



# **The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL)**

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## **Speech on the Occasion of the Laying of the Foundation Stone for the new Evangelical Lutheran Church at the Baptismal Site at Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan**

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The Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land  
The President of the Lutheran World Federation**

**Baptismal Site of Jesus at Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan  
6 January 2012**

Your Excellencies and Graces,

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

It is a great pleasure and honor for me to welcome you here along the banks of the River Jordan. You have gathered together from near and far to meet here at Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan, just as people once came from near and far at the call of John the Baptist. And it is here in this place in which God met with and spoke to humanity in the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We celebrate today the feast of Epiphany, which is known for many churches as the Feast of Baptism. The Feast of Epiphany spans six weeks in which it concentrates on the manifestation of the true humanity and personhood of Jesus—the promised Messiah—to the people who were living around Jesus as well as to us.

This is one of the oldest celebrations in the Christian church year, older even than Christmas. For it was not until the Christianization of the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine I that Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup> was celebrated as a feast. According to tradition, the first Christmas we know to have been celebrated in such a way was celebrated in 386 CE. However, prior to that, Christmas and Epiphany were celebrated together in one day on January 6<sup>th</sup>—a tradition that continues to be upheld within the Armenian Orthodox Church.

In this way, the Feast of Epiphany was understood to celebrate the manifestation of God in Christ as a Savior to our world. Through it was declared the glory of God and God's love toward humanity in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who came among us for the sake of the salvation of humanity and the reconciliation of all of God's creation. As is written in Titus 2:11 "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all."

At the same time, the Feast of Epiphany was one of the times in which new believers were baptized into the early church. And in many of our Lutheran churches around the world the Feast of Epiphany continues to be a feast of mission. For it is a feast in which the message of the love of the triune God is manifested to the world.

In the Orthodox Church is still sung this day:

"When you were baptized in the Jordan we devoted ourselves to the triune God,  
for the voice of the Father witnessed in proclaiming you God's beloved son, and  
the Spirit of God rested upon you, confirming you the incarnation of the Word.  
As you have been manifested for us we pray for you our Lord Jesus Christ."

This is the core message of Epiphany. This is an ecumenical message.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, John the Baptism proclaimed a baptism of repentance, but Jesus' baptism at Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan meant two things:

- 1) The baptism of Jesus is a divine manifestation that Jesus' public service has started. Therefore, Jesus' baptism is linked not only with the cross, but with the cross is linked with resurrection.
- 2) Secondly, heaven reaches out and meets earth at the Jordan and we hear at Jesus' baptism the voice of God the Father saying: "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). And the Spirit of God descends like a dove and alights on Jesus. In this way, the Baptism of Jesus and our own baptism become a living witness to the one triune God who reaches out in love toward humanity for the sake of their salvation. For God wants for God's people life abundant in dignity and peace with God and with God's people. So here at the Jordan was the manifestation of God, by the Holy Spirit, through Christ Jesus, and in that, the manifestation of the love of God to every human being.

In Lutheran theology we baptize infants according to our understanding of Baptism as a gift of God given through grace by faith, and not because of our works. In Baptism we carry Christ and becomes heirs, with Christ, of the promises of God. To this gift of grace and promise the whole church has been continuously witnessing.

And we Arab Christians, too, have carried this witness for 2,000 years. Our existence has always been a call to be apostles of love to the world and to be integrally involved in our society, in which God has called us to carry out the call of our Baptism as living witnesses to ourselves and to others.

Because of our covenant of Baptism we have stood steadfast in this place, as we have stood steadfast to our calling to be instruments of peace, brokers of justice, defenders of truth, advocates for the voiceless, promoters of human rights, including the rights of children and women, and ministers of reconciliation in service for the sake of all humanity.

Today, we renew our baptismal covenant and witness again to the manifestation of God, by the Holy Spirit, through Christ Jesus, and to the love of God, through which we are all called. And we break ground today as we begin to build this new church to the glory of God and the service of all Christians—not only Lutherans—who wish to come to this place to pray and renew their baptismal promises.

For this reason, and in the name of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) who represents more than 70 million Christians worldwide, I hereby express our gratitude to His Majesty King Abdullah II for this royal gift that he has given us of this land for the building of a church and a retreat center. I also send our deep appreciation, love and gratitude to his Royal Highness Prince Ghazi, the Special Advisor for Religious Affairs, whose work has made everything smooth throughout the steps to this point. This work and dedication has shown again the strong relationship between this one nation, in which Muslims and Christians have lived side-by-side for centuries in national unity. And through this national unity, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has also become a hub of Muslim-Christian dialogue, of which I am proud.

Finally, as we today hold this service of dedication, our first service here, on the Feast of Epiphany, so I call on all Lutheran churches, both the local congregations of the ELCJHL and the global communion of Christian churches in the Lutheran tradition to make this a new tradition, and invite you all to come on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January to celebrate the Feast of Epiphany at the Baptismal Site at Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan in the spirit of love and ecumenism.

I hope that next year our service might be in the newly completed church, where we will pray once again to the Lord to help us to continue to carry the message of love to those around us, wherever we may find ourselves.

*The Rt. Rev. Dr. Munib A. Younan  
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