

Breaking Bread, Finding Hope:
Reflection for Jerusalem and Holy Land Sunday 2024

By Christopher Sanford Beck

In May of 2023, I had the beautiful opportunity of participating in the Young Adult Pilgrimage to the Holy Land with a group of incredible individuals from across Canada. The pilgrimage experience and the memories from Nazareth, Galilee, and Jerusalem, as well as many other remarkable places through Israel and the West Bank, have often been at the forefront of my mind over the past twelve months.

For Jerusalem and Holy Land Sunday, our theme is *Breaking Bread, Finding Hope*. There was no shortage of bread broken during the Young Adult Pilgrimage—considering both the Eucharists and the many special meals we shared together. My photos of the Sea of Galilee and ancient places of teaching and worship are punctuated with shots of our full tables and phenomenal meals.

When I consider this year's theme, one memory that stands out for me is of our group's time in Nazareth. While staying with the Sisters of Nazareth, just steps away from the Basilica of the Annunciation, we were privileged to meet with Rev. Nael Abu Rahmoun at Christ Anglican Church. He introduced us to several young people from his congregation, with whom we shared stories and experiences of our lives as Christians and sang songs together in the sanctuary.

Later, one of the young adults we had met came to visit us at the Sisters of Nazareth, bearing a massive box of baklava to share with us. We enjoyed the treats together on a rooftop terrace looking out to the hills of Nazareth, which are dense with twinkling lights. Through our conversations, however profound or mundane the topics, we saw more than a twinkle of hope—hope for a good life with family and loved ones, with rooftop terraces and sweet treats, with new friends and a global community brought together through Christ. We certainly found hope while breaking bread—or baklava.

While this memory of companionship is striking in its materiality, being in companionship doesn't require the ability to meet face to face. While the young folks we met asked us to spread the message to 'come and visit,' it is an enormous privilege to be able to travel to the Holy Land—but companionship with our siblings in Christ, the Living Stones of the Holy Land, is not a blessing reserved for the few who are able to travel internationally.

In Christ, we are connected regardless of the miles between us. The young adults in Nazareth also asked us to spread the message that there are still Christians in Jesus' childhood home. Though that number continues to dwindle, it is crucial that we not forget about the Living Stones keeping the faith alive. Through prayer, through memory, even through the recognition of the current Christian community carrying the faith when we listen to the Gospel, we can find companionships. With the wonders of technology and the ability to follow the ministries of the Diocese of Jerusalem on the internet, to pray with them and to hear of their ministries, we can all continue to break bread and find hope together.

The entire nature of life in the Holy Land (The Land of the Holy One)—Gaza, Israel, Palestine, and so many others—has changed dramatically since the 7th Sunday of Easter, 2023.

Nevertheless, one hopes that Lutheran and Anglican parishes, congregations, and communities will see 'Jerusalem Sunday' as an opportunity to pray fervently for peace and safety for all.

The place of Jerusalem, of course, is central—indeed, as Psalm 122 exhorts us to do: we are to 'pray for the peace of Jerusalem'. The last five months have been a very challenging time for us all—desperate events have taken place; millions of people, on all sides, live in deepened fear, and horrific images assault us every day. All around us, terrible labels are being hurled at each other and the peace for which we so appropriately pray seems even more elusive than in the past.

For those living in the Holy Land, and beyond, the entire structure of life—patterns of prayer, rest, work, and fellowship—have been interrupted and upended. There are far too many fresh graves. Too many dead to be mourned. And yet, as Jesus uttered those towering words to his disciples: *Peace be with you*, so we earnestly and, always hopeful, proclaim them to the world.

Words matter. We pray for the *people—all the people*—of Israel and Palestine; we pray for the leaders and those in authority—*all those in authority, in all those places*. We pray for **all** those who have died, for **all** those who have lost loved ones—parents, friends, siblings, children.

We do not, one hopes, rush to take sides or lay blame. Instead we try to find compassion and love for all who are impacted by violence and ideology. Those in whose midst we offer our prayers also live in a world where division and name-calling hold too much sway; we as church leaders are called to resist picking up our stones and swords, hard as it may be. We hold space for grief and lamentation for all destruction, in our anger and sorrow and despair we are reminded that God's love is for all who suffer. With knowledge and recognition of the pains and injustices of the past and present, we pray for justice and reconciliation—of true and just and lasting peace for the future. With a foolishness born of Easter hope, we pray that Jesus' words from the Gospel of John may be true for all who suffer and who are filled with despair: "I will not leave you desolate, I will come to you."

Jerusalem, the place, is home to many different faiths—we pray for all of those traditions and all of those people. Jerusalem, the symbol, is always a place where peace finds a home.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus asks his Heavenly Father to '*protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me.*' May we preach and pray for that protection for all God's children in the land of the Holy One.