

Zoughbi's Christmas message:

"Hope Does Not Disappoint Us" (Romans 5:5)

Hope isn't guesswork or speculation; hope is an active, nonviolent struggle for justice and peace. Hope is shared among friends and allies. At Christmas what we in the Holy Land need most is hope—real, actionable hope, made visible, even tangible in partnership and solidarity. This is no time, then, for mere speculation. It's a crisis of conscience, a moment of decision, a time to be counted. Hope insists, then, on discipline and action, even costly discipleship. And this kind of hope does not, will not disappoint us.

There's no doubt that we are living under political and socio-economic conditions eerily similar to those facing peoples of this land when Jesus was born, 2,024 years ago. In those days, under a violent Roman occupation, Herod the Great massacred all children under the age of three—fearing the divine promise of liberation and the new world order that the baby Jesus symbolized. In their flight to Egypt for refuge, the Holy Family faced the many terrors of their own time—families crying, women trembling, and fear dominating every community and countryside.

Generations later, more than 50,000 have been killed and more than 200,000 wounded in just the last 14 months in Gaza. Seventy percent of those killed are children and women. More than a million women are without homes or safe shelter. At least 17,500 children were killed. We can say one child is killed every 30 minutes!!! Fear grips communities as homes are demolished, hospitals destroyed, schools reduced to rubble, and families erased for civil records. Ambitions are uprooted, dreams are assassinated, and human rights are denied. And amid this devastating despair, extremism, fundamentalism and racism thrive, leaving whole peoples hopeless and helpless. Though the Bible offers 365 assurances that we "be not afraid," fear begets fear, and violence inspires vengeance.

Jesus' story, however, did not end in his family's flight to Egypt. This Christmas we remember that his commitment to God's kingdom led him to resist every empire with love, overturn the many tables of injustice, and walk the Stations of the Cross in faith—embodying in all these ways an ongoing struggle against oppression and hate. If the spirit of Herod persists today, in so many places, its grip on the hearts of nations and peoples, so too does Jesus' vision of nonviolent resistance and reconciling peace. By his word and in his steps, we are steadfast in our passion, in our collaboration, in our shared commitments to a world renewed and redeemed.

What we need then, this Christmas as ever, is actionable hope—meaningful and consequential hope. For too long, calls for a ceasefire have gone unheeded, and pleas for international protection have fallen on deaf ears. For too long, Palestinian communities and Palestinian lives have been rendered invisible, unworthy of basic care

and human dignity, among the powerful and privileged. Apartheid is a sin, and we pay a devastating daily price. When will the nations of the world finally speak to the suffering, to the genocide of our people? When will the International Criminal Court console the oppressed and enforce justice—or does it lack the resolve to act? Again, speculation is not enough. Good wishes will not protect us. Hope must soon be translated into an immediate ceasefire that ends the occupation itself, frees its many prisoners, and opens a bright horizon of justice and peace. Hope should birth security and safety for all people in place of violence, and lead us from a grim deadlock of injustice toward a world of equity and coexistence.

A Path to Justice and Peace

To achieve this, we must commit to the following principles:

1. Collective Responsibility

Blame, victimhood, guilt, and finger-pointing only perpetuate cycles of paralysis and toxicity. Dwelling on victimhood is political foolishness. Building nations around victimhood is suicidal. Only collective responsibility—rooted in a win-win mindset—offers our peoples a way forward and redressing injustice happened to us as Palestinians : a way of justice, abundance and mercy. We have seen this principle at work in South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy and Northern Ireland's peace process, where former enemies now govern together.

In the Bible, Jesus embraces this lesson in Mark 2:1-12. Four individuals, determined and loving, carry a paralyzed man to the home where Jesus is teaching. Faced with an overcrowded house, they climb to the roof, embodying prayerful intention and collective effort. They remove many tiles and soon lower the man down to Jesus himself. This kind of discipleship is, as we know, costly indeed, and not at all cheap and easy. Hope is enacted day by day. It requires bold partnership, persevering solidarity and faithful determination. And their hope is rewarded when Jesus heals the man, restoring him (and thereby their community) to wholeness.

Collective responsibility requires struggle, then, on three fronts:

- Palestinians must persist in their pro-active nonviolent resistance to end Israeli apartheid and occupation. In particular, nonviolence aims to defeat injustice, not people; and it insists that the universe will ever be on the side of justice.
- Israelis advocating peace and human rights must escalate their own nonviolent struggle toward preventing their government's role in the occupation and ethnic cleansing of Palestine.
- Third parties—including civil society, NGOs, state agents, religious communities and international organizations—must empower the weak and hold the strong accountable. From these partners we need not just platitudes, but accountability and courage.

2. Justice

In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail (1963) Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” The most potent justice, to be sure, is not vengeance, but restorative justice. And this is the path forward for us. The story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) exemplifies this. When confronted by Jesus, the tax collector repents, returning his ill-gotten gains, and seeking redemption and right relationship with the community. Justice must redress wrongs, meet the needs of the oppressed, and ensure reparations. For peoples of faith, justice is necessarily inspired by love and faith. “Resistance is a right and duty for the Christians,” reads the Kairos Palestine Document (2009); “but it is resistance with love as its logic. It is thus a creative resistance—for it must find human ways that engage the humanity of the enemy.” Restorative justice seeks redemption through reparations, and right relationships through meaningful and enacted justice. It is not only the end of our struggle, but the only means to that end.

3. Transformation

Transforming hate and anger into compassion is essential. Saul, once a persecutor of Christians, became Paul—a cornerstone of Christianity—after his own personal transformation. Similarly, figures like De Gaulle in Algeria and De Klerk in South Africa exemplify transformative leadership. Transformation at personal, community, and international levels requires apologies from perpetrators, genuine forgiveness from the oppressed, and systemic change with reparations and compensation. Again, hope is not speculative; it flourishes in personal commitment and community action. Leaders are renewed in spirit by nonviolence and spiritual practice and costly care for the common good. Divided communities are made whole by steadfast attention to justice, truth, confession and forgiveness. Truth and reconciliation efforts, as seen in South Africa and Northern Ireland, provide powerful and urgent models for healing and justice.

4. Faith

Too often, religion has sharpened the weapons of grievance and division. “Fear and anger are a threat to justice,” writes Bryan Stevenson in Just Mercy. “They can infect a community, a state, or a nation, and make us blind, irrational, and dangerous.” But religion need not be a driver of hate and oppression, but can be, a resource in our work for justice and reconciliation. Faith is crucial—not in religiosity, but in spirituality as a force for justice and peace. A truly inclusive spirituality can combat ideologies of hate and foster coexistence. “Every valley shall be lifted up,” preaches Isaiah, “and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.” Faith inspires in peoples of many traditions a collaborative practice of solidarity and mercy. “Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,” says Isaiah, “and all people shall see it together.” We walk this way together, arm in arm, brothers and sisters, all. And a higher power walks at our side.

5. Learning from History

History is a teacher if we only choose to learn. The philosopher George Santayana famously said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." The transformational journeys of other nations, from ending apartheid to resolving sectarian conflict, offer plentiful lessons. But we can and must remember. We who are committed to restorative justice must dedicate ourselves to curiosity, learning and discovery. Building bridges and creating a culture of acceptance—as others before us have done—are keys to achieving just peace, and thereby replacing the deadly dialogue of arms with the generous arms of dialogue.

6. Hope

Hope, again, is not naive optimism or despairing pessimism: it is an active, nonviolent and shared struggle for justice and peace. Hope is fueled by a spirituality of love, sense of costly discipleship and persevering justice. Hope is bolstered by relationships, consequential friendships in communities of resistance and compassion. And hope embraces God's new kingdom of love—quickened by reconciliation and justice—even in the midst of the warring spirits of the empire. As Paul says in Romans 5:5, "Hope does not disappoint us." "Hope does not disappoint us." Instead, it sustains us—as it has friends in South Africa, Northern Ireland and elsewhere—on the challenging road toward justice and reconciliation.

Indeed, as Richard Leach's hymn says, "Hope is a candle, once lit by the prophets, never consumed though it burns through the years." Often, during this Advent Season, this candle shimmers in our midst, in our churches, homes and towns, symbolizing the hope that continues to shine despite the acute and deadly darkness around us.

What we need this Christmas—as ever—is the hope born in partnership and friendship, the hope forged through struggle and perseverance, the hope revealed in the Gospel of a powerless child whose only power, whose only weapon, whose only promise is Love. May such partnership be ours, yours and ours, as we welcome his kingdom in action, in courage and in our life together.