

February 2024



From the Bishop:

Today as I write this, I am acutely aware that I am home.

You see, I was supposed to be on a plane today – traveling to the Holy Land – with thirty people from this synod. We were going to see holy sites: the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, Galilee, Jerusalem, and so much more.

Besides visiting these holy sites, we were going to be with our Lutheran siblings in Palestine and Israel. We were going to visit with and learn from Bishop Azar, the pastors, and the laypeople of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL). We were going to visit our Lutheran schools in Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Ramallah, and Beit Jala. We were going to visit the only liberal arts university in Palestine – Dar Al-Kalima University in Bethlehem. We were going to visit the Lutheran hospital, Augusta Victoria Hospital. And we were going to visit our Jewish siblings who work for justice and peace.

Today as I write this, I am acutely aware that today is the one hundredth day since fighting began in the Holy Land.

On October 7, 2023 Hamas killed around 1,200 people and kidnapped over two hundred. It was a horrible and horrendous attack on women, children, and the elderly.

Following this attack, Israel began striking with guns, bombs, and other devices of war. At this moment, the death toll in Gaza is 24,100 dead with 61,000 others wounded. It is estimated that two-thirds of those killed in Gaza so far are women and children –all non-combatants. Almost the entire population of Gaza is now displaced, and starvation and disease are rampant.

By anyone's estimate, these are horrifying statistics, and they cannot, at all, begin to acknowledge the pain and anguish from all sides.

Now, I am not an expert of the Holy Land or the Israel-Palestinian conflict. I cannot begin to parse out all that happens in this area of the world – especially in such a short article as this. But as a baptized child of God, pastor, and your bishop, I know that this war is not God's way. I know that God calls us to advocate for those whose voices have been silenced. I know that God calls not for a pretend cease fire but true dialogue. I know that God calls us to a just peace where all people are recognized as human.

As many of you know, I was part of a group of seventeen ELCA bishops who went to the Holy Land last year. While we were there, we visited the ELCJHL schools in Palestine and Israel. We saw Muslim and Christian children learning together. We saw dancing and singing. We listened to their stories and we rejoiced at the hope we saw there. When we visited Augusta Victoria Hospital during this same visit, we saw Muslim doctors treating Christian patients and vice versa. When we visited with an Israeli non-profit dedicated to justice for the Palestinians, we saw Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians, working together for peace and justice.

Dear Beloveds in Christ, please take to heart what our brother in Christ, ELCJHL Bishop Sani Ibrahim Azar, said on Reformation Day 2023 while speaking at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem:

"It is very hard to speak about hope here in Jerusalem ... As Palestinian Christians, we have been here for many years, not recognized, but calling for reconciliation. We are serving people's needs and we are working for the future of the whole human family...The priority right now is to end the war, to stop the killing of women and men, children and the elderly ... We hope that our Christian brothers and sisters elsewhere in the world are praying for us, praying for Christians in the Holy Land and for the rights of Palestinians to exist here."

As we are privileged to be in our homes – and as millions have been displaced from their homes – let us pray for true peace, work for justice, and speak out against hatred.

Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it... The Lord is near to the broken-hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. Psalm 34:14, 18

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From the VEEP

“For where **two or three** are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Matthew 18:20

I was chatting with a colleague about weekend plans recently and shared that I was invited to a belated holiday gathering. My friend sighed and said, “The older I get, the less energy I have to be ‘on’ for things like that.” As a lifelong introvert, that comment really resonated with me. Some people may think that being an introvert and choosing a career as a public-school teacher is odd, but you might be surprised by how many “professional extroverts” there are in similar professions. I have spent the last thirty-five years acting like an extrovert for several hours a day. The older I have gotten, the harder that has become. That is why, in part, I shifted to alternative education more than fifteen years ago and then to pseudo-administration six years ago – smaller class sizes and then one-on-one or small group meetings were much more doable. I hadn’t realized just how much work this all was until the pandemic shut down. Suddenly, my introversion was a superpower. Although I missed being able to gather with family and friends when I wanted to, the removal of the expectation to do so was incredibly freeing. It was like I could finally relax a muscle that I’d been keeping clenched forever.

Then, the gathering restrictions ended, and most people flocked back to school and church. It was like a joyous return from exile. I, however, didn’t experience it quite that way. That muscle I had relaxed was now seriously out of shape. I found myself retreating to my office more and more, rather than walking around the campus and checking in on classes. At church I rarely stay for the fellowship hour, and in-person synod council meetings typically leave me with a migraine the next day. This is not to say that I am a misanthrope or that I want to go live alone on a desert island somewhere. Nor do I want to stop serving in my various leadership roles. On the contrary, I do love my fellow human beings and enjoy being connected. I just recognize that, for me, some things that my more extroverted friends find easy require me to make more of an effort and that I thrive when I can connect in other ways.

I think this is why the Matthew text is so comforting for me. I only need to gather with one or two other people and be assured that God is with us. I’d like to give a shout out to all those congregations who have the equipment, staff, and tech savvy to continue to offer remote options for worship services. I know that these look different from congregation to congregation, and some allow more participation than others, but any such option is something that didn’t exist (or was extremely limited) in the before times. I recently visited a congregation with a robust remote presence. I was amazed at how fully engaged the remote congregants were. What a gift to those of us who sometimes need space to feel connected. I know that many of my extroverted colleagues withered during the pandemic while I was blooming. They *needed* that in person contact to thrive. As we work to be more authentically diverse and inclusive, these differences in how individuals relate to one another, whether due to personality differences or cultural norms, need to be recognized. Providing multiple options and valuing all ways of being engaged in church will go a long way toward our DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging) goals. In the meantime, I’ll work on building up my extrovert muscles again.

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