

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. Isaiah 52:7-9

Further Readings: Matthew 1:18-2:18; 5:1-11.

A. Introduction

A person standing atop the Mount of Olives looking south would see a few hills peeking their heads above a line of trees no more than six miles away, marking the northern outskirts of the city of Bethlehem. Bethlehem is a small town snuggled in the Judean wilderness atop a hill. It is beyond these trees where God revealed a Son to the world, putting salvation to the world in motion.

Bethlehem was always close to me, but I did not go there often. It seemed so far away. I was born in the old city section of Jerusalem, the walled city built like interlocking building blocks. The cobbled streets are more like alleys, the houses look more like shrines than homes, and the smell of each neighborhood tells what part of the city a person is in. I would not consider Jerusalem to be a clean or beautiful city, but it is a very safe city to walk through any time of day or night. I invite you to make a trip to that wonderful place and see for yourself. Behind the massive construction of stones is an immense history that is at the very heart of God's plan of salvation. The traditional meaning of the word Jerusalem is "the city of peace".

No more than six miles south of Jerusalem is the city of Bethlehem. Beth means "house" and lehem means "bread". This name tells a great deal about this town. It used to be known as the bread basket of Judea and farmers of Bethlehem used to raise grain.

The city of Bethlehem was constructed around the Church of the Nativity. It is interesting to see how the fathers and mothers of modern Bethlehem built the city. It seems to me that the city was constructed like a theater: the Church of the Nativity as the stage and the rest of the city the audience.

B. Jerusalem

One of the highlights of the summer in my early teen years was the game of hide-and-seek at night. When all the stores and shops closed, the streets were dark and the people were asleep. We would start with no less than 20 boys. We hid on rooftops, around dark corners and at the eighth station of the cross on the Via Dolorosa. (The Via Dolorosa, or the Way of the Cross, is the traditional path Jesus took on Good Friday carrying his cross to Calvary.) To those of us playing the game, the eighth station or any of the shrines or churches were no more than a hiding spot. Now I wonder how I took all that happened in those places for granted. Why didn't I consider the places more important, especially when every day I saw hundreds of pilgrims walking the streets of Jerusalem, looking in awe at these places? Why did they need to come this far? They are just buildings, I thought. They have been here for hundreds of years, and they are going to be here forever. What was so special about those spaces that so many people would come from afar to see?

It took me a while to comprehend the meaning of these places. In my mind and in the minds of my friends the buildings were no more than ordinary and old, deteriorated and in desperate need of repair. It wasn't until my faith started moving me that I understood what was behind all those walls and within those buildings. This is where Jesus walked and healed and carried his cross and died and rose and the place where God sent the Holy Spirit. Many years later during a visit to Jerusalem, I shared with my father my childhood thoughts about Jerusalem. My father said that Jerusalem is like the Bible. If you do not look behind its cover, it is no more than another book, but when you open it and read it, you can discover not only your history but your eternal destination.

C. Bethlehem

Going to Bethlehem in my childhood years was a daylong trip. The road that connected the two cities through west Jerusalem was closed because Israel controlled that part of the city. We had to take a long, country, curvy road that was dangerous, but I enjoyed the trip. I saw shepherds tending their flocks and Bedouins in their tents. A person could see all the southern regions of Judea and portions of the Judean wilderness. I enjoyed going to Bethlehem because I could see the star where Jesus was born. Inside the Church of the Nativity is a cave known as the Grotto. Inside the Grotto there is a spot, a star, that marks the place where Jesus was born.

Years later I returned to Bethlehem to teach at the Lutheran school. I was surprised to learn that Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem was built before the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem. I was surprised that mission work by Lutherans was started in Bethlehem and Jerusalem simultaneously.

For the visitor to Bethlehem today, the city still centers on the Church of the Nativity. Gift and souvenir shops abound. Preparations have been under way for the past couple of years to prepare for the ushering of the new millennium.

D. The Two Cities

Thirty years ago a journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem took at least 90 minutes and was about 30 miles one way. Today a traveler from Jerusalem to Bethlehem can make it in fifteen minutes. Even though the highway connecting the two cities was opened following the 1967 Six Day War and is now no more than six miles because of urban sprawl, it takes a Palestinian the same amount of time to make the trip as it did 30 years ago. Residents of Bethlehem are not allowed to travel to Jerusalem. Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint outside Bethlehem stop every vehicle and traveler. Israel does not allow Palestinians residing in the West Bank or Gaza to enter Jerusalem.

This is a part of the continuing agony of the Palestinian Arabs. This is what an occupying force does to a nation. Not only does it rob people of their freedom and deplete their integrity, but it limits their freedom and separates them from each other. Where can the people of Palestine turn? Who cares about their cause and their plight? Who in the world community has done anything to help their cause?

E. The Need for Peace

Review Isaiah 52:7-9. There is no nation that is greater than another; nor is there a race that is superior to another. The Koran, the holy book of Muslims, says that God looks at people equally, like the teeth of a comb. Palestinians suffer because they are Palestinians. The State of Israel forgets that it was not long ago the Jews suffered oppression. A Jew is not superior to or better than a Palestinian, and a Palestinian is not superior to or better than a Jew. We are all God's children; we all fall short. Both need to improve their lives. A Palestinian cannot become a

better citizen looking at the barrel of an Israeli soldier's gun every day of his or her life, and an Israeli Jew cannot become a better citizen carrying the gun that intimidates Palestinians.

God blesses the messenger of peace. Jesus Christ blesses the messenger of peace. Islam blesses the messenger of peace; all humans bless messengers of peace. There should be no reason why a resident of Bethlehem cannot travel to Jerusalem to visit relatives or attend worship in a church or a mosque. There should be no reason why a Palestinian should be stopped to prove that she or he is legal to enter Jerusalem, a city close to the hearts of the people of the whole world.

The city of Jerusalem should not belong to one group or one nation. The three Abrahamic religions-Judaism, Christianity, and Islam-are rooted in Jerusalem. Therefore, Jerusalem should be a city shared by both Jews and Palestinians. Jerusalem should be accessible to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Jerusalem should live up to its name: the city of peace, the city of salvation, the city of hope.

F. The Challenge to All Christians

It must be understood that there are stewards of our faith who live under constant political oppression. The Christians in Bethlehem and Jerusalem are no more important than the Christians in Indonesia or Iran, but they are among the few Christian groups paying a very high price for false Christian interpretations. To many fellow believers, what is occurring in the Middle East today, and what the Palestinians are going through, is no more than a part of what God planned in preparation for the second coming. I would like to set the record straight. God does not need to prepare for the second coming through the suffering of one group of people. Nor does God look upon us with favor because we sanction the agony of any race or ethnic group. We are all God's children, bought and redeemed through the blood of the covenant.

Christians, open your ears and hear "a voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; because they are no more". (Matthew 2:18) These words of prophecy are again being fulfilled right in Ramah, on the outskirts of Bethlehem, but now the Palestinian Christians are about to be no more.

G. The Challenge to the ELCA

The reality of our Christian commitment is to make sure that justice is done and that peace prevails. This is what Lutherans do throughout the world. Lutheran World Federation (LWF), for example, is an ELCA supported organization that demonstrates the commission of discipleship throughout the world, including the people of Palestine. LWF staffs and supports the Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem, the only hospital serving Palestinian refugees, both Christians and Muslims, free of charge.

The ELCA, through your support, makes sure that the ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCJ) continues to reach as many Palestinians as possible, not only through ministry of Word and Sacrament, but through six schools and a vocational school that educate more than 4,000 students each year. But now we are asked to do more.

Write to your elected officials in Washington and encourage them to realize that there is room in Jerusalem for two nations, both Israel and Palestine. Encourage the United States to pressure Israel to remove roadblocks that continue to separate families and have brought economical hardships on all Palestinians and to abandon the idea that the United States should move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Assign one Sunday each year to study the issues of the Palestinians; lift them up in prayers every Sunday. Pray for Bishop Munib Younan, the pastors of the ELCJ and the different ministries.

Have a special offering on Good Friday designated to help the ELCJ in its many ministries.

Then shall the words of Isaiah come to pass: "your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem." (Isaiah 52:9)

H. Final Thought

What a great hope we Christians have in Jesus Christ! And what a joy it is to know that we have sisters and brothers who share our faith in distant lands. But our family members in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and throughout Palestine ache and moan. The weight of more than 33 years of occupation is unbearable. Two generations have grown up knowing guns and hatred as part of daily living. Sick people are unable to travel to see their doctors. Mothers cannot visit their children in Jerusalem. Farmers must destroy their crops because they are unable to transport them. This is happening to your brothers and sisters in Palestine. But the mercy of God is great and is asking each one of us to do our share to alleviate the pain and suffering of our human family and our family of faith in Palestine.

I. Closing prayer

Dear God, gracious Lord, we have heard yet another story of your children who suffer in ways that we did not know about. Let your Holy Spirit stir within us the strength and ability to do what we can to help share their pain and bring justice to the people of Palestine. Hear us, O God, for we pray in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

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