For Nothing Will Be Impossible With God
~ Luke 1:37

Daily Advent Devotional 2012
A response to Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth
front cover:
“Access Denied: Under Military Occupation”
by Palestinian artist Zaki Baboun of Bethlehem
Mary and Joseph portrayed at the Separation Wall of today.
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The IPMN thanks the project coordinators, editors and writers for the hopes expressed for justice in Palestine in this devotional. May they be realized through the power of God working through these advocates.

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In joyful obedience to the call of Christ, and in solidarity with churches and our other partners in the Middle East, this network covenants to engage, consolidate, nourish, and channel the energy in the Presbyterian Church (USA) toward the goal of a just peace in Israel/Palestine by facilitating education, promoting partnerships, and coordinating advocacy. Our network speaks TO the Church not FOR the Church.
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First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2012


Jesus lived when the Roman Empire had recently come to his land and made it part of the empire. The Romans were very cruel to any of those who dared to resist the occupation. Religious authorities in Jerusalem collaborated with the occupation for fear of losing their authority. The Galilee region where Jesus lived was a hot bed of controversy as to how to handle the occupiers from Rome.

Jesus refused to become a part of a revolution movement to oust the Romans. Instead he preached the kingdom of God and God’s goodness. As a teacher of nonviolence, Jesus had difficulty with those who wanted to take up the sword and solve things violently. In this passage from Luke, Jesus warned of the destructive power that seemed very near.

As we look at the complexity of the Palestine/Israel issues today, I am struck by a sense of déjà vu. The West Bank has been the primary target of military occupation since 1967. The Palestinians in the State of Israel are second-class citizens, having lost their land and become internal refugees. One can see parallels between civil and religious authorities, then and now. Collaboration with the occupiers is still one way to preserve leadership. And just as in Jesus’ day, the situation is in danger of boiling over, and the destruction would be harsh and cruel. Jesus recognized this. So must we.

Jesus learned how to survive the occupation and to embrace it as a tool to challenge it. He lost his life in exposing the ugliness of the occupation and its collaborators and revealed a focus on the kingdom of God. Like him, we are called to expose the ugliness of the present day occupation and to denounce those who collaborate, and to focus on God’s coming kingdom.

Richard Toll

Monday, December 3, 2012

Micah 5:2

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah…” Ephrathah means “fruitful.” Why was this unusual wording chosen by the prophet Micah as he addressed his nation? A look at the verses and chapters that preceded this phrase helps us understand that Micah was addressing a nation that was on the brink of collapse. Micah’s announcement was of the coming of hope to a nation that was devastated by the ravages of war and the consequent economic collapse. But he saw hope through the promise of a new leader who would come from Bethlehem. Both Micah and Isaiah predicted the birth of Jesus as God’s answer to the spiritual, political, economic and social challenges of their day.

In time these prophecies were fulfilled. Jesus was born in a humble manger in Bethlehem, and hope exploded on planet earth. Today, masses of women, men, and children in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and in many other places all over our planet feel crushed under the weight of wars and political, social, and economic devastations. Even the modern-day population of Bethlehem faces similar challenges to those described in the book of Micah. Palestinians living in Bethlehem are surrounded by an eight-meter high wall of segregation. Watchtowers and checkpoints mounted with armed soldiers disrupt the flow of their daily lives and ravage their economy. In their distress, the Christians of Bethlehem have learned to turn their eyes to the babe born in the manger and to draw inspiration from him as they celebrate his birth every year with faith and hope. The Church is the bearer of this message of hope. Through both words and actions we demonstrate to the world the power of hope that still erupts out of Bethlehem’s manger. It is still God’s desire that the oppressed people of modern days, like those of old days, hear this message of hope that sprang out of Bethlehem on the first Christmas.

Alex Awad

The Rev. Alex Elias Awad is a missionary of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church serving in Jerusalem and Bethlehem with his wife, Brenda. He pastors an international church in East Jerusalem and teaches courses at Bethlehem Bible College. He is the author of two books on the Arab-Israeli conflict, Through the Eyes of the Victims and Palestinian Memories: The Story of a Palestinian Mother and Her People.
Tuesday, December 4, 2012

Ps. 33, 85, 94, 146; Isaiah 1: 21-31; I Thess. 2: 1-12; Luke 20: 9-18

The lectionary reading for this day gives us the Parable of the Vineyard, written with allegorical elements. A man who owns the land has planted a vineyard and leased it to tenants. After unsuccessful attempts to collect his due, the owner sends his son. The tenants kill the son and hope to gain ownership of the vineyard. The owner comes and destroys the tenants and gives the vineyard to others.

For Luke and others in the early church, the owner in this parable is God; the evil tenants are the elite priesthood at Jerusalem who were regarded by the people in Galilee and other parts of the country as oppressive absentee landlords; the vineyard represents God’s elect people. Luke ends this story with Jesus providing an interpretation from Psalm 118:22-23: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.’ What are we to make of this?

Our Advent/Christmas traditions fit this allegory. A loving God sends prophets to Israel to guide them (the tenants) to justice and righteousness. The prophets are rejected, persecuted, and often killed. Then God’s Son is sent. Jesus is born in a strange and unexpected situation—a barn in a tiny country with peasant parents. He will grow up to be misunderstood, persecuted, and executed by the Roman Empire, the power of that day.

We expect revelations of God to come in holy sanctuaries, learned conclaves of holy scholars, official places we have dedicated to God. What if these places are closed to God’s messages? God uses other ways to enter into the lives of his people. The Palestinian people are being driven out by a powerful Israeli army. Our government has not only closed its eyes and ears to the Palestinians, but has also provided the military means for it to happen.

The Parable of the Vineyard should guide us to the possibilities of God’s acting today in ways that are unexpected, to bring a just peace to the Holy Land. Dare that be our Advent hope and message? In the meanwhile, we must follow the “rejected cornerstone,” the way of Jesus, with eyes and ears open to the possibilities of God’s presence creating a new way to peace. Read all of today’s Scriptures with an expectation of hope.

Rob Coffman
Rev. Rob Coffman is a retired PCUSA minister, member of the Israel/Palestine Mission Network, and lives in Oak Park, IL.
Ps. 50, 53, 147; Isa. 2:1-4

In Psalm 50, God rebukes the wicked for stealing and giving false witness. In Psalm 53, the writer expresses confidence in God’s help for the poor and innocent, even in the face of wickedness and evil. In Psalm 147, the psalmist joins praise of God’s power and wisdom in creation with God’s attention to the lowliest and weak. It ends with “the Lord takes pleasure in those who worship and obey him – in those who hope in his steadfast love.” All of these psalms bring to mind the range of emotions – our anger and frustration with the Israeli government for stealing the Palestinians’ land and falsely claiming it as government property; our confidence that it is God’s will for us to help the Palestinians under the economic and military occupation; our joy in praising God for the strength and hospitality of the Palestinian people and finally, our hopefulness that God is pleased with our work to find justice for our Palestinian brothers and sisters.

In the passage from Isaiah, the writer powerfully evokes a vision of glorified Jerusalem where God shall “judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” As Al Winn wrote in Ain’t Gonna Study War No More, the Bible is ambiguous about war, and the Israeli government and military have their own biblical passages justifying their occupation of Palestine. But as Christians and peacemakers we should strive to hold up this biblical image of a peaceful Jerusalem – a shared international capital for the three monotheistic faiths.

Becky Evans

Becky Evans is the daughter of Methodist minister, New Testament scholar, and Civil Rights/Peace and Justice advocate William R. Farmer; a member of North Decatur Presbyterian Church in Atlanta where she serves as co-chair of Global Mission; participated in Greater Atlanta Presbytery’s trip to Israel/Palestine in February 2008; is a member of the Joining Hands for Justice Partnership; and was a team teacher of the Steadfast Hope curriculum in 2011-2012.
Thursday, December 6, 2012

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Paul’s message to the Thessalonians: fear that his absence and the hardships involved in standing firm in their beliefs may cause the new flock of Christians to lose faith. Unable to return, Paul sent Timothy to them. Timothy tells Paul the flock has stood steadfast despite hardships, and Paul asks the Lord to make their love mount and overflow towards all—that their hearts be firm.

Standing firm in faith despite hardships is a task none of us in our culture is asked to do. We do not experience deprivation, isolation, persecution, as early Christians did. In everyone’s family tree there is no doubt a moment when holding Christian beliefs and living those beliefs meant trouble. They paved the way for us. However, we are exhorted to make our love grow. This is our struggle—to live with love.

In current Palestine, living with love in the face of difficult restrictions on life and livelihood associated with the military occupation brings unique challenges. How to live out the Christian faith of love when frustrating and humiliating circumstances cause great anger and even hatred? Christians in Bethlehem have the leadership of Mitri Raheb who exhorts his flock to live boldly but without hatred—to protest nonviolently the current political situation—with a steadfast devotion to the future. His missional mantra is “Hope is what we do.” While giving sustenance to Bethlehemites through social and educational services, he has faced off against those in power with stern calls to resist through his leadership in producing Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth, a 2009 confession of faith and call to action endorsed by most of the leaders of Churches in Palestine-Israel. He illustrates standing firm in faith that justice will prevail and in using love as a tool to that end.

In seeking justice for Palestinians, can we face our adversaries with love? Love for Israelis who tragically disdain Palestinian rights as they fear for their own survival? Our faith must remain steadfast as we pursue justice. While it is not hard to be Christian in our culture, it is a challenge to be loving. Should Paul be worried about us?

Peg Griffiths

Peg Griffiths is a semi-retired clinical psychologist, who has been committed to educating others about Palestinian rights for over 10 years. She chairs a 38-year old Presbyterian advocacy group in Chicago, and does volunteer work for the Christmas Lutheran program in Bethlehem.
Friday, December 7, 2012

Luke 20:20-26

Speech and words are important. Words may be honest. They may be lies. They may be truth. They may be deceptive. We are in an era of words that are used in all of these ways. Jesus was a master in scoping out how people were using words when they spoke to him. Often his challengers used deception to work him into a corner from which it was hard to save himself.

Most of what is going on these days is a war of words that takes the place of action, action that will bring peace. Words are used to justify non-action. More time is spent trying to understand what is behind the words than suggesting actions that might lead to peace. More time is spent challenging one’s truthfulness, one’s loyalty, and then trying to find actions that will bring about peace.

Words are important but what one does is equally important. Jesus is asked about what he would do. His answer is that one should do what is appropriate. That’s not always easy! We are guided by the framework of love that Jesus teaches. In a conversation with a friend recently, she said that more and more the saying “What would Jesus do?” made sense. I have had the same experience. When we hear admonitions to do this or that, it makes sense as a follower of Jesus to ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do?”

The Israel/Palestine conflict is a great deal about words. We will only know peace if there are genuine words spoken that are loving, followed by actions that reflect honest and loving words. My mother said in her senior high school annual, “I have often regretted my speech but never my silence.” She was very good at showing her love by her actions. Actions can speak louder than words!

David Johnson

David and Polly Johnson are both members of the PC(USA) Israel/Palestine Mission Network Steering Committee. Polly has been to the West Bank 5 times and David 4 times. They have volunteered in The Elderly Center in Beit Sahour, led the 2010 Olive Tree Planting trip for Keep Hope Alive and value meeting with Israeli and Palestinian peace advocates. They have made many friends in Beit Sahour and think of that as their second home.
Saturday, December 8, 2012

Luke 21:5-19

In this passage, Jesus gives his disciples words of encouragement for the hard times that are coming: “Watch out that you are not deceived; . . . they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to . . . prisons. . . . This will give you an opportunity to testify. . . . I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. . . By your endurance you will gain life.”

Words for the trying times that came after Jesus’ crucifixion and the persecutions endured by the early church, which Luke fleshes out in the book of Acts, are just as applicable to trying times in Palestine today.

Palestinians have learned not to be deceived by the promises of Oslo, the peace process that has stretched out for nearly 20 years, which is doing what the Israeli government intended it to do: allow Israel to be “recognized” by the Arab world; create improved security for the state of Israel; and improve Israel’s diplomatic relations around the world; while Israel creates facts on the ground that make it increasingly impossible for a Palestinian state to be created.

No longer deceived by American and Israeli hasbara (propaganda) Palestinians are taking measures into their own hands: applying for recognition at the UN and UN-related agencies, nonviolent demonstrations against apartheid walls that separate Palestinians from their families, schools, work, property, and religious sites; hunger strikes in Israeli prisons holding over 4000 Palestinian prisoners; boycotting Israeli products; inviting international visitors to visit, who when they are turned away by Israeli border guards, testify to the world about the violations of international laws.

The testimony is getting louder and is harder for the world to contradict thanks to the internet and social media. Endurance is the watchword: to exist is to resist.

Melinda Thompson

Melinda is a graduate of Wesley Theological Seminary who works with the Israel/Palestine Mission Network, the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, and the National Capital Presbytery Middle East Concerns Team to promote a peaceful and just resolution to the Palestine-Israeli situation.
As we approach the coming holiday season of celebration with friends and family, how are we to understand the meaning of advent?

From Malachi 3:

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. . . . But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap . . . He will come against “those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice.”

And from Luke 3:

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar . . . the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of Isaiah, the prophet: ‘A voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord. . . . And all people will see God’s salvation.”’

All people will see God’s salvation – that is what Isaiah tells us. This is the message of advent. It is a time of anticipation of the coming of God’s message to humankind in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Salvation’s message came as a Palestinian and a Jew, who loved God and taught us how to live with compassion and love for all people.

To a Palestinian of the 21st century, this message of compassion and love means that there is yet hope - a hope that the world will cease to be silent in the face of occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people by the powerful and that living a life expressing God’s love means providing justice to the Palestinian people.

Nahida Gordon

Dr. Nahida Halaby Gordon is a ruling elder at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Wooster, Ohio. Her interest in the Middle East and particularly in peace and justice for Palestine/Israel stem from her experiences as a Palestinian exile. She is Emerita Professor, Case Western Reserve University. Her field is cancer epidemiology. Professor Gordon served as a Fulbright Senior Scholar at Birzeit University in Occupied Palestine in 1997 and continues professional collaborations with faculty there.
Psalms 122, 40; 1 Thessalonians

“Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.” (Ps. 122)
Not so for Palestinians. One of the bitter realities for Christian Palestinians is the severely restricted access to the beloved city. Our Greek Orthodox guide pointed out how the 26-foot cement separation barrier cuts right across the major road he often used to take to Jerusalem.

“Now we must get permission papers to visit relatives, doctors, and the holy sites. It takes weeks and only a few are granted.” I could taste the bitterness in his words. At least under Roman occupation, Mary and Joseph were able to take Jesus to Jerusalem for circumcision!

Because of thousands of daily injustices and indignities, Christian Palestinians issued a formal cry for help at Christmastime 2009 (referred to now as Kairos Palestine). It echoes Psalm 40, “You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God,” and issues a plea to Christians around the world to pray and work for their deliverance from their brutal repression.

In 2012, Israel’s policies continue unabated and even worsen. Must we not answer this call to help usher in God’s kingdom in the land where—for us—it was initiated? It may well take the same sort of zeal for the Palestinian community in evidence in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, i.e., we will have to send more laborers. Whether it be helping harvest olives or standing with non-violent protests or staffing schools, those of us who can should go. Might it be in this guise that all will see the Body of Christ coming with power? “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is near.” (Luke 21:28)

Jim McGown

Jim McGown is a Presbyterian Elder (PCUSA) who works with the Justice and Peacemaking Action Team of Northeast Georgia Presbytery, with the Education Committee of IPMN and with Kairos USA.

Monday, December 10, 2012
Tuesday, December 11, 2012

Psalm 85:10, 12;  
I Thessalonians 5:14-15, 20-21

We read the words of the Psalmist and wonder if the writer’s upbeat message is relevant. “Lovingkindness and truth have met together?” Where? “Righteousness and peace have kissed each other?” In your dreams! Witnessing the relentless harshness and deprivation of daily life for Palestinians under Israeli occupation, we long for the Psalm’s promise to be revealed, that “Indeed, the Lord will give what is good.”

The Psalmist’s vision of global harmony and plenty is not uttered into a void, but into the world of human error and struggle. Our scriptures remind us that it is our highest calling to make God’s transforming presence felt on earth. We are not only the beneficiaries of God’s grace, but the active agents of it. Through our work on earth, justice and healing are made manifest even as we confront the tragic struggles that blight human relationships.

Paul addresses us alongside the Thessalonians when he relays his ten-point plan for transformation. As we prayerfully attempt to “seek after that which is good for one another and for all men,” we look with particular grief to the contested piece of land where Palestinians seek equality with their Israeli neighbors from a position of ever-deepening weakness and subjugation.

Concerned Christians find wise counsel in Paul’s letter, as well as encouragement to compassionately confront the existing order. “Admonish the unruly.” Lord, guide my lips. “Help the weak.” Teach me how. “Be patient with all men.” Give me strength and wisdom. “Do not despise prophetic utterances.” May we speak with fearless love.

God’s covenants transcend land and dominion. Modern-day Israel/Palestine can, with our help, sustain and nourish the aspirations of both Palestinians and Israelis. We celebrate with the Psalmist God’s promise that, through our work as God’s hands and feet on earth, “our land will yield its produce.”

Martha Reese

Martha Reese is a member of First United Church of Oak Park, Illinois. She was moved to compassionate study and engagement with the Israel/Palestine conflict after a visit to the region in 2003.
Wednesday, December 12, 2012

Isaiah 6:1-8 and 61:1

Isaiah boldly emphasizes faith in God as the instrument to overcome the powers and principalities holding God’s people in exile. Exile, through its cultural impositions, robbed the spiritual core of those once so devoted to God’s will. Isaiah calls them back to God and God’s promises. Their spiritual disposition must be transformed so that their trust in God can be revived. Isaiah assures them through the call to the afflicted, the brokenhearted, the captive, the imprisoned, the bound, and the indebted. However, the greatest assurance of delivery from captivity comes in the opening words, “The Spirit of God is upon me. . . .” The God of deliverance is present in the midst of their strife. Isaiah, the prophet of hope, has arrived with good news from God Almighty.

Today, fear of losing denominational funding and membership has drowned out the prophetic voice. We cautiously preach and teach hope, but only when we feel some assurance of forward progress. But God’s desire for justice is accomplished through advocating for authentic loving communities even when justice seems improbable. And while we should not purposely intend to divide the community, we must not stop challenging injustice simply to appease the powerful.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.’s) work for peace in the Middle East comes out of our longstanding relationship to the region which dates back to 1820. In 1948, the General Assembly of the PCUSA stated, “We believe that a solution to the problem will be achieved only by a return to the principle of faithful devotion to the welfare, needs, and rights of both the Jewish and Arab peoples. . . .” The Assembly has repeatedly called for a two-state solution that brings peace and security to both peoples and a shared Jerusalem with freedom of worship for all the children of Abraham. The establishment of a peaceful and secure Palestinian state alongside a secure state of Israel requires the recognition of both states’ right to exist and the ending of the 45-year Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

Advent is a time to focus on love found in common places. Whether we are standing with an interfaith group, comforting communities in an uproar who feel their faith has been trampled, or sending messages of hope to those displaced within their own country or forced into exile abroad, now is the time to begin anew with an announcement that the Savior is coming -- right now!

J. Herbert Nelson, II

The Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson II is Director of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness in Washington, DC.
In 2006, 14 members of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem began meeting. They were discussing conditions of the elderly in Bethlehem. Consider this:

- People over 65 are not permitted to buy health insurance.
- Bethlehem does not have “social security” - families are the sole means of support.
- Emigration has left many elderly without family support.
- While Jerusalem, with excellent medical care, is six miles away, many are refused permits to go through the armed checkpoint separating Bethlehem from Jerusalem.

In the face of these conditions they remembered that Jesus said, “I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.” They decided not to be deceived by what they saw, but to take action toward “abundant life.” The group organized and started offering services and opportunities to engage and empower this population. Within six months the original 14 had grown to 140, and today over 650 elderly are part of what is called Ajyal.

Ajyal offers classes, health screenings, shared meals, services to homebound people, mentoring to young families, reading groups, and providing storytelling for children. Ajyal serves the elderly across all of Bethlehem and Palestine.

The cost to provide these services cannot be borne only by the people served. This work is done under the umbrella of Christmas Lutheran Church with the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, Pastor.

We are blest with the opportunity to support this focused and flourishing effort in Bethlehem. As Advent unfolds for each of us, we can be reminded not to be deceived. Let us join hands and resources to support Palestinians in the service toward abundant life in Bethlehem.

Jo Lucas

Jo Lucas has headed the committee which has overseen the partnership between the Presbytery of Ohio and the International Center of Bethlehem. The committee pledges its prayers, has raised $175,000 for scholarships and other uses, and has sent nine batches of used hearing aides to the ICB. In addition, it has made over 91 presentations about Israel/Palestine, organizes alternative travel to Palestine, and supports the advocacy work of Churches for Middle East Peace in Washington, D.C.
Friday, December 14, 2012


In the New Testament readings for today, Jesus acknowledges his gratitude for those gathered around his Table, “standing firm” with him. In Paul’s letter, the author reminds the Thessalonians to stand firm and hold fast to the traditions which “you have learned by both word and letter,” and he prays for God’s continuing encouragement in the days ahead.

In Arabic, the word sumood means resistance. The word in Arabic script at first glance looks somewhat like the English word “Jesus.” How ironic that Jesus, too, resisted the occupation of his day. We know, also, that he did so in a nonviolent way. In the translation of the word sumood, we learn that it is not merely resistance in a passive way, but persistence through barriers to the other side which is good. The Israeli occupation offers another opportunity for people of good will to persist in a nonviolent way toward a more just and peaceful world.

In 2006, like many before me and those afterwards, I traveled with an interfaith delegation to a small family farm, six miles from the city of Bethlehem. The Nassar family, who are Palestinians and who possess proof of ownership through three generations of occupation, have worked in a nonviolent way to maintain their legal right to the land. They do so by planting olive and fruit trees in the face of numerous attempts by the Israeli authorities to confiscate their land. They practice sumood each day by their active resistance to such deeds of injustice. At the entrance gate to the farm, there is a sign in three languages which reads: “We refuse to be enemies.” (Picture above)

May the new day reveal again to people of nonviolence God’s promise to stand firm with us.

Bill Plitt

Bill Plitt is a ruling elder at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Arlington, and has represented the National Capital Presbytery as an Elder Commissioner to the General Assembly (PCUSA) in 2008 and as an overture advocate for divestment and boycott in 2012. Currently he serves as Chair of the National Capital Presbytery’s Mission Coordinating Committee. He is also co-founder of Friends of Tent of Nations North America (FOTONNA) and coordinates the educational and community outreach efforts for that non-profit.
Psalm 90:13-16

Relent, Lord! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble. May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children.

Saturday, December 15, 2012

Advent is our waiting time, the season of preparation and hope. To a Palestinian, this entire year must have seemed like endless waiting for an unknown future. Yet each visit to a Palestinian home, with its simple meal of rice, hummus, and lentils, feels like a joyful feast. How can this be? Surely God is present here.

Two years ago, I made a solo pilgrimage to Galilee and Bethlehem, hoping to get to know some of the “living stones” who cry out from among the faithful. They were not hard to find.

In Ibillin, home of Archbishop Elias Chacour, I sat down on an outdoor stairway and was promptly greeted by a worker picking up daily trash. Ammar was from a small village near Jenin in the West Bank. He had learned English, he said, from a textbook that someone had thrown into the trash, and he listened to children practicing the words.

Then Ammar talked about his own children that he saw only every few weeks when he made the six-hour trip back to Jenin in a hot, covered truck. Since there was no work in Jenin, the truck was always jammed with workers secretly crossing into Galilee. Ammar demonstrated the way he had to sit.

“How do you do that?” I asked.

“I have to,” he said. “Here I am happy because I work each day in the shadow of ‘the great man of peace.’ It is an honor to be here!”

Kathy Matsushima

As a seminary student in 1980, Kathy Matsushima spent a month in the Middle East and fell in love with the people. She is a former moderator of the Israel/Palestine Mission Network and serves on the board of Pilgrims of Ibillin, supporting the Mar Elias schools established by Elias Chacour. She also co-chairs the Seraj Library Project which builds children’s libraries in the West Bank.
John’s instructions on how to prepare for Jesus speak to the current situation in Palestine/Israel. Amid injustices, John warns us not to cling to history (like the Israelis using their past persecution to justify their present oppression of the Palestinians) and addresses symbols of such injustices (e.g., tax collectors and soldiers, both still relevant today), urging us to share what we have—even those in a position to do evil must seek to do good. If people do not correct injustices, Jesus will—by baptizing with fire. So justice will come from God, not from the people.

Christians begin in baptismal waters, but few continue with baptismal fire; those who fail to do so, suggests John, are not fit to be called Christian. Moreover, while water is a cleansing substance, it has its limits. Fire cleans heavy metals and purifies gold. Being baptized in fire means truly walking with God, not always living comfortably; it means being courageous and loving in your faith.

Palestinians have mixed feelings about fire. Sometimes they fear it—fire reminds them of settlers burning their crops, or explosions besieging Gaza. But they also like it—fire means sun and light. It’s as if we have two kinds of fire, one from people (killing and destroying) and one from God (building and purifying). John’s words call us to the blessing of God’s fire.

Oh God, God of all creation, we long for Your fire, we thirst for Your water and hope for Your love. Give us the power to repent and to be Your faithful and courageous servants and give us Your heavenly fire to be steadfast and stand against evil. Grant us the strength to walk with You, to be born again in fire to glorify Your name. May we open our eyes to see the suffering of Your people and become solid in our faith to stand by them with solidarity in faith, hope, and love.

Rifat Odeh Kassis

Rifat Kassis has been General Coordinator of Kairos Palestine Group since its inception in 2009. He is the author of three books: Palestine, A Bleeding Wound in the World’s Conscience (2006); Palestinian Christians: Facts, Figures and Trends (2008), with Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb; and Kairos for Palestine (2011).
Monday, December 17, 2012


On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus takes his disciples to a garden on the Mount of Olives. The days preceding this night were filled with many teachings and with contentious dialogues with the religious leaders, angering them so that they now seek ways to kill Jesus. Realizing this and that his choices are flight, violence, or staying the course, nonviolently, Jesus goes off separately to pray in the garden. Before doing so, he instructs his disciples to pray concerning their time of trial. Alone, he prays first that this “cup” would be lifted from him—a way out of this situation. Sensing God with him, and strengthened, he prays more earnestly, no longer praying for this “cup” to be removed. He returns to his disciples, finding them asleep. He wakes them and again warns them to pray so they will not enter the time of trial.

Facing these difficulties, Jesus prays until he knows that God’s hand is upon him. He does not flee nor does he permit violence to be his answer to his circumstances—immediately, in the garden, or on Friday when subjected to injustice, humiliation, and death. The disciples’ response to these difficult circumstances initially is not to pray, but to go to sleep, and, subsequently, to flee.

How are we to respond faithfully to the call issued in the Kairos Palestine document and the demands placed on us by recent votes of several denominations, including the PCUSA, to boycott all products coming from Jewish settlements in the West Bank? Pray earnestly, and then act, nonviolently, supporting the Palestinian quest for just peace, including the movements to boycott these products. Conflict will result because we will be going against our culture’s taken-for-granted reality. Following Jesus, pray more earnestly and resist nonviolently.

_Ted Settle_

Ted Settle is currently a volunteer with his wife, Jane, at the Mar Elias Schools in Ibillin, Israel, helping the schools “build peace on desktops.”
Tuesday, December 18, 2012

Psalms 33, 85, 146
Ephesians 6:10-20

The Lord loves righteousness and justice. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and frustrates the ways of the wicked. Sometimes living with so many injustices all around, it’s hard to remember that the earth is full of God’s unfailing love. In fact, oftentimes the world seems under the control of the unrighteous where wickedness and corruption abound. The daily pain and suffering is very real.

As we bring doctors, nurses, teachers, and others to the most remote villages in Palestine, God’s spirit of truth reveals itself in the faces of the oppressed. Over and over again we are humbled by the hospitality and joy that greets us in places where cotton balls are the most high-tech medical equipment available. One doctor tells of her encounter, “Through all the difficulty the people experience, I was overcome by the kindness and faith that sustains the people we met. They welcomed us as if we were the most important people in the world.”

Walking in the footsteps of Jesus and considering how he would have us respond to what we encounter today, we must gaze into the eyes that suffer the injustices and face those whose only hope is in God’s unfailing love.

The ability to face the daily challenges with joy, hospitality, and yes, even laughter comes from a deep-seated dedication to the Palestinian tradition of Thabet or Steadfastness in seeking God and accepting His will. The Lord takes pleasure in the faithful, in those who hope in the Lord’s steadfast love. As we discover realities that people must live with each day, our only response can be embracing and proclaiming truth. Peace, justice, and righteousness are born in truth.

What makes seeking Peace so sweet? It comes with the kiss of Righteousness.

Christy Reiners

Christy Reiners is the Executive Director of In His Steps: Pathways of Peace. IHS is a U.S. religious nonprofit organization that works with American churches to visit the Holy Land, see the ancient Holy and historic sites, walk in footsteps of Jesus, and then consider how Jesus would have us respond to what we encounter today. The response to injustice and oppression is helping to strengthen the local Palestinian communities in health, education, advocacy, and business development. Christy is a PCUSA ruling elder from the San Francisco Presbytery who has been facilitating short-term mission teams in Palestine and Israel since 2000, and is now living in Bethlehem.
Psalms 50, 147; John 5:30–47

True and false religion are described and respectively praised and condemned in these passages.

Psalm 50 warns against the corrosive danger in false religion that offers eternal security and current comfort by means of unexamined conformity to ritual and self-congratulatory benevolence. The psalmist writes with unconcealed sarcasm regarding ritual offerings: “Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?” (vs. 13).

Then the writer nails our spiritual laziness and its consequences: “For you hate [spiritual] discipline and you cast my words behind you.” (vs. 17)

The writer of Psalm 147 takes the sting of rebuke for false religion one step further, contrasting it with true religion in his description of God’s character and intent for his children: “God is gracious . . . God heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds . . . the Lord lifts up the downtrodden.” (vss. 1, 3, 6)

In the passage in John, Jesus sharply reinforces the warning against false religion in his confrontation with the religious/political leaders whose unconscious lust for power and control blind them to the truth in their own tradition.

These leaders had condemned Jesus for breaking the “law of Moses” by healing on the Sabbath. Jesus’ response to their blind hypocrisy is courageous and uncompromising. “I know,” says Jesus, “that you do not have the love of God within you . . . [Y]ou receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from God. . . . It is Moses who accuses you on whom you set your hope.” (vss. 42, 44-45)

Even so today, false religion ignores the oppression of the poor and outcast even while practicing its rituals and promoting its moral restrictions and tribal loyalties into state power that furthers the advantage of one religion over another. False religion even sanctions the occupation and theft of land from the “downtrodden” by those who support its dominance in national life.

In contrast, true religion, in humble gratitude for the gifts of life and love, seeks the release of the captives, the healing of the wounded, and the end of rejection and oppression of the outcast. Genuine Advent prayers are offered in hope for the end of occupation and oppression and a conversion of the heart that love may provide a new direction in the religion and life of all.

Darrell Yeaney

The Rev. Dr. Darrell W. Yeaney PH.D, H.R. is a member of the Peace and Justice Task Force of San Jose Presbytery and of the I/PMN of the PCUSA. Retired after 40 years of service in the PCUSA, most of which has been on university campuses, Dr. Yeaney and his wife Sue have led seven fact finding trips to Israel/Palestine and remain active locally and nationally in a variety of ministries emphasizing Christian just peacemaking.
Psalm 18

In Psalm 18 the psalmist has a daunting list of dangers: enemies, the cords of death, the torrents of perdition, cords of Sheol, snares of death, mighty waters, strong enemy, those who hated him, and calamity. The preface to the psalm states that it comes from the time David had been threatened by Saul, perhaps when Saul threw a spear to kill him or when Saul sought to kill him in the wilderness.

In a similar vein the Churches of Palestine list daunting obstacles they face under Israel’s 45-year-old occupation in their Kairos Palestine statement of Advent 2009: the separation wall erected on Palestinian territory that has turned their towns and villages into prisons; the cruel war Israel launched against Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009 where inhuman conditions continue and the permanent blockade cuts Gaza off from other Palestinian territories; the Israeli settlements on the West Bank that ravage Palestinian land and control natural resources, including water and agricultural land, and that deprive hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and constitute an obstacle to any political solution; and the daily humiliation to which they are subjected at the military checkpoints as they try to get to jobs or schools or hospitals.

Again in a similar vein the Palestinian Christians find themselves “[i]nspired by the mystery of God’s love for all, the mystery of God’s divine presence in the history of all peoples and, in a particular way, in the history of our country,” and they “proclaim . . . a word of faith, hope, and love.” To speak this way shows that they are experiencing God’s deliverance even in the midst of dangers.

Len Bjorkman

Len Bjorkman is a retired PCUSA teaching elder; he has been active in partnership with Middle East churches through the Israel/Palestine Mission Network, the Iraq Partnership Mission Network, the Syria-Lebanon Mission Network, and also with the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, as well as with various ecumenical, interfaith, and secular groups.
Psalm 102: 1-2

The Psalmist cries out to God to hear the distress of the land in which he is living. It was December 11, 2009, that I heard such a cry. It was the voice of the Psalmist spoken through God’s people today. I was privileged on that day to be one of the representatives of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to the gathering of the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum of the World Council of Churches in Bethlehem. The first gathering of this group had occurred in Amman, Jordan, in 2007 and resulted in the Amman Call, which was approved by the 2018th General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This subsequent gathering in Bethlehem, acting on the basis of the Amman Call, embraced a call from our Palestinian brothers and sisters known as the Kairos Palestine Document (KPD). The KPD is a cry to God and a cry to the world. It is a cry for everyone to hear the pain and suffering of our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters as they struggle to live with the immoral and illegal Israeli occupation of their homeland.

So often during this Advent Season, we sing that wonderful little carol “O, Little Town of Bethlehem, how sweet we see thee lie.” In that particular Advent Season of 2009, Bethlehem was not lying sweetly in God’s peace and justice, and that is even more the case in 2012. So, our brothers and sisters raise their voices again -- and again -- and again. But is anyone listening? Is God hearing their cry? Are we the children of God hearing their cry? Or has God’s ear gone deaf? Have our ears gone deaf?

May our prayer on this Advent day be: Open our eyes that we might see, our ears that we might hear, our minds that we might understand. Amen.

Ron Shive

The Rev. Dr. Ron Shive is the Senior Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Burlington, North Carolina. He most recently served on the Middle East Monitoring Group, mandated by the 219th General Assembly (2010), and chaired the Middle East Study Committee that produced the “Breaking Down the Walls” report. In February 2012, he led a group that participated in olive tree planting in conjunction with the Joint Advocacy Initiative of the East Jerusalem YMCA and the YMCA of Palestine.
Mary’s song, the “Magnificat,” rings out each advent with a message that is both humbling and inspiring. For us, as for the early church, it is a song of celebration and awe as we begin to recognize God’s mysterious yet blindingly obvious way in the world.

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,” prophecy, “all generations will call me blessed.” Why? Because the Mighty One has chosen a lowly servant for an extraordinary role. This is how God operates – choosing the "least of these" to do exalted things.

Heard in this way, Mary’s song provides the inspiration and direction for a peaceful revolution. We see anew what God intended all along: the proud are scattered, the powerful are brought down, and the rich are sent away empty. At the same time, the lowly are lifted up and the hungry are filled. This is how God operates.

And because it is the way God operates, it is the way for lasting change. We have hope for lasting change in the wake of the Arab Spring because in it we saw the weak -- courageous ordinary people -- do amazing things and prevail against the strong. We can rightly hope that we have witnessed again the Mighty One doing great things.

And it is the same in Palestine and Israel, though the season of spring may seem farther off there. Even in the context of ongoing injustice, we see ordinary people doing amazing things. We see the Nasser family incarnating their motto “we refuse to be enemies,” while struggling to stay on their land in the face of threatened confiscation by the Israeli government. And in the Palestinian village of Budrus, we see ordinary Palestinians and Israelis joined in non-violent protest against the Israeli separation barrier.

These and so many others inspire us to set aside power and wealth and join in God’s revolution of the weak.

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Susan P. Wilder

Rev. Susan P. Wilder lived in Jerusalem from 1999 to 2002. She serves in ecumenical and interfaith networks working to raise awareness about Palestine/Israel and to further advocacy for a just peace there. She serves on the advisory councils of the Washington Interfaith Alliance for Middle East Peace and Friends of Tent of Nations North America and chairs the Middle East Working Group at Grace Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Virginia.
Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 23, 2012

*Micah 5:2-5a*

The historical setting of Micah chapter 5 is the Assyrian invasion of Judah under Sennacherib in 701 B.C. Hezekiah, the King of Jerusalem, was helpless in front of Sennacherib’s forces.

Within that context, Micah describes the real King, the Messiah, who will be the only Hope. This King will not be born in a large and well-known city but in the small town of Bethlehem, “one of the little clans of Judah,” as Micah describes it.

The prophecy says also that this Messiah will be rejected, but “He shall be great to the ends of the earth; and this One shall be peace.”

It is something special to read these verses after 2700 years and be on the same spot where the prophecy was fulfilled. The situation 700 years before Christ and 2000 years ago when Jesus was born was not that much different from the situation in Bethlehem and Palestine today.

The people during the time of Micah were living with fear, without knowing what was going to happen, and at the time when Jesus was born, the people of Palestine were living under the Roman occupation. Hopelessness, frustration, and fear were everywhere in the country. During that time the real King of peace was born and brought hope for the future, not only for a specific people but for all Nations. This very small town of Bethlehem became one of the most famous places on earth after the King of Peace was born there.

Today, and after so many years, the people of Palestine are still living under occupation. Every day we see how olive trees, homes, and lives are destroyed and more land is confiscated for the expansion of settlements, bypass roads, and the wall. People are waiting for somebody to come for salvation, without thinking that the real King of peace, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, whom Micah was talking about, is living among us. HE is the one who lifted us up and taught us the real meaning of nonviolent resistance by overcoming evil with good, darkness with light, and hatred with love.

*Daoud Nassar*

Daoud Nassar is the founder of Tent of Nations. (See page 16).
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2012

Micah 6:6-8; Isaiah 9:2-7

Christian Palestinians in Bethlehem today have no trouble imagining what Joseph and Mary might have been experiencing as they sought a safe place for Mary to give birth. Like Mary and Joseph, displaced from their home by a government decree to go to Bethlehem to be counted for the census, Palestinians in our time have been uprooted and disconnected from their lands. Security is a distant dream for them.

It is hard for Christians in the United States to imagine just what Bethlehem looks and feels like today. One faculty member at Bethlehem Bible College described to me his despair at his inability to stand anywhere in Bethlehem without seeing the massive wall that has been constructed around this Holy City on the hill. “Each morning, as I go to work at the college, the wall reminds me that I am functionally incarcerated, unable to visit family members who live a short distance away.”

Decrees by the powerful have always been life-threatening for those who live on the margins of our society. That’s why the first century Palestinians would resonate with the words of the prophet Micah taken from our lectionary as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. “What does God require of you? To do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”

And from Isaiah: “For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire” – for this child will overturn all of the violence and will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.”

So as we go to sleep tonight, let us say a prayer for those who still know no peace, and remember just how radical a thing it is to give ourselves over to the everlasting Prince of Peace.

Rick Ufford-Chase

Rick Ufford-Chase, Executive Director of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, was the Moderator of the 216th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
Christmas Day, December 25, 2012

Ephesians 2:14

While traveling in China, I was asked by a student, “What if Jesus was to be born today?” I replied, “If Jesus were to be born this year, he would not be born in Bethlehem. Maria and Joseph might not be allowed to pass through the wall or to cross the checkpoint, and so, too, the Magi, while the shepherds would be stuck inside the walls and couldn’t leave their little town. Jesus might have been born at the checkpoint like so many Palestinian children.”

While many Christians gather year after year to prepare for Christmas, singing “O little Town of Bethlehem,” the majority of them do not know that the little town today is confined to as little as four square miles, surrounded on three sides by a mighty 25-foot-high wall disconnecting Bethlehem from its neighboring city of Jerusalem. The pretext for building the wall is security, while the real reason is a land grab. The West Bank looks more and more like a piece of a Swiss cheese where Israel gets the cheese and the Palestinians are pushed in the holes behind high walls.

No one understood what building bridges means as well as St. Paul. A former Jewish leader, a zealot, a persecutor, and a hardliner, he committed himself to making sure that a wall of separation was built and kept between his community and the “gentiles.” However, this same radical person was radically transformed on the road to Damascus. From that moment, the zealot Saul became the passionate apostle Paul. His great discovery was that if God himself in Christ has broken the walls of hostility between the human and the divine, then there is no place for walls between peoples, tribes, cultures, and nations. The Holy Land today is in urgent need of bridges not walls.

Mitri Raheb

The Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb is a Palestinian Christian, pastor of The Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, and founder and president of the Diyar Consortium, a group of Lutheran-based, ecumenically-oriented institutions serving the Bethlehem area. (See the devotional for December 6th and the picture which accompanies it).