

Lutheran Church of the Ascension

Mt. of Olives, Jerusalem
28 November 2018 at 8:30 a.m.

Morning Worship: 1 Advent
Luke 21:25-35

Good morning and greetings from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and its Bishop Sani Ibrahim Azar.

Let us prepare our hearts and minds.

Pause...

Stir up your power, Lord and come.

Last week my family and I had Thanksgiving dinner with friends who live in an eclectic neighborhood in West Jerusalem.

Now, these friends are informed American Kabbalists who spend part of their time in Connecticut where the husband teaches Arabic and Hebrew Literary Translation and his wife is a prolific, published author of historic fiction.

Before I tell you about our dinner, I need to tell you a little about the tradition from my North American perspective. The tradition of Thanksgiving is a widely known-mythical story of European pilgrims' arrival to North America and the peaceful celebration of the year's harvest or bounty topped off with a meal between the inhabitants of the land and the newcomers. What we know today is that the narrative is often used to distract us from the end of the story --- the land grab of much of the North American continent leaving natives on small, shrinking portions of land called, reservations.

It is a painful U.S. holiday for Native Americans, whose land was stolen and for the countless other ethnic groups who were forced to toil that land – they are Americans of African, Indian, Chinese, Irish, and Arab descent to name a few who continue to struggle for dignity and respect in the country they built.

Mark Charles a Navajo, Native American and Washington, D.C. correspondent for Native News Online wrote,

“In 1863, Abraham Lincoln established a national day of Thanksgiving while his own ethnic cleansing policies and wars were contributing to a genocide rate [of Native Americans] in the 19th Century of over 60%.”

I tell you this because most people in the U.S. who are conscientious or at least trying to be aware and alert have resisted this celebration. They have called on

others to recognize those suffering through, wars and distress and to stand up against the farce.

To understand this about our beloved national holiday makes us look at our own contributions to calamity and injustices, and this is not easy to accept.

We came together for dinner with our friends not to celebrate the sins of our country but to give thanks for the Kingdom already come near, even in the chaos.

The Saying...

Before dinner, my host shared a saying from of his favorite aunt:

"Aunt Neesh had a saying that she would trot out in difficult times," she announced.
Aunt Neesh would declare:

"I'm learning to accept the cosmos,"

Learning to accept the cosmos....

My host continued:

"The cosmos, as most of you know, means 'order.' We're lucky to have around the table tonight people who in various wonderful ways both accept and resist the cosmos. So, in no particular order..." '

...and then my host moved around the table giving thanks for each guest's strength in the face of personal difficulties of all sorts, and ended by thanking us all for making the cosmos easier to accept or more cosmic.

At the table was me, who just recently recovered from a health crisis, a young American woman who was detained at Ben Gurion airport for two weeks --- accused of supporting BDS ---the civil rights attorney who spent countless hours fighting in her defense and all of the people who participated in our resistance.

My host proposed both acceptance and resistance; to do both is to live in cooperation – not separation from one another or God, this leads to wholeness or redemption.

How can our teachings make the universe more cosmic or more ordered? I suggest by praying diligently that we all escape, and giving thanks before God for those who assist in our redemption.

In the Gospel text Jesus tells us to "Pray that we may have the strength to escape all these things that take place, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."

What are the things? Destruction, sorrow, pain and suffering of all sorts, natural disasters and the text says that even the cosmos will order in such a way to give celestial warnings of the coming of His glory.

Escape...

I ask, must we flee that which is unavoidable?

Yes.

South and Central Americans escape the corruption and dangers of gang controlled villages, The Rohingya people flee religious persecution and genocide, thousands of Syrian and Yemenee refugees escape war ravished countries, and Palestinians in Gaza pushing toward the right of return to their native home land, as the number of Christians in the Palestinian Occupied Territories due to emigration from oppression continues to drop.

This is the image of escape that comes to mind when I read Jesus' plea. There is a Divine agency that will lead to their salvation.

We must remember to cry out like the Psalmist along our journeys:

“O Lord, my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me.”

In our communion of LWF churches we lift our voices in prayer for the wounds of the world to be healed.

To be alert means to take actions that protect those living today with the horror of persecution and death. Stand up, and raise our heads and join the oppressed, the marginalized and the forgotten in their escape to safety.

This isn't an either or text, it is a both/and text of Divine and Human agency. Jesus tells us to stand and be alert and to escape!

To escape is also to be delivered, delivered from evil, delivered from suffering.

Escapism...

However, to experience this deliverance means that those who have comfort and safety must not practice escapism.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.” Luke tells us.

When the Christian community closes its eyes, and ears to the political unrest around the world, or allows our Palestinian siblings in Christ to continue to be

denied human rights under the law and racism, then we are practicing escapism. As the church we must remain alert!

To promote false stories of harmony while a nation crushes its indigenous people is escapism.

A national holiday to celebrate land acquisition should cause us pause as we look at our own sins against the neighbor and how we, like the Psalmist, can asked to be corrected.

“Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.”

May we be delivered from indifference and complacency.

Balance...

Nor are we to slip into dissipation and the worries of this life with hopelessness and the weight of the world’s rubble upon our backs.

God’s faithfulness to those who must escape will give them strength to cross the rivers and oceans, and to those who are citizens, the courage to meet them on the bank and shores of the border.

We are called to co-create with God in righteousness and justice come whatever may. As followers and workers of Christ we are promised that the Kingdom of God, like no other kingdom, is near, today.

Jesus empowers us to aid and to plan our own escape for the glory of the Son of Man.

Some of you will stay extra days to see the self-sustaining work of the church community here, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land.

On behalf of the ELCJHL, we give thanks to you as we learn to accept and resist the cosmos together.

The LFW’s communion of churches is an example of our attempt at fulfilling Jesus’ promise. It is the gathering of community, and thanksgiving for each other (like in Thessalonica, and my dinner gathering) that we experience redemption.

The “end of the world” language we find in the Gospel these last few weeks may feel heavy to bear and other worldly, and the daily struggles of life in many of our countries may seem insurmountable.

But contrary, the lectionary texts point to a hope that is balanced between prayer on our knees for one another and a plot to escape the ravishes of life for all people.

May we learn to accept and resist the cosmos for the struggles of those on the margin, for our personal pains and for our own transgressions. Do not faint for the power and great glory of Jesus' redemption is near.

The vicissitudes of life will come, just as the leaves on the fig tree appears in summer as will the irritations of summer appear; temperatures become sweltering, and bugs buzz our ears, and water here becomes scarce, and we seek shelter from the heat and rays of the sun; but we can be assured of the sweet fruit of the fig.

*May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. **Amen***