls of Rome. She sang the story from her own point of view on the dark side of the wall. And her story lifted all the downtrodden up from the dirt. Her story was not only for her well-being. Her story was our story. Her story reconnects her with her people and envisions a future for them all—beyond the wall.

DEC 6

A SONG OF HOPE

LUKE
2:27-35



By

Jarrold McKenna

Jarrold McKenna wants to follow Jesus. Jarrold currently serves as a

pastor at Steeple Church in Naarm (Melbourne on most maps), and explores hermeneutics of liberation for reading the Jewish and Christian scriptures through conversations with his co-host Dr. Drew Hart and their guests on the popular *InVerse* podcast. He, Kat, and their sons live and worship on Wadjuk Noongar land (Perth, Australia).

If hope is not a gift, it is a lie.

I imagine Simeon's leathery baritone voice as he took the child Jesus in his arms. I can almost hear the coda of his waiting as he draws breath before this young couple, there in the temple. His song finished, his life at its end, yet they hold life beginning.

What would Mary and Joseph have made of the old man's words? The oppression ongoing. The brutality unending. What glory for God's people who suffer unceasingly? Did Mary sense, as she gazed at her defenceless bundle cradled in Simeon's arms, how God's nonviolent salvation would violently pierce her soul like a sword?

I confess how hard I find it to be present to your pain, and my own. Go back one generation and lives and legacies bound within shared histories of colonization that span decades and oceans are my story. How do I hold the complexities of resistance to a

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”*

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.”

LUKE 2:27-35 (NRSVUE)



colonizing power half a world from the unceded colonized lands on which I was raised while learning of the genocide of your people? How do I hold you in prayer when you face annihilation in Gaza? How do we tell the truth while we wail?

The prophets’ poems seem pathetic when pitted against the carnal weapons of crucifixion and airstrikes. Language that paints a picture cannot shield a mother who gathers her children as a hen gathers her chicks beneath her wings from targeted drone strikes. Yet Simeon’s situation does not allow for the luxury of paralysis. He knew that poetry must be embodied or it means nothing. He knew that hope conjured is not hope, but another cruelty. To pierce the numbness and transfigure his wailing, his prayers were chanted. Our scream must be sung. A story must be told, the truth must be witnessed to, not merely in news reports but in the register of our souls.

This is not the brittle “hope” we utter when we seek to manipulate God with our “morality” to hold back the madness. The “if/ then” prayers of those who cling to the illusion of control.

Real hope is a gift or it is nothing. It calls from us a holiness which is not our own. Simeon’s words haunt us with the holiness of hard-fought-for openness to real hope. Hope that daily requires the wrestling open of our hands and hearts to be received. The hope that demands a willingness to feel through the numbness. A willingness to hurt. A willingness to be present to pain and be moved into action. Simeon’s “righteous and devout” witness is terrifying: it speaks not of moral achievements but sheer grace. The grace of control relinquished and reality embraced. The grace and integrity of hope hung on to, through hell, for the long haul. Holiness experienced as showing up and allowing your heart to break over and over until the horizon of your heart is as vast as Heaven’s hope for everyone,

Lord,

I protect my heart from your ache, and my siblings' cries.

In this season, may we have ears to hear Simeon's song.

May our voices shake with his in awe of a God who saves by suffering love.

May hope pierce our souls with Christ's victorious suffering-love that we too might lift our voice in song.

Amen

everything. The embarrassment of holiness is that it is never our own. Hope is a gift.

Holiness is always on loan, only received in humility, and most often received as the pain of possibilities not yet imagined. Lifetimes—long allowing of the Spirit to harrow and hallow our desires in active waiting. This is the witness of Simeon's waiting and it is the relentless witness and righteous hope of our sisters and brothers in Palestine.

As we heed their witness—the horrors that fill our feeds and overshadow their lives—we must learn to say no to counterfeit consolation: simple answers, quick-fixes and easy-outs that would protect us from entering the heart-breaking ache of God and his promised Messiah.

Because what sets Simeon's hope apart from that of the nations is the Creator who hears and responds to the cries of the oppressed. Those who long for freedom. Who are made in the image of God. And what is a song if not the human cry transfigured in melody? A song that demands our bodies enter into the vulnerability of poetry as we wait and work for the horror to cease and a just-peace to reign.

So here we are with Mary, Joseph, and their baby. God's got the whole world in his hands, but here in the temple Simeon holds God's presence in his arms. The Most High has come so low, assuming all that needs to be healed. In Simeon's embrace is the All-Powerful made all-vulnerable. In Simeon's hands history and hope are held. Can we sing this song?

DEC 7

GOD SHOWS UP

MATTHEW 2:16-18



By
**Jonathan
Brenneman**

Jonathan is a Palestinian American Christian and Co-founder of Christians for a Free Palestine. He is a graduate of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies and has worked in multiple countries doing Palestine advocacy, human rights monitoring, grassroots organizing, and challenging anti-Arab racism. Jonathan's work connects the Palestinian decolonial struggle with those of other indigenous peoples and challenges theologies of domination.

The “Christmas story” ends in Matthew with the killing of every male child in Bethlehem. Amidst the exaltations of “Peace on Earth” and “Hosanna,” the gifts of the magi and the elation of the shepherds, it is easy to miss the devastating political situation that surrounds the birth of Jesus.

The story in Luke begins with a pregnant teenager forced to give birth far from home due to the whims of an emperor. In Matthew, it ends with a massacre against the children of Bethlehem and the holy family fleeing as refugees to Egypt.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:



*“A voice was heard in Ramah,
Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children,
Refusing to be comforted,
Because they are no more.”*

MATTHEW 2:16-18 (NKJV)

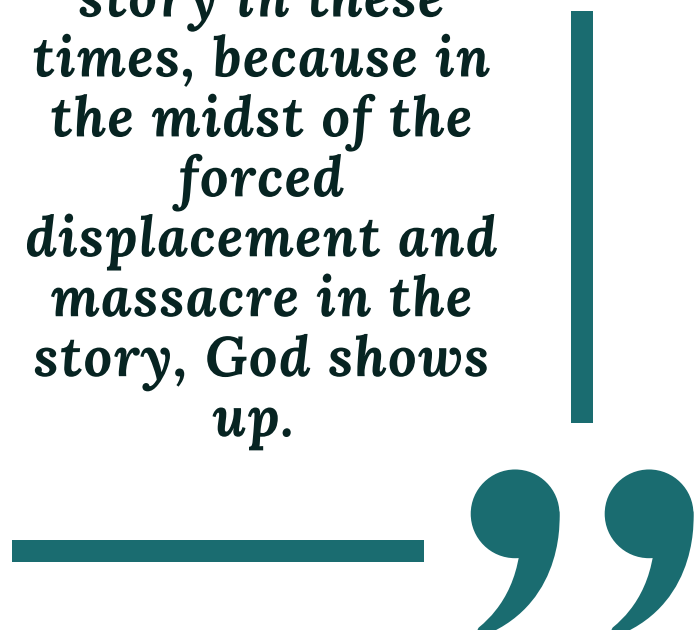
As a Palestinian, looking at this story amidst the ongoing genocide of our people in Gaza, these aspects of the story resonate too well. As of my writing, nearly 17,000 children have been killed by the Israeli military. We don't know how many have died of hunger and thirst, because Israel will not allow food or water to the million people they have made homeless.

There are 155,000 pregnant women and new mothers in Gaza, who in the past year were forced to give birth under fire, in tents, while fleeing bombs, and often without access to medication or clean water. Most of them have lost their homes to Israeli bombs. They have had to flee, often multiple times. In the damaged and barely functioning hospitals, there are no beds left among the tens of thousands of injured people. Many of these women will be giving birth with no clean water, no food, no shelter, and no safe hospital. They are in a situation like Mary,

of having to give birth in an unfamiliar and unsafe place.

The horrors of Israel's atrocities against all the people of Gaza is hard to witness. I take some solace in the Christmas story in these times,

***I take some solace
in the Christmas
story in these
times, because in
the midst of the
forced
displacement and
massacre in the
story, God shows
up.***



God of Peace,

Give us strength for today in the fight for justice.

Give us strength for tomorrow in the fight for justice.

Give us strength.

Amen

because in the midst of the forced displacement and massacre in the story, God shows up. God is there in a more tangible way than ever! God took the form of the most vulnerable—a child of an oppressed and targeted population.

Instead of looking away, becoming numb, or burning out, let us join with God's work of seeking peace by being with the most vulnerable in Palestine, in our own communities, and anywhere in the world.

When we see the devastating images coming out of Gaza, let us remember that in the midst

of a political tragedy, God is with us: "Immanuel."

And as we seek God in these times, let us see God in the faces of the oppressed. Let us uplift the cries of Palestinians and people of peace around the world calling for a ceasefire now, and an arms embargo.

We dare not do this alone. As the Holy family was surrounded and supported by shepherds and wise men, let us rely on one another. I invite you to join the growing community of Christians for a Free Palestine (CFP).



DEC 8

EMMANUEL

GOD WITH US

MATTHEW 1:22-23



By
**Rev. Dr.
Munther Isaac**

Munther Isaac is a Palestinian Christian pastor and theologian. He now pastors the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem and the Lutheran Church in Beit Sahour. He is also the Academic Dean of Bethlehem Bible College, and is the director of the highly acclaimed and influential Christ at the Checkpoint conferences. Munther is passionate about issues related to Palestinian theology.

We are angry. We are broken. This should have been a time of joy, instead we are mourning. We are fearful. Gaza as we know it no longer exists. This is an annihilation.

This is a genocide.

We cried out, “My God my God, why have you forsaken Gaza? Why do you hide your face from Gaza?” In our pain, anguish, and lament, we have searched for God and found him under the rubble in Gaza.

Jesus himself became the victim of the very same violence of the empire. When he was in our land he was tortured, crucified. He bled out as others watched. He was killed and cried out in pain, “My God, where are you?”

In Gaza today God is under the rubble. And in this Christmas season, as we search for Jesus, he is not to be found on the side of Rome, but our side of the wall. He is in a cave with a simple family—an occupied family. He is

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.”

MATTHEW 1:22-23 (NRSVUE)



vulnerable, barely and miraculously surviving a massacre himself. He is among the refugees, among a refugee family.

This is where Jesus is to be found today. *If Jesus were to be born today he would be born under the rubble in Gaza.*

When we glorify pride and richness, Jesus is under the rubble.

When we rely on power, might, and weapons, Jesus is under the rubble.

When we justify, rationalize, and theologize the bombing of children, Jesus is under the rubble.

Jesus is under the rubble. This is his manger. He is at home with the marginalized, the suffering, the oppressed, and the displaced. This is his manger.

The majesty of the Incarnation lies in its solidarity with the marginalized. This is the

Incarnation: messy, bloody, poverty. This is the Incarnation and this child is our hope and inspiration.

So this manger is about resilience, because this is the very same child who rose up from the midst of pain, destruction, darkness, and death to challenge empires. To speak truth to power and deliver an everlasting victory over death and darkness.

This is Christmas today in Palestine and this is the Christmas message. It is a true and authentic Christmas message about the God who did not stay silent, but sent his Word and his Word was Jesus, born among the occupied and marginalized. He is in solidarity with us in our pain and brokenness.

This message is our message to the world today and it is simply this:

This genocide must stop now.

This is our call. This is our plea. This is our prayer. Hear, oh God. Amen.

DEC 9

DISARMING VIOLENCE

ISAIAH
11:6-9



By
Diana Oestreich

Diana Oestreich is a combat medic who found the posture of peace on the battlefield of the Iraq war. She's a veteran, peace activist and author because she believes everyday people are going to disarm violence and heal the divides tearing us apart. She is the founder of The Waging Peace Project: empowering everyday peacemakers to activate justice and instigate joy by committing acts of courage right where we live.

I was waging war as a combat medic in the Holy Land when the Prince of Peace disarmed me of my violence.

It was Christmas Eve. I was closer to where our savior was born than I had ever been before, but I had never felt farther away from my faith. Being born into western Christianity I never questioned why my church celebrated military service or why, in my Christian family, I was a third-generation Army veteran. Never questioned until I was waking up in my tent next to the ancient city of Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, in the Holy Land.

War was nothing like I imagined it would be. Eyes wide open, witnessing what soldiers wearing my uniform were doing to those they said were "their enemy" tore at my conscience and traumatized my 23-year-old soul. Their actions in this land were anything but "holy".

*The wolf will romp with the lamb,
the leopard sleep with the kid.
Calf and lion will eat from the same trough,
and a little child will tend them.
Cow and bear will graze the same pasture,
their calves and cubs grow up together,
and the lion eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens,
the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent.
Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill
on my holy mountain.
The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive,
a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.*

ISAIAH 11:6-9 (THE MESSAGE)



The violence human beings were doing to one other violated the image of God in each other, desecrated the land, and planted more seeds of Islamophobia and Zionism.

Isaiah 11 speaks of what the world will look like when it finally wraps its arms around the full knowledge of God. What the people of the world will look like when we are drenched and dripping in the knowledge of God. What animals and creation will look like when they are brimming with the full breath of God. Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill.

The night my commander gave me an order to run over an Iraqi child if necessary to keep the convoy rolling at all costs, I went back to my tent and prayed...or mostly sobbed into my pillow quietly. In the middle of the night, I heard God break into the darkness, "But I love them Diana, I love them, too." Standing under the starry night sky, I disarmed myself. I took the bullets out of my gun and I pledged my

allegiance to the Prince of Peace and the kingdom of heaven first, and to my country second.

The night my commander gave me an order to run over an Iraqi child if necessary to keep the convoy rolling at all costs, I went back to my tent and prayed...or mostly sobbed into my pillow quietly.

Oh God,

We pray that the whole earth will be brimming with knowing God fully Alive.

We pray that every single person will disarm themselves of violence today and arm themselves with self- sacrificial love instead.

Will you give us courage to follow our Brothers and Sisters in Palestine wherever it may lead? Whatever it may cost us? Because love never fails.

Thank you for making us peacemakers so that we can be a blessing to you and a blessing to our children and to our enemies' children.

Today, tomorrow and forever,

Amen

Our savior first appeared in a small village in Palestine named Bethlehem. But he appeared again, in a darkened tent in the middle of a war, to save a weary soul from her own violence.

The Prince of Peace came to set us free from the violence in our human nature: the killing, harming, and waging of wars. He has come to

give us a new life, by giving us peace as our new nature.

Jesus was born to make us peacemakers in a warring world.

The Prince of Peace calls to us from under the rubble in Palestine today. Will we hear him?



DEC 10

THE LAND CALLS THEIR NAMES

JEREMIAH 22:3



By

Anthony Khair

Anthony Khair is a Latino-Palestinian Christian from

Bethlehem, Palestine. Fluent in English, Spanish, and Arabic, he is a Master's student in Theology (Peace, Trauma, and Religion) at Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, and an active human-rights activist. Anthony spent a year working with the Mennonite Central Committee's National Peace and Justice Ministries in Washington D.C., where he conducted advocacy work related to Palestine, Latin America, and migration to the United States, addressing both the U.S. Congress and the United Nations. Anthony has delivered speeches at various universities and churches in both Spanish and English.

During this Advent season, we remember the miraculous birth of Jesus. With his birth, the good news (the gospel) arrived in the little town of Bethlehem. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14).

Unfortunately, we have romanticized this story—The incarnation of the Word has been born! But we tend to forget the misery during this time.

Jesus, a Palestinian Jew. Born and raised during an occupation by a 1st-century empire. There is much in these 1st-century circumstances that reminds us of life in

Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.

JEREMIAH 22:3 (NRSVUE)



Palestine today, under the occupation of a 21st-century empire.

Western interpretations of biblical texts have distorted our beliefs. Jesus, the incarnation of God's peace, is seen as neutral. Yet, we forget to look at Jeremiah's call of justice and *sumud*—steadfastness.

Jeremiah's words ask the king to repent as he sits on David's throne. As injustice continues to unfold in the land. As pain trembles through the bodies of the widows, the orphans, and the migrants. We have to remember the importance of acting justly, loving mercifully, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

Our actions today must reflect God's love. If our actions are not embedded in the words of Jeremiah, then we have failed to love.

Unfortunately, the church—which is supposed to be the source of love and relief—has failed

in its calling. It has become complicit in the genocide of our people. Instead of acting with justice and righteousness, it has been an active source of oppression.

During this Advent season, we remember the arrival of the gospel and the incarnation of the Word fleeing from the persecution of Herod. And we ask, “What if Jesus was born in Gaza?”

Lord,

Glory to you in the highest. We plead and we beg on our knees: Let your Holy Spirit fall on Palestine instead of rockets. Let your tears nourish the land, instead of ours. Let your holy fire burn the hatred, not the tents. Let your blood on the cross spill on the ground and make the land holy again. Lord, have mercy.

Lord, we hope you can hear the screams of the wounded from your throne, loud and clear as we hear them from here. May you raise the souls of the people who were lost, bring consolation to the broken hearts, and let love travel through their veins. Provide comfort for the mourning and justice for the meek.

Let us remember to act with justice and righteousness. Let us deliver from the hand of the oppressors, all who have been robbed of their grace their humanity, and their souls. Let the orphans, the widows, and the uprooted find comfort in your rod and staff. And Lord, let us feel your love once again.

Amen

Jesus, the deliverer of the gospel and the restorer of humanity, was born in a manger surrounded by the injustice of the Roman Empire. Today, we remember every child who was born and murdered in Palestine, where mothers give birth on the rubble of their demolished houses and tents. Their tears fall on the soil, nourishing the land with anguish and resentment. Their children's bodies are crushed by the weight of demolitions and despair. Burnt on the tents of misery and agony. Palestinian bodies are fleeing into Egypt, yet their hearts remain in Gaza.

Though their bodies do not remain in the land, the land, imprinted with their memories, calls out their names. The land, soaked with innocent blood, yells, "Why did you leave me?"

Jeremiah's words—"Do not shed innocent blood in this place"—have been forgotten. The blood of innocent people has spilled in this place. It makes me wonder, why do we still call it a "Holy" Land?

During this Advent season, we remember the arrival of the gospel and the incarnation of the Word fleeing from the persecution of Herod. And we ask, "What if Jesus was born in Gaza? Would he be born under the rubble? Burn in the tents? Flee from persecution?"

The good news has arrived. Yet, the bad news remains as we continue to see suffering in the unholy land.



DEC 11

THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS

MARK 1:1



By

Dr. Yousef Kamal AlKhouri

Dr. AlKhouri is Christian Arab Palestinian theologian and activist. He was born in Gaza to a Christian family that has a long heritage of serving in the priesthood of the Greek Orthodox Church. He is married to Merna and they live in Bethlehem, Palestine. In 2007, Dr. AlKhouri published his first poetry collection under the title *You are Not My Beloved*. Dr. AlKhouri is Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies at Bethlehem Bible College, as well as a board member of Kairos Palestine, Christ at the Checkpoint, and the Academic Alliance for Interfaith Dialogue in Palestine.

The word “gospel” is widely interpreted as the “good news.” For many Christians, this mainly refers to God becoming human to save people spiritually. While this is true and deeply important, the gospel is much more than that. It embodies God’s vision for the renewal of humanity and creation, where God takes on our flesh to experience both our joy and pain, standing in solidarity with the brokenness of humanity to make it whole again.

In the first century, the term “gospel” was used to announce the installation of a new Roman emperor, symbolizing the power and dominance of the empire. Roman emperors were venerated, sometimes even divinized. Mark’s Gospel begins with a bold declaration, challenging the notion that Augustus Caesar, hailed as the son of god, brought the “good news.”

The gospel of Jesus, the true Son of God, stands in direct contrast to the gospel of Rome



*“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ,
the Son of God.”*

MARK 1:1 (NRSVA)

and Caesar. It opposes the empire’s narrative of power and control with the love and humility of God’s kingdom, rejecting violence and achieving victory through nonviolent prophetic resistance.

Today, the spirit of the Roman Empire still thrives in the form of modern empires. For Palestinian Christians, Israeli settler-colonialism represents such an empire. For decades, it has presented itself as the good news, promising order and civilization to the region. Yet the so-called “good news” of this empire has brought disorder, death, and the exploitation of the land and its people.

Even more disturbingly, during the genocide in Gaza, Israel’s military deployed an AI weapon named “The Gospel” to kill Palestinian civilians and destroy homes—a chilling distortion of the true gospel.

In response to this, Palestinian Christians remain steadfast, holding firm to the true gospel of Jesus and working tirelessly toward

healing and justice. They take Jesus seriously, following his example of prophetic resistance against injustice.

As we enter the Advent season, we are invited to delve deeper into the meaning of Jesus’s gospel. It counters the imperial gospel of power and domination with a message rooted in justice and love. The true good news of this season is that God is with the weeping parents and children of Gaza and Palestine, and every place where injustice exists.

In this season we remember that God is with the meek and the oppressed—that even God becomes one of them.

Lord,

Immanuel, who is with us, we declare that You are the meek and peaceful king of our world. We repent for distorting and overlooking the deeper meaning of Your good news and for confusing it with the empire’s message. Help us to live and embody Your gospel, imitating You in our lives and in the world.

Amen

DEC 12

PROCLAIMING TRUTH

LUKE 1:46-55



By

**Rev. Dr. Crystal
Silva-McCormick**

Rev. Dr. Crystal Silva-McCormick is Visiting Assistant Professor of Evangelism and Mission at Austin Presbyterian Seminary. Her research focuses on the intersections of Christianity, imperialism, and colonialism, particularly as it relates to Euro-American Christian missions and Christian Zionism. Crystal is originally from El Paso, Texas. She is a scholar with the Hispanic Theological Initiative and an ordained minister in the United Churches of Christ. She is on the leadership of Christians for a Free Palestine (CFP) and has served as a pastor, chaplain, and activist, working in solidarity with immigrant communities.

Mary's prophetic Magnificat bears witness to the truth. She bears prophetic witness to the truth about who God is. God sends the powerful away empty! God lifts up the humble!

Mary is clear that God resides with the vulnerable and marginalized—those who the empires of this world seek to crush under their heels. Mary's prophetic witness causes the powerful to tremble, which is why so many are unwilling to speak the truth about Palestine.

For over a year now, we have bore witness to the powerful waging of an ongoing genocide against the people of Palestine in Gaza. The genocide in Gaza has opened the door for

And Mary said:

*“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who
are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham
and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”*

LUKE 1:46-55 (NIV)



buried truths to surface, including the truth that the genocide is an extension of life under occupation that Palestinians have endured for decades.

Yet the truth about the occupation of Palestine and the genocide in Gaza has been difficult for so many Christians to take in, particularly Christians in the West. These truths challenge many of the ideas Western Christians have been taught to hold dear: that one’s loyalty lies with the powerful—with the nation over the gospel. That violence is the only way to achieve peace and security, the safety of some matters more than others, that Palestinian lives simply do not matter.

This Advent, we give thanks for Mary’s Magnificat. Her prophetic words open our eyes to the truth about God, about empires, and the powerful who rule them. The truth about God gives us hope, courage, and direction because we know where to find God: among the powerless, the vulnerable, among those that

empires seek to dehumanize and crush under their heels.

May we muster the courage to bear witness as Mary does in her Magnificat. To proclaim the truth about who God is and where God resides—amongst the vulnerable of this world.

Siblings in Christ, the truth makes the powerful tremble, and Mary reminds us to speak boldly and with courage! May we find the courage to bear prophetic witness and to see God in Gaza, in occupied Palestine, the birthplace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

God,

*Whose mercy extends to all those who fear you.
May you create in us humble hearts that are open
to remembering the truth about who you are. This
Advent, may we heed Mary’s prophetic words and
seek you amongst the vulnerable and the
marginalized of this world. In the name of Jesus,
whose very name causes the powerful to tremble,*

Amen

DEC 13

GOD SHOWS NO PARTIALITY

ACTS
10:25-35



By

Anton Deik

Anton (Tony) Deik is a member of the Networking Team and Board of

Directors of the International Fellowship for Mission as Transformation, Lecturer in Biblical Studies for Bethlehem Bible College, and Research Associate at the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence, U.K. A Palestinian Christian from Bethlehem, Tony has lived and ministered in several different contexts over the last thirteen years, including in the Philippines, Hong Kong, England, Palestine, and Bolivia. Tony is married to Sara Amestegui Deik, and they have a six-year-old daughter, Nour Sofia.

The early church grappled with something comparable to Christian Zionist theology.

As Jewish believers, early Christians were impacted by the strong nationalist theology of Second Temple Judaism. Like other Jewish sects of their time (see Matt 3:7-9), they thought of themselves as special because of their ethnicity. Therefore, at the beginning, they did not fully understand that the gospel included gentiles.

This is why in the first nine chapters of the book of Acts we do not see the gospel reaching the gentiles. The first evangelistic sermon to the gentiles does not occur until Acts 10, in the house of a Roman centurion by the name of Cornelius. This story, commonly known as the “conversion of Cornelius,” tells us also of another conversion: Peter’s.

On Peter's arrival, Cornelius met him and, falling at his feet, worshiped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled, and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?"



Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say."

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does justice is acceptable to him."

ACTS 10:25-35 (AUTHOR'S TRANSLATION)

Before Peter could even start declaring the good news about Jesus to Cornelius and his household, he needed to profess the following: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does justice is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35).

This theological statement is not new; Deuteronomy taught that God is not partial (Deut 10:17). Therefore, Peter's assertion is a type of theological repentance—a return to the right conception of God:

1. that God is not tribal,
2. that God does not show favoritism, and
3. that anyone who does justice is acceptable to him.

This kind of repentance is a prerequisite to the proclamation of God's love to the world.

Now, although Christian Zionism might be comparable in some ways to what could be considered a racist theology initially espoused by early Christians, Christian Zionism is much more dangerous.

First, early Christians did not use their ethnocentric theology to legitimize killing and ethnic cleansing. Second, they did not place their theology in the service of imperial agendas that sharply contradicted Jesus's ethics. On the contrary, early Christians were a persecuted minority, including by the Romans (and remember, Cornelius was a Roman centurion). Yet, even this non-colonial and non-imperial ethnocentric theology needed to be discarded for the advancement of the gospel! How much more, then, does a racist theology used to legitimize ethnic cleansing and settler-colonial apartheid, 2,000 years after Peter's proclamation, need to be thrown away?

If the early church had to remove its non-colonial and non-imperial ethnocentric theology for the progress of the gospel, we surely need to get rid of Christian Zionism in all its forms, shapes, and colors, if we are serious about the gospel. If God's love and goodness are to be proclaimed to the world, then the removal of Christian Zionism from our midst is an imperative.



DEC 14

TENT OF NATIONS

MATTHEW 5:43-45



By
Shane Claiborne

Shane Claiborne is a prominent speaker, activist, and best-selling author. He heads up Red Letter Christians, a movement of folks who are committed to living “as if Jesus meant the things he said.” Shane is a champion for grace and non-violent, Christ-centered activism and advocacy, which has led him to jail (for advocating for the homeless) and lands riven by war, as well as conferences and festivals as a sought-after speaker.

There’s a Christ-centered community in the West Bank known as the Tent of Nations.

They put a name and a face on the conflict. They are Palestinian Christians who have lived simple lives off the land for generations. But over the past couple of decades, Israeli settlements have been built all around them, and the Israeli government has tried to take their land. Unlike most families who have lived in communal handshake agreements on land deals, the Nassar family actually have deeds going back over a hundred years that prove they own their land, which made things tricky for the Israeli government.

As the Nassar family continued living on their land, a new strategy evolved—harassment. Olive trees were uprooted. Piles of boulders



“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

MATTHEW 5:43-45 (NRSVUE)

were dumped on the road leading to their home so they couldn't get vehicles in and out.

Even though they owned the land, they were refused permits for electricity and water. So they went off the grid, using solar power and collecting rain water. When they were refused building structure permits for their home, they started building underground.

It is one of the most inspirational stories of persistent love and Christ-driven nonviolence. At the front of their property is a sign that reads: “We refuse to be enemies.”

After their olive trees were uprooted, a Jewish group caught wind of it and came to help them replant them all. One story after another of reconciliation.

One final attempt was made to buy them out: the Israeli government offered them a blank check, telling them to name their price for their land, however many millions of dollars it might be. But the Nassar family said, “No, there is no price.” They continue to live there

and have gotten to know their neighbors. At one point they invited one of the Israeli settlers to dinner. When she came into their house, she started weeping and said, “You have no water and we have swimming pools. Something is wrong.”

And when asked how they retain hope in the midst of such injustice, they simply say, “Jesus” with a big smile.



God of Love,

Give us the courage to choose faith over fear, and love over hatred. Help us to believe that your mercy is big enough to transform our enemies into friends. May we live into your vision of a world where we beat our swords into plows, our guns into garden tools, and study war no more. In the name of the Prince of Peace, Jesus,

Amen



DEC 15

STREAMS OF TEARS

LAMENTATIONS
2:11; 3:46–50



By

Jumana Salfiti

Jumana Salfiti is a fourth-year Bachelor of Arts student, focusing

on the Bible and Theology, at Bethlehem Bible College. She calls the college the Oasis, not just because of the space, but because everyone is more than welcomed by staff and others who work there.

I have read these verses many times before, but it feels different when I go through them today. It is as though I am reading them for the first time. These words speak out on my behalf.

The lines are not clear—I am not able to see the words and letters of the verses, because streams of tears flow from my eyes. The fear is real and so is the sorrow.

Reading isn't the same as experiencing. Nowadays, I am living the words of Jeremiah. His words, "I called on your name from the depth of the pit," draw me to the deepest part of my sad soul.

Yes, it's true. This is not a flight of imagination or fake feeling. Horror and fear surround me as I watch how evil humans can be. How cruel armed soldiers are—heartless weapon holders—mocking and laughing

*My eyes fail from weeping,
I am in torment within;
my heart is poured out on the ground
because my people are destroyed,
because children and infants faint
in the streets of the city...*

LAMENTATIONS 2:11 (NIV)

*All our enemies have opened their mouths
wide against us.*

*We have suffered terror and pitfalls,
ruin and destruction.”*

*Streams of tears flow from my eyes
because my people are destroyed.*

*My eyes will flow unceasingly,
without relief.*

until the Lord looks down from heaven and sees.

LAMENTATIONS 3:46-50 (NIV)



loudly, celebrating their deadly, bloody achievements.

Destruction and ruin are everywhere. My mind is restless. My nights are dark and sleepless “because my people are destroyed.”

What a nightmare!

Witnessing death, hearing cries, make the joy leave the heart. Oh Lord, have mercy.

In the darkest nights I raise my eyes and hands to the heavens above, pleading for the sake of the fainting children, the infants cold and starving. The orphans and homeless.

In the middle of my grief, I pray to my Lord: “Test me and examine my ways, help me to return to you, I lift my heart and put it in your arms, for I have sinned, I repent, I confess and regret, because my faith in you my Lord had gone, my trust in you had faded.”

“Yet this I call to the mind
and therefore I have hope:
Because of the Lord’s great love we are not
consumed,
for his compassions never fail.”
(Lamentations 3:21-22)

***Destruction and
ruin are
everywhere. My
mind is restless.
My nights are
dark and
sleepless
“because my
people are
destroyed.”***

Lord,

“Yet this I call to the mind and therefore I have hope: consumed, for his compassions never fail.

They are new ever morning; great is your faithfulness.

I say to myself, “The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.”

The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;

It is good to wait quietly, for the salvation of the Lord.”

Lamentations 3:22- 26

Yes, my Lord, help me in all ways, because I seek you with all of my heart. I ask you to strengthen my faith and attract me to you, so that I can understand and accept your righteousness and wisdom.

Amen

Although it looks hopeless, amongst all the destruction and chaos, there is light at the end of the long and dark tunnel. Though it seems endless, I am not left without hope.

My daily duty is to remind myself of God’s promises.

This is my faith—my Lord will not cast me off forever. He shows compassion in times of sadness and grief. He “comforts all who mourn...bestows on them a crown of beauty

instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning and the garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” (Isaiah 61:2-3)

Yes, I believe my Lord hears each and every scream.

Yes, I believe He sees even the things I do not see.

My Lord comes near me and whispers in my ear, “Do not fear.”

DEC 16

DO NOT

BE AFRAID

LUKE
2:10-11



By
**Rev. Dr.
Mitri Raheb**

Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb is the Founder and President of Dar al-Kalima University in Bethlehem. The most widely published Palestinian theologian to date, Dr. Raheb is the author and editor of 50 books including *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes* and *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible*. For more, visit: www.mitriraheb.org

A few weeks ago, I was meeting with Christian leaders from the Middle East. Although each one of us came from a different context, it was nevertheless clear that one single theme was common in all our deliberations: Fear.

The Jewish settler attacks in the West Bank, the daily deadly Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon, the instability in Syria and Iraq, and the news about an escalating regional war between Israel and Iran are making Christians very fearful about their future. Fear seems to be the mark of our time.

Yet, the fears of our Palestinian people in Gaza are beyond comprehension.

Half of the population in Gaza are children. In only 16 years, most of these children have been through five wars in addition to the current ongoing genocide. A child born in

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

LUKE 2:10-11 (NRSVA)



2007 experienced the first Israeli assault when he was two years old, the second when he was five, the third when he was seven, the fourth and fifth when he was a teenager of fourteen/fifteen years old, and at age 16 the current genocide. Such a child saw his home bombed, his sibling murdered in airstrikes, his neighborhood in rubble.

He has been displaced twelve times and can't sleep from the constant sounds of drones, airstrikes, and shelling.

We had a university campus in Gaza. It was destroyed by an Israeli airstrike during Holy Week this year. We have 36 staff, all of them displaced. They refuse to surrender to fear. They are determined to do something against the fear, the trauma, the depression. They volunteer daily, reaching out to the thousands of displaced children around them with art therapy programs so that the children can heal — at least partially.

We will still pass through troubled waters, but when we pass through troubled waters, he will be there with us and for us so that the powerful rivers will not overwhelm us. We will continue to experience fire, yet when we walk through fire, the flame shall not consume us.

Lord,

Thank you for giving us the power to live with, and despite, our fears. Thank you for granting us the gift of resilience. Thank you that fear shall have no power over us because you are there for us.

We pray for the children in Gaza.

We pray for the people of Palestine, Lebanon and the entire Middle East. We pray for the end of the Israeli occupation, for a just peace in the region, for an end to all wars.

Send us into our world so that we can be agents of liberation and healing.

Amen

The experience of our volunteers in Gaza opened for me a new understanding of “Do not be afraid!” Jesus came to save us from fears that paralyze us. Does this mean that we are saved from trouble and wars? Not at all.

We will still pass through troubled waters, but when we pass through troubled waters, he will be there with us and for us, so that the powerful rivers will not overwhelm us. We will continue to experience fire, yet when we walk through fire, the flame shall not consume us. God makes us resilient.

“Do not be afraid, I will make you resilient!”
“Do not be afraid, a savior is born!” Savior

stands for liberator. The angels promised liberation and freedom for a people under Roman occupation. Our people are asking for nothing more than freedom and liberation from occupation.

As Christians we need to challenge the necropolitics of our time—all politics that keep creating death worlds and the military industries that keep benefiting from wars. It is not enough to call for a ceasefire. We need to be God’s instrument of liberation, striving towards a world without wars so that the children in Gaza can live their childhood, and the Christians in the Middle East not only survive, but thrive.

DEC 17

I WILL BE WITH YOU

ISAIAH 43:1-2



By

**Shireen
Awwad Hilal**

Shireen Awwad Hilal is the Director of Bethlehem Bible College Community & Outreach. She works with women and is involved in ministry that works for rights/reconciliation and leadership. Shireen has a BA in English Literature from Bethlehem University, an MA Degree in Educational Administration from Texas A & M University, and a Masters of Business from Sofaer International at Tel Aviv University.

This reading from Isaiah 43 is such a comfort in the distress of the difficult times in which we live.

The incarnation, which we celebrate at Christmas (the Feast of the Incarnation), remembers the time when God chose to come and live among His people, in the form of a man—Jesus. Our great comfort is that God knows and understands our human situation.

God is here with us still, and shares in our griefs and sorrows, as well as our joys.

My mother is from Gaza, and her family is still there. I have already spoken of an aunt and uncle who were killed while sheltering in the

*But now, this is what the Lord says,
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.”*



ISAIAH 43:1-2 (NIV: ABRIDGED)

Holy Family Parish Church in northern Gaza. The church was shelled by Israeli forces, and a number of people were killed. Some others were wounded.

My aunt Najwa was one of the wounded. She was seriously wounded and required a hip replacement. This operation had to be performed with no anaesthetic or pain relief. She lived with quite severe pain for almost a year, before again undergoing surgery. She is now in a wheelchair. We pray for her recovery. As a family, we just hold on to faith that God is with her, that her pain will ease, and she will recover. The care she needs is hard to find at times such as these—with Gaza under constant bombardment.

We must hold on to our belief in a loving God as revealed in the reading from Isaiah. We must hold on to our faith in God, in Jesus Christ, who revealed the extent of God’s love, even unto death. We know God is with us—

Emmanuel—as real to us today as when the angel proclaimed God’s plan to Mary, the holy birth as prophesied by the prophet Isaiah, and quoted in the Gospel According to Matthew:

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son,
and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).
(Matthew 1:23)

Lord Jesus Christ,

We thank you for your constant presence among us—sharing in our joys and in our sorrows. You understand the worst pain and grief we can go through, because you have been there.

We pray for your healing touch on those who suffer pain and grief. We pray in your holy name,

Amen

DEC 18

I WILL GIVE YOU REST

MATTHEW
11:28-30



By
**Virgini
Nabil Isid**

Virgini Nabil Isid has a Bachelor of Arts with majors in English Language and Literature from Bethlehem University. She served as the Director of the “Building A Better World Association” for eight years and currently works as a teacher’s assistant at the Evangelical Lutheran School. Virgini has been married for 21 years and has three sons.

In light of the difficult living conditions that we, the Palestinian people, are experiencing in the West Bank and Gaza, this verse is an important reminder of where we will find refuge.

These days it is tempting to turn to countries that help and support the Palestinian people, but we can forget to seek refuge and draw closer to God. God alone, and no one else, is our refuge in times of hardship. When we pray to God in times of hardship, we receive His abundant and many blessings, and He alone helps us remove the troubles, burdens and worries of life.

All around us we see families greatly affected by the shortage of work caused by the war. Those in the tourism sector, such as owners of oriental antique shops, olive wood shops, and hotels, are drowning in debts and loans. When we read this verse, we think of these tired and heavy-laden ones, who are unable to secure

"Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

MATTHEW 11:28-30 (NRSVUE)



the needs of their families and children. They feel frustrated and under great pressure, as their thoughts turn to emigrating from their beloved and wounded homeland.

We must not forget our steadfast people in the honorable Gaza Strip, and the painful days they are living under the ongoing Israeli aggression against them. Despite their pain and the loss of the people dearest to their hearts—the martyrdom of their children and relatives—and the lack of the basic necessities of life, such as food and drinkable water, we are amazed by their strength and their steadfast adherence to God. They demonstrate the strength of their faith and their closeness to God through prayer every moment and minute they live.

Here we see the role of our strong faith in God—through prayer and drawing closer to Him, we find our greatest comfort in Him. For God, despite the difficulties, is always present with us and extends His arms to us. He tells us to

throw down our burdens and come to Him. With His blessed hand, He removes all fatigue and difficulties from us and gives us His yoke instead. True faith is not without cost, but those who walk in the path of the Lord find comfort, joy, and peace in Him. When the Lord places His strong hand in your weak hand, you can cover the distance, no matter how far, and endure earthly life, no matter how hard, to reach the gates of eternity and the happiness of heaven.

Lord Jesus,

We ask you to cast a compassionate look on this Palestinian country which belongs to you more than any other country, because you blessed it with your birth and sanctified it with your death and resurrection.

Amen

DEC 19

CHRIST IN OUR HEARTS

1 TIMOTHY 3:16



By
Rula Rishmawi

Rula Rishmawi is the mother of three children and grandmother of two beautiful girls. She graduated from Bethlehem Bible College in 2002 and has a Masters in Psychological and Educational Counseling. She was a Christian Education teacher for 20 years, and is now the Students' Affairs Coordinator and a lecturer at Bethlehem Bible College.

Millions around the world celebrate the birth of Lord Jesus Christ.

The ways of celebration differ from one community to another, with some having various customs and traditions for the festivities. Many people exchange gifts and hold family gatherings. Many churches organize Christmas celebrations to highlight the main reason for these annual festivities, which is the birth of Lord Jesus Christ and His coming into our world.

So what is the benefit of celebrating Christmas without acknowledging the one for whom the holiday exists? While people sing about the



“And without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh...”

1 TIMOTHY 3:16 (KJV)

birth of our Lord Jesus Christ and His first coming into the world, there is something even more worthy of our praise and celebration throughout our lives: the birth of Christ in our hearts.

It is remarkable that God chose to reveal Himself to humanity in a way that we can understand—through the incarnation. Yet what is even more astonishing is that the infinite God chose to dwell in the hearts of limited human beings.

By human nature, we are first born as fallen beings and we remain in this state until we accept the saving work of Christ in our lives.

He gives us a second spiritual birth that frees us from the judgment of our sins and transfers us into His kingdom. “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Colossians 1:13).

Isn't it strange that during Christmas, most of us give gifts to everyone except the glorious person whose birth we are celebrating?

It is remarkable that God chose to reveal Himself to humanity... through the incarnation. Yet, what is even more astonishing is that the infinite God chose to dwell in the hearts of limited human beings.

Lord,

We offer our hearts as a gift to you this Christmas season. We do not come before you empty-handed; instead, we follow the example of the wise men who “came and worshiped” you. They opened their treasures and presented their gifts to you, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We offer ourselves to you today. We offer our hearts and our hands, our minds and our bodies. Enter our hearts, Lord Jesus.

Amen

We should ask ourselves this question: What will I give to the Lord Jesus this Christmas season? Our Lord and Savior is worthy of the best and most precious things that we possess. In fact, He is worthy of everything we possess, for He has given us Himself.

But what is the precious thing we have that we should offer Him without reservation? It is our hearts. This is essentially what He asks for: “My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways” (Proverbs 23:26).

This is for our own good and benefit, both in this life and in the eternal one. The Lord Jesus desires our hearts; He does not seek material gifts, for these will not bring Him joy if our hearts are not His. He wants all of us, with no

sharing: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5).

The true meaning of the birth of Lord Jesus Christ is still overlooked by many! They do not know who Christ is! They do not realize that He came to save us and to take our sins far away! While millions of people around the world celebrate the anniversary of Christ’s birth, it seems that few understand the real significance of His coming into our world.

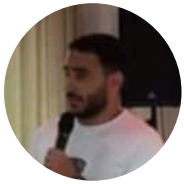
We know that the birth of Christ was a miraculous sign, not only because He was born of a virgin but also because the child born in Bethlehem was none other than God manifest in human flesh.



DEC 20

A SERVANT KING

MATTHEW
2:2



By
**Khaled
Dally**

Khaled Dally is completing a Bachelor degree at Bethlehem Bible College. He lives in Jerusalem where he is undergoing ordination training in the Episcopal Church.

“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” the magi asked Herod. A special star had appeared, signaling a king had come into the world, so it would be logical to assume this king had been born in a palace.

Yet, the magi’s question suggests they were curious: Where was this king?

From the moment of his birth until the day Jesus ascended to heaven, he turned people’s expectations upside down. The king who should have been born in a palace was instead born humble in a manger.

Through his teachings and miracles, Jesus transformed people’s understandings: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). He provided deeper spiritual insight: “You have heard that it was said to the ancients, ‘Do not murder; and



“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

MATTHEW 2:2 (ESV)

whoever murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.” (Matthew 5:21-22)

He transformed the lives of those who accepted him: sinners and wrongdoers became saints and evangelists, tax collectors began to distribute money. He fought against the enmity that existed between Jews and Samaritans, sat with sinners and outcasts considered unclean by society, and restored the dignity of women. In doing so, Jesus also restored the dignity of humanity.

He taught us how to be human in the image of God. He showed us the essence of our humanity and how we should be; who our neighbors are and how we should treat them — “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:39). He taught us to act with unconditional love and mercy toward those who are marginalized and broken-hearted. He

taught us to be peacemakers on this earth amidst conflicts, persecution, and injustice. To help those who are oppressed— not through violence, but through loving our

From the moment of His birth until the day Jesus ascended to heaven, he turned people’s expectations upside down. The king who should have been born in a palace was instead born humble in a manger.

Lord,

Let us be like your son, Jesus Christ.

Let him dwell in our hearts, fill us with the abundance of his peace, and change us to walk in his ways—with love, faithfulness, and speaking the truth.

Make us like the star that leads people to You, O loving, just, and merciful God.

In Your love You sent Your only son to us and for us, so that we could be returned to You through the cross. Therefore, Lord, we raise our thanks and praise to You, who deserves all glory and honor, and we ask, Lord, that You grant us peace in this time—a peace in which humanity coexists with fellow humanity in love, supporting one another.

Amen

enemies and praying for them so that their hearts might be changed. To strive for justice—not the justice of the world, but the justice of God that returns humanity to Him and changes hearts and souls. For He is the Lord and King of peace, justice, and mercy.

He taught us service, born from the love for our fellow human beings, and helped people to grow in faith: “He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.’” (Mark 9:35). Jesus himself, the heavenly king, came to serve and save the world: “Just as the

Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28).

In the shadow of difficult circumstances, at a time when the principles of humanity seem to have vanished and evil and injustice abound, God shines His light into the world through His faithful children who work according to His will. Those who have accepted Christ and have allowed the Holy Spirit to change and transform their lives are like the star that guided the magi to worship the living God, Jesus Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords.

DEC 21

REFLECTING JESUS

ISAIAH 61:1-5



By
Costandi Bastoli

Costandi Bastoli, a Palestinian Christian, serves on the board of

directors for Palestinian Christians in Australia (PCiA). Born in Jerusalem, he lived there for 21 years before migrating to Australia with his family. A founding member of the Disciples of Jesus Covenant Community, Costandi has ministered in healing for over 40 years across Australia, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines. He authored *Jesus Heals Today* (2020). Married to Barbara, they reside in the Blue Mountains, NSW, with five children and seven grandchildren.

This Advent season, as we wait expectantly, preparing for both the celebration of Christ's nativity in Bethlehem and His return at the Second Coming, let us reflect on Isaiah 61:1-5.

Jesus quoted this prophecy in Luke 4:18-19, identifying himself as its fulfilment. During his first coming, Jesus stood in solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed:

- He preached good news to the oppressed (Luke 4:18).
- He healed the broken-hearted (Luke 7:11-17).
- He freed captives and prisoners (Luke 13:10-16).

Jesus assured us, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21). He gave us the

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

ISAIAH 61:1-5 (NRSVA)



same power and authority to continue his mission and prepare for his Second Coming.

When Jesus came in the flesh, he came to save and lay down his life for many. At his Second Coming, he will judge the living and the dead. We will hear him say: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40).

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25:35-36).

Today, the Palestinian people, displaced and oppressed, hungry and thirsty, mourn the slaughter of their loved ones, the loss of their homes and country, and having nowhere to rest their heads. They long for justice, freedom, dignity, and peace.

As we prepare for Jesus' return, let us examine our attitudes and actions: Do we educate ourselves about their struggles? Do we raise our voices in solidarity with them? Do we support organizations promoting justice and peace? Do we pray for justice, peace, and reconciliation?

May our Advent preparation include standing in solidarity with the oppressed, reflecting Jesus' love and compassion.

Lord,

As we await your Second Coming, help us recognize your presence in the oppressed. We pray for the suffering of the Palestinian people to end and for a just and lasting peace to reign in this troubled land. Anoint us with your Holy Spirit and grant us courage to stand in solidarity, advocating for justice and human rights. Empower us to raise our voices against injustice and oppression. May our actions reflect your love and compassion.

Amen

DEC 22

TO WORSHIP IN JUSTICE & HOLINESS

LUKE 1:67-75



By

Anton Deik

Anton (Tony) Deik is a member of the Networking Team and Board of

Directors of the International Fellowship for Mission as Transformation, Lecturer in Biblical Studies for Bethlehem Bible College, and Research Associate at the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence, U.K. A Palestinian Christian from Bethlehem, Tony has lived and ministered in several different contexts over the last thirteen years, including in the Philippines, Hong Kong, England, Palestine, and Bolivia. Tony is married to Sara Amestegui Deik, and they have a six-year-old daughter, Nour Sofia.

A key part of Luke's story of Jesus' birth is the famous song or prophecy of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist.

In this prophecy, Zechariah announces that God “has raised up a mighty savior” (1:69) to enable people to worship God “in holiness and justice” (1:74-75). Here, the idea of worship (*latreuō*) is best understood as a holistic way of life, encompassing a right relationship with God and others. This is evident in the concepts of holiness (*hosiotēs*) and justice (*dikaiosynē*) which qualify the type of worship that will be made possible through the advent of Jesus.

For the ancients, holiness (*hosiotēs*) is understood in relation to God, while justice (*dikaiosynē*) pertains to relationships with others. First-century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria expresses this succinctly: “holiness (*hosiotēs*) is to God and justice (*dikaiosynē*) to people” (*On the Life of Abraham*

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his child David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might worship him without fear,
in holiness and justice before him all our days.”

LUKE 1:67-75 (AUTHOR’S TRANSLATION)



208). Similarly for Plato: “When someone does what is fitting with regard to people, his actions will be just (*dikaia*), and with regard to the gods, holy (*hosia*)” (*Gorgias* 507b). In the Old Testament, however, justice and holiness are closely entangled, nearly fused. According to Deuteronomy, God’s people live in justice and holiness (cf. Deut 9:5 LXX) by loving and worshiping God with the whole heart and soul (10:12), so that they can imitate God in extending love and liberative justice to the oppressed (10:17–19).

Zechariah’s prophecy not only intertwines justice and holiness, but also puts the two notions in a markedly liberative context: “that we, being rescued (*rhyomai*) from the hands of our enemies, might worship him without fear, in holiness and justice before him all our days.” The language of liberation here is quite striking. The Greek word “to rescue” (*rhyomai*) has strong liberation connotations; in his Latin translation, Jerome renders the lexeme as *liberō* “to set free, liberate, deliver.”

What does “being liberated to worship God in holiness and justice” mean?

It is clear from Luke–Acts that the “mighty savior” who will liberate his people to worship God is Jesus of Nazareth, whose mission includes proclaiming “liberty to the captives” and setting “the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18). Those who believe in Jesus—i.e., his Church—must follow his example as an integral part of their worship.

Now for those who struggle with the language of justice and liberation—and unfortunately there are many—we say: love (*agapē*)! Jesus simplified things for us by summing up the Old Testament conception of justice in two commandments: love God and love your neighbor. As Jesus said to the teacher of the law: “Do this, and you will live” (Luke 10:28).

Within the narrative of Luke–Acts, we see Zechariah’s prophecy fulfilled most clearly in the life of early Christians, who powerfully

embody Jesus's ethic of love. After the ascension of Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Luke describes how Jesus-followers lived, intertwining holiness and justice in an astonishing way. These Christians were committed to a type of *koinonia* (community) that actualized the commandment to love God and neighbor: they held "everything in common (*koina*)," were dedicated to the apostolic teaching and prayer, practiced need-based wealth distribution, and celebrated the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42-47). They also lived as one "heart and soul" (Acts 4:32)—an expression that echoes the commandment to love God with one's "heart and soul" (Luke 10:27; Deut 6:5). This is a remarkable use of language by Luke to describe how God is to be loved in community: by living in unity, centering the poor and the outcasts, and working for equity (Acts 4:32-35).

Importantly, by worshiping God in holiness and justice, early believers were neither apolitical nor secessionist. Although they proclaimed Jesus, not Caesar, as *kyrios* (Lord), early Jesus-followers did not want to topple Caesar and establish a Christian theocracy. Rather, their political engagement was precisely through worshiping God in holiness and justice, which essentially meant embodying Jesus's ethic of love (i.e., loving God and neighbor). In doing so, the early church offered a way of living and being that subverted Roman imperial structures, including patronage systems, oppressive socio-economic stratification, and merit-based wealth distribution, among other entrenched norms.

What does this mean to us today?

The church of Acts offers us an important

model for political engagement that centers Jesus and his ethics and is inseparable from worship. Just as early Christians embodied Jesus's ethic of love as an integral part of their worship, so too are we called to do the same in our world today.

Someone once overheard me criticizing those who legitimize Israel's war on Gaza. He came to me upset, saying: "So you don't want Hamas to be destroyed?" For Christians like him, support for violence is part of their political contribution to the world. Just kill them, or in the words of Nikki Haley: "Finish them!" In such cases, one can barely notice any distinction between worldly politicians and followers of Jesus; the way of Christ is confused with the way of the world.

To our Christian siblings who are fixated on Hamas, I say: Do you want to dismantle Hamas's Qassam brigades? *Instead of following the ways of the empires of this fallen world, try Jesus.* Try his ethic of love. Try loving the Palestinians as part of your worship of God in holiness and justice. Since you are already involved in the Palestinian question from faraway lands, pressure your governments to remove Israel's brutal occupation and apartheid from the neck of the Palestinians. Believe me, the Palestinians will then not only dismantle the Qassam brigades but also the rest of the Palestinian militias.

You see, *Jesus's ethic of love is God's solution to the problems of the world!* And this ethic is not only applicable to one's private life. It is also applicable to the church, to the *polis* (or the public square), and to our world. Jesus's genius ethic of love works.



DEC 23

THE WORLD IS WATCHING

MATTHEW 25:40



By
**Rev. Dr.
Munther Isaac**

Munther Isaac is a Palestinian Christian pastor and theologian. He now pastors the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem and the Lutheran Church in Beit Sahour. He is also the Academic Dean of Bethlehem Bible College, and is the director of the highly acclaimed and influential Christ at the Checkpoint conferences. Munther is passionate about issues related to Palestinian theology.

The world is watching. Churches are watching. The people of Gaza are sending live images of their own execution. Maybe the world cares, but it goes on.

We are tormented by the silence of the world. And we are outraged by the complicity of the church. Let it be clear, friends: silence is complicity.

This war has confirmed to us that the world does not see us as equal. Maybe it is the color of our skins. Maybe it is because we are on the wrong side of a political equation. Even our kingship in Christ did not shield us.



‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’

MATTHEW 25:40 (NRSVUE)

“It is self-defence,” we are told. And I ask, how is the killing of over 16,000 children self-defence? How is the displacement of 1.9 million Palestinians self-defence? They say, “If it takes killing 100 Palestinians to get a single Hamas militant then so be it.” In the shadow of the empire, they turned the colonizer into the victim, and the colonized into the aggressor.

We are not humans in their eyes, but in God's eyes no one can tell us that.

While the world continues to reject the children of Gaza, Jesus says, “Just as you did to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.” You did it to me. Jesus not only calls them his own, he is them. He is the children of Gaza.

We look at the holy family and see them in every family displaced and wandering, now homeless in despair.

While the world discusses the fate of the people of Gaza as if they are unwanted boxes in a garage, God in the Christmas narrative shares their fate. He walks with them and calls them his own.

Gaza today has become the moral compass of the world.

If you are not appalled by what is happening in Gaza, if you are not shaken to your core, there is something wrong with your humanity.

And if we as Christians are not outraged by the genocide, by the weaponization of the Bible to justify it, there is something wrong with our Christian witness and we are compromising the credibility of our gospel message.

DEC 24

LOVE

BELOVEDS

1 JOHN
4:7-12



By

Dr. Jer Swigart

Dr. Jer Swigart is the Executive Director of Global Immersion, a

non-profit training and consulting organization that forms Everyday Peacemakers and Reconciling Leaders to mend divides. His work takes him into war zones, whether battlefields or boardrooms, where he disarms conflict and guides processes that transform constructed enemies into co-creating allies. Jer is the co-author of *Mending the Divides: Creative Love in a Conflict World* (IVP, 2017).

In 1 John 4:7, we are called “Beloved.” But what makes us beloved? Is this identity contingent on the death and resurrection of Jesus? Are the acts of believing and receiving these gifts a prerequisite? Both? Neither?

In the Gospel of Mark, we encounter Jesus dripping with the waters of baptism. We find him standing under severed heavens, receiving Spirit’s descent and hearing a familiar voice. This baptismal severing, like the tearing of the curtain in the temple upon Jesus’ crucifixion, offered new access to Creator. Spirit’s descent took the appearance of a dove: the sacred symbol of repair. And the voice declared Jesus’ identity as “Beloved.”

Jesus, a God-fearing Jew, was named “Beloved” before he had done anything. This divine declaration was contingent upon nothing but God’s desire to love him so.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

1 JOHN 4:7-12 (NRSVUE)



Friend, you too are declared beloved not because of anything that you have done (or not done), but because God wants to.

What's the quality of this love?

It's not a general kind of love that God has for the entire world...the kind that gives life, breath, rain, food, protection, etc. Rather, the quality of this love is found in an only child who is the sole recipient of all the extravagant love of both parents. Here lies the unspeakable experience of being beloved: God lavishes love on all of us as though each of us are God's only.

It's in the quality of God's love that we also find it's scope: you, your friends, your others, your irritants, and your enemies are the full recipients of God's extravagant love.

What's the response of one loved so extravagantly?

She replicates what she knows, not to

accumulate more belovedness, but as a response to it. As we embrace our belovedness, our impulse is to love as extravagantly as we have been loved.

**We who embrace
our belovedness
cannot help
extending
extravagant,
sacrificial love to
others, even those
who exist beyond
the reach of our
empathy.**



Lord,

Deepen our humility to embrace our belovedness.

Grant us courage to respond with barrier-breaking, expanse-eliminating love.

Do so until the watching world experiences the extravagance of your love.

Amen

But who are we supposed to love so extravagantly?

Today's passage indicates that we are to extend love to "one another," which at first glance might seem to be insider language for those who are "just like me."

I'm all about growing the muscle of the church to love one another sacrificially and sacramentally. And, I'm painfully aware that wars are being fought over limited understandings of who is beloved and whom we can disregard, exclude, or even eliminate.

Every tradition builds walls around who is beloved and worthy of affection and who is not. *Jesus stands alone in dismantling all of the human-made boundaries of love.* For he is the only one to take anyone beyond rigid, conveniently homogenous understandings of neighbor love to enemy love.

We who embrace our belovedness cannot help ourselves from extending extravagant, sacrificial love to others, even to those who exist beyond the reach of our empathy.

Perhaps *this* is our revolutionary contribution.



DEC 25

CHRIST IN THE RUBBLE

In 2023, Red Letter Christians partnered with artist Kelly Latimore of Kelly Latimore Icons to create the “Christ in the Rubble” icon used in this devotional. This icon echoes the prophetic message found throughout these pages: if Jesus was born today, he would be born “under the rubble.”

A year ago, Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac created a nativity with the baby Jesus buried in the rubble on the alter of his church in Bethlehem, and delivered a Christmas sermon that has now been heard by millions of people around the globe.

Over the past year, because of the generosity, compassion, and outrage of people around the world, Red Letter Christians sent over \$120,000 to Gaza and the West Bank for humanitarian relief and peacebuilding efforts.

We launched a fundraiser with artist Kelly Latimore Icons, where individuals could receive a limited-edition signed print of Latimore’s “Christ in the Rubble” icon after making a donation of \$100 or more. More than 1,000 individuals contributed over \$100,000 in less than a week.

Kelly wants his art to be a ‘holy pondering’ —a process that brings about a new way of seeing. Our hope is that the “Christ in the Rubble” icon and this devotional have created more dialogue among Christians during this holy season about the ways our beliefs and actions—or lack thereof—contribute to the violence our sisters and brothers are experiencing in Gaza. How can we shape a culture of Christianity where love truly has no boundaries? How do we create a world where our poor, homeless, refugee, Palestinian Savior—born to a teenage mother and later condemned to death—would be cherished had he been born today?

More info can be found on our site here:
<https://www.redletterchristians.org/red-letter.../>



TAKE ACTION

Scripture says, “Faith without works is dead.” We need to be people of prayer and people of action.

There are lots of ways we can take action, and we don’t want to limit your imagination. But let us all commit to do SOMETHING.

Take a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with [Telos](#) or [Sabeel](#). Take a class with [Bethlehem Bible College](#). Join us on marches and vigils and direct actions. Pray - Preach - Organize for peace. Do good theology to counter the bad theology. Contact your legislators and ask them to stop funding war. Divest from corporations and organizations profiting from death. Invest in a Palestinian-led organization. Read the books of people who contributed to this devotional. Check out the Open Letter from Palestinian Christians “A Call for Repentance” —it’s on our website along with a ton of other ideas for how to take action.

www.RedLetterChristians.org

OUR PARTNERS

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www.brightstarsbethlehem.com

Raising awareness and support to educate the next generation of creative leaders in Palestine.



**GLOBAL
IMMERSION**

<https://globalimmerse.org>

Global Immersion forms Everyday Peacemakers and Reconciling Leaders to mend divides.



<https://freedomroad.us>

Freedom Road consults, coaches, trains, and designs experiences that help groups in multiple sectors do justice in just ways.



<https://ccda.org>

For over 30 years Christian Community Development Association has shared the journey of seeing Christians fully engaged in the process of transformation in their communities.