

## **The Magi's Long Journey to Peace**

Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 2:1-12 by Patty Friesen (Dec. 29/24)

When in Matthew 2 it says the wisemen saw the star in the east - the Greek word for East is not a direction or a place but a verb meaning rising - they saw a star in its rising or forming or coming into being. When it comes to the East - it depends on where you are standing as to where the East is. In Canada, the East is anything from Winnipeg to the Atlantic Ocean. When Patrick and I were at seminary in Indiana - the West was anything west of Ohio. If you are in Jerusalem - East is the other side of the Jordan River toward the Jordanian and South Arabian Desert. Matthew 2 is not thinking of the East as China as we modern day readers assume. Isaiah 60:6 says all those from Sheba and Midian will come bringing gold and frankincense. Midian and Sheba are desert kingdoms in Saudi Arabia.

The earliest commentary on the birth of Christ was written about 160 AD by Justin Martyr a Palestinian Christian in which he says wisemen from Arabia came to Bethlehem bringing gifts. In the 1920's British scholar E.F.F. Bishop visited a Bedouin tribe in Joran that bore the Arabic name al-Kokabani. The word Kokab means planet and al-Koakabani means those who study planets. Bishop asked the elders why they called themselves by such a name. They replied it was because their ancestors followed the planets and traveled west to Palestine to show honour to the great prophet Jesus when he was born. This supports Justin's second century claim that the wise men were Arabs from Arabia. It kind of turns our concept of the wisemen on its head.

(Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, p. 40?)

Isaiah 60:17 talks about peace and righteousness coming to the open gates of Jerusalem but it didn't happen in Jerusalem. Peace and righteousness didn't come to the gates of Jerusalem but to a child in Bethlehem instead. Peace is not the restoration of the former kingdom of Israel with Jerusalem as its' capital. Peace is a swaddled baby in a house in a village. What a shock - not only for the wisemen but for Herod and all who were with him in Jerusalem.

In Isaiah 42:1 God says My Chosen One in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring justice to the nations. He will faithfully bring forth justice on the earth. What does this justice look like? Verse 7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoner from the dungeon, to release from the prison those who sit in darkness. Justice is freedom for those who suffer.

Jesus' name Yeshua means the one who saves - not just the oppressed, but the oppressors too. Jesus is a failed mission to save the Jews from their enemies Romans because he saves the Romans too - like the centurion at the cross. There are no good guys or bad guys in the Holy Land - *all have sinned* in a cycle of violence that begins with the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem and ends with the capital punishment of an innocent in Jerusalem.

Slide - Munther Isaac is a Palestinian theologian and pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem. He serves as academic dean of Bethlehem Bible College, where he directs the annual Christ at the Checkpoint conference where North American Christians come and experience what it is like for Palestinian Christians to go through Israeli checkpoints going to and from work and shopping several times a day. Bethlehem Bible College holds traditional evangelical beliefs about the inspiration

of scripture and the importance of personal encounters with Christ but are progressive on social justice issues and do not embrace the Christian Zionism of many North American evangelicals who believe that God gave the Holy Land to the Jews in 1948.

He says, because life is so hard here - many Palestinian Christians emigrate to Europe or North America. Another challenge is rising extremes of political Islam and religious Zionism. This leaves Palestinian Christians asking questions about where do we fit in and what role do we play in the rising tensions? We're also questioning our relationship with the Western church, which is heavily involved with the one-sided support only to Israel. That troubles us. What about our faith brings hope rather than false optimism.

Isaac continues: I can't forget October 7. We were horrified and shocked by Hamas' violence. We were terrified by the thought of what Israel would do in retaliation but the level of destruction in Gaza is something we'd never expected. The annihilation of Gaza's infrastructure and mass killing of people, especially children, continues to horrify us. I don't want to talk about hope right now. That may sound unchristian, but at this stage we're just trying to survive and live day by day. The people of Gaza are finding strength in one another and in their faith in God. They know they can't rely on anything else.

I'm convinced that people undergoing harsh realities experience God in a more powerful way than we can imagine. We hear this from the Gaza Christians living in their churches and in the Muslims, who are pulled from under the rubble. Christians and Muslims both still say, we thank God, and Inshallah - we rest our case before God. The faith they exhibit in God is so strong. This kind of faith must be what sustains people in

times of need. God must be present in the midst of these hard circumstances. We pray for deliverance, but the Bible doesn't promise deliverance. It promises Emmanuel - God with us.

Isaac continues: Right now, my energy is focused on how we can end this apartheid using creative and nonviolent resistance like they used in South Africa. This may sound naive to talk about nonviolence today as a Palestinian, given the intensity of violence we are subjected to. But I can't give up on my beliefs that the Jesus way is that of nonviolence.

There is no more hope for a two-state solution as Jewish settlements are built deep in Palestinian territory. That means there are two options. One is the continuation of the status quo: more oppression, more killing and revenge killing. The second option is a single state with equal rights for everyone. When people ask me if in one state the Muslims would kill all the Jews? My reply is are you serious? Look at history. Who killed six million Jews? Was it Arab Muslims? No - it was European Christians! Zionism - or the supposed right to the land of Israel in 1948 by Jews was born out of European victimhood and anti-Semitism. Out of European Christian guilt about the Holocaust, came the state of Israel in 1948. The problem was the European refugees didn't come to live alongside Arabs in Palestine - we would have welcomed them as we welcomed Armenian refugees but Europeans came to take Palestine over as a Jewish state though we had lived here for millennia. Hezbollah wouldn't exist if there was no Israeli occupation in south Lebanon. Get rid of oppression of Palestinians and you get rid of Hamas.

Israel has to decide, because they hold the keys to decide when enough killing is enough. Sadly, the pro-peace voices in Israel seem to be getting weaker as the Israeli government shifts to the extreme right. There are still some very courageous Israeli Jewish voices and we are grateful for them. (Palestinian and Christian in a violent time - Christian Century May 2024, p. 48-53)

Slide 2 - one such Israeli peacemaker is historian Ilan Pappé, who goes to all the sites of Palestinian villages destroyed by the Israeli occupation of 1948 and subsequent settlements over the past 70 years. Pappé sets up markers with the Arabic names for those villages destroyed. It is a courageous visual reminder of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine these past 70 years.

Slide 3 - another Israeli peacemaker is Sapir Cohen, who was kidnapped on October 7 and held by Hamas for 2 months in Gaza. Sapir gives this testimony. "Every day in captivity I said "thank you God for sending me to this place. I feel all the power that you gave me to keep me strong and help others. Thank you, God, for all the angels you sent me to this hell." Some of the angels were Palestinian - although she's been playing that down recently. The first home they were kept in - the homeowner kept checking on the hostages to make sure they weren't harmed. One Palestinian captor was different and couldn't believe children had been taken. He gave her extra food after the others had gone to sleep. Other angels ironically were Russians. She was released by negotiation with Russia and Qatar as her boyfriend and his mother and grandmother were Russian born. Despite the grim circumstances, Cohen says, while in captivity, she had a spiritual revelation. "I felt peace and I didn't understand how I could feel it in that situation."

Dr. Kenneth Bailey, author of *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes* as lived through 7 wars in 40 years - that's a war every 5 years. He says, when people ask him How do you keep hope in the midst of such violence? He says I remember the Christmas story. I am not amazed by human evil or surprised by human capacity for violence. It hovers over the Christmas story - the part we never act out in children's Christmas pageants. The birth of Christ and the visit by the wisemen seeking him results in the death of innocents. And yet alongside the violence is the never-ending calls of the prophet Isaiah in Handel's *Messiah*: He was despised and rejected by others, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Surely, he has borne our infirmities and carried our disease. He was wounded for our violence, crushed for our hatred. Out of his anguish he shall see light. (Is.53:11-12)

May we have the courage to follow Jesus, the Prince of Peace who made peace possible this coming new year. It's a long hard journey beginning with peace in our own hearts. If anyone would like to make that commitment to peace public through baptism or joining the church on Jan. 12, please let us know. Let us pray: Thank you God for the Word made flesh in Jesus to reconcile and make new. We proclaim God with us in Jesus, our hope and our peace.

Sing: Hope of Abraham and Sarah #807