



# The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land

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*Genesis 33:1–11 | Matthew 9:9–13 | Preaching: Isaiah 1:10–17*

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The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

It is a great honor and privilege for me and my wife, Suad, to be with you here in Münster. I thank you for the recognition being bestowed on me today. I receive this honorary doctorate as recognition of the work we are doing for the glory of God in my country, in my church, in the Middle East as a whole, and in the Global Lutheran Communion.

I come to you today from Jerusalem. When I left my city, I was very depressed about our present situation. Jerusalem is supposed to be a city of peace and reconciliation, a place where the dividing wall has been brought down. In these past weeks, it has been brought to our attention again and again that we are faced with the fact that certain forces want to transform the political conflict within Israel and Palestine into a religious conflict. In the name of religion, these forces are working to change the status quo of many different arrangements and relationships in this city of two peoples—Palestinians and Israelis—and three faiths—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

The Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, consisting of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Patriarchs and Bishops of Jerusalem and the Sharia Courts in Palestine, have issued a statement lamenting that “the site that Muslims refer to as the Haram al Sharif and Jews refer to as the Temple Mount, has become a major focus of the conflict in the Holy Land.” Together—as Muslims, Christians and Jews—we stated clearly that in Jerusalem “our respective attachments to our holy places should not be a cause of

bloodshed.” If the integrity and current status quo of each holy place is not respected, “we are deeply worried over the possibility the political conflict will turn into a violent religious conflict. In that case, all of us are losers - except extremists on all sides.”

I must be clear: no religion has a monopoly on extremism. In addition to violent expressions of Islamist extremism which harm Christians, Jews and moderate Muslims alike, we are seeing a growth in Jewish extremism, especially among some settler groups. While Christian Zionism can seem less directly harmful to human flourishing, Arabs are very aware of how Christian Zionists justify and promote state violence by “blessing” wars against certain enemies as reflecting the will of God. All of these forms of extremism drive us away from relationship with one another, harming our shared capacity to draw create a sustainable future in which all human communities can flourish.

In the Middle East and in many other parts of the world, emerging groups are competing to claim who is more religious, who drives God’s agenda, who can most brutally use their religion to oppress others. They are emerging from what they feel is a period of humiliation to offer new political theologies and attempt to create new political orders. These groups seek to hold all of us hostage; they create fear in us, whether or not that fear is justified.

Using religion to justify their political ends, these groups claim to speak in the name of God and fight in the name of religion. They use the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, or the Qur’an to justify occupation and violence, persecution and oppression. The extremism we see often has very little to do with religion at all. They pick from the scriptures not the spirit but the letter. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3.6).

What we are seeing is, in fact, religiously sanctioned or religiously justified political extremism. In order to achieve a particular political or economic goal, certain leaders concoct interpretations of religion which mobilize people toward that goal. Even though some of the individuals who have been drawn into extremist groups may be sincere in their religious motivations, their leaders cynically manipulate religion for more worldly goals. As Charles Kimball has said, “Whatever religious people may say about their love of God or the mandates of their religion, when their behavior toward others is violent and destructive, when it causes suffering among their neighbors, you can be sure the religion has been corrupted and reform is desperately needed.” When, on

the other hand, “religion remains true to its authentic sources, it is actively dismantling these corruptions.”<sup>1</sup>

Hear again parts of our reading from Isaiah: “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord.... When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? ... When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. [R]emove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (11, 12, 15–17)

The Middle East today is being held hostage by people and groups who appeal to religion but have forgotten the basic outcome of faith in God. Instead of rescuing the oppressed and defending the orphan, more widows and orphans are being created every day. They have convinced themselves that God wants them to kill the *kafir*, the infidel and the unbeliever, that God grants them the right to exclude anyone else from land they believe is theirs. Their aim is to kill any acceptance of diversity and pluralism in civil society. These extremists who claim to jealously love God are showing that they do not love their neighbor. But as John says in his first letter, “Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars” (1 John 4.20). True religion is to love God and the neighbor as oneself.

True religion is what Jesus said in Matthew 22: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind [and] you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (36–40). This same message was declared by 138 Muslim scholars in 2007 when they presented “A Common Word between Us and You.” Their goal was to break down walls of division and suspicion by inviting “Christians to come together with us on the basis of what is common to us, which is also what is most essential to our faith and practice: the Two Commandments.” The core of religion is found in loving the neighbor who is different.

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Isaiah’s message is echoed by the prophet Amos, who says, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5.21–4).

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 47.

What Charles Kimball calls the “active dismantling” of corrupted religion is the vision of Isaiah and Amos; it is the vision of God. Together, we are called to challenge the voice of religiously-sanctioned extremism and to correct any complicity our churches or governments might have in feeding the capacity of extremists to promote conflict. As followers of Jesus, we are called to raise a critical, prophetic voice to both governmental and religious leaders. We must inform them that true religion is a constructive force that works against all forms of extremism, violence, and oppression. We must not seek to counter extremism with arms alone, but by offering a constructive vision for the future of our communities. At the same time, we must not be complicit, offering silence of the pyramids.

We cannot blame local groups alone for the suffering we now experience in the Middle East. Those who pervert justice and create orphans are fed by many outside forces. The smell of blood filling our nostrils in the Middle East does not come from our region alone. The merchants of hate have been welcomed by the merchants of arms. While in the past we have been told that an equal amount of weaponry on all sides leads to peace through deterrence, the Middle East is facing a situation in which the arms merchants decide who should live in peace and who should be ravaged by war. These merchants include the manufacturers of weapons, but also the governments that supply them. Today, our people are crying out for peace and reconciliation based on justice and the respect of human dignity. We are faced with too many “rulers of Sodom” and “people of Gomorrah” who refuse to let the people live in peace. Our Middle East does not need more machine guns, F-35 fighter planes, attack submarines, Cobra helicopters and tanks. We already have too many weapons, enough to destroy the Middle East 650 times! Instead, our Middle East needs to be fed by Isaiah’s plea: to seek justice for the oppressed, to rescue the orphan, and to plead for the widow.

We are called to promote the vision of Jesus Christ for a world living in peace with justice and reconciliation based in mutual forgiveness. I am often asked what the future and role of Arab Christians might be in response to the challenges we are facing today. My response is that we are called to continue being instruments of peace, brokers of justice, initiators of dialogue, defenders of human rights, promoters of gender justice in a patriarchal society, ministers of reconciliation, and apostles of love. This is our calling in our context. We best follow the call of Jesus when we are building civil society for the good of all our neighbors. We thus call for equal citizenship with equal rights based on human rights, freedom of religion, freedom of speech and gender justice. Our future is not found in emigration, but by being involved and engaged in our societies with the values of the Gospel of Love.

We see a clear witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus in today's brief story from the Gospel of Matthew. After Jesus calls Matthew to be one of his followers, Matthew evidently invites him to a meal with several of his fellow tax collectors. While the first question of some of the religious leaders is to cluck their tongues and ask "Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?" Jesus simply sits down for the meal. That's how it is in the Middle East: if you are asked to join a meal, it means that you are beloved and reconciled with the host. It's as simple as that.

It's simple, of course, unless your interpretation of God's will is one that builds walls of separation and exclusion, walls of protection for your personal holiness. But that is not the witness of Jesus. Jesus accepts the cup of tea. Jesus receives the piece of bread from the tax collector's hand. Jesus invites the tax collector and the sinner into relationship with him and with God. So must Jesus' disciples be today, with passion for the church and for the world.

As followers of Jesus, we are well-equipped to offer a different witness in the face of extremism. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the church leaders in Ephesus, "In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (2.13–14). This witness of inclusion and the cessation of hostilities does not extend only to the relationship between Christians and Jews. It extends to the relationship of God to all human beings and all religions. While religiously-sanctioned extremism is based on the principles of exclusion and oppression—often erupting into expressions of violence—the witness of Jesus Christ is based on the principle of receiving a piece of bread as a gift freely offered, inviting others into God's ready embrace. The witness of Jesus calls us to accept the Other—despite their religion, race, gender or denominational and political affiliation—ensuring that they are able to receive and enjoy their full rights as fellow children of God.

The witness of Jesus is one of radical inclusivity, rejection of human boundaries of holiness. This reconciling inclusivity is found in the cross of Christ. There, on the cross, he received us and reconciled us, even though we do not deserve it. In the space of life opened up by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, religious extremism has no motivation and no power.

This means that the ministry of reconciliation we share is not only a relationship between ourselves and God. Indeed, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us to "leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift"

(Matthew 5.24). Is this not the same vision of justice cried out by the prophets Isaiah? Reconciliation is therefore a matter of establishing right relationships, of nurturing justice between human individuals and communities, of caring for and liberating the persecuted, oppressed, marginalized, and abused. Reconciliation happens when we pull down every dividing wall in the name of Christ for the sake of our neighbor who is different from us.

The former President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, succinctly put it this way: “In today's multicultural world, the truly reliable path to coexistence, to peaceful coexistence and creative cooperation, must start from what is at the root of all cultures and what lies infinitely deeper in human hearts and minds than political opinion, convictions, antipathies, or sympathies—it must be rooted in self-transcendence.” Human beings can realize the goals of liberty and reconciliation only if we do not forget the Creator and Redeemer who endowed us with these values.<sup>2</sup>

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It is good to be with you in Germany, a country that has experienced many waves of trauma and division as well as many experiences of reunification and reconciliation, both internally and externally. After the so-called World Wars of the Twentieth Century, you had to work to become reconciled with your European neighbors, fostering a system of harmony through mutual trust. Two weeks ago, you celebrated removal of the wall in Berlin. That event brought another process of reconciliation with your own people.

The celebrations surrounding memories of the fall of the wall were accompanied by a warning from Mikhael Gorbachev that the world is on the brink of a new Cold War. Even when certain walls come down, many other psychological walls of division, hatred, false power, hegemony, and prejudice against others, are built every day. The fall of the Berlin Wall reminds us: all human-made walls will eventually be destroyed. This goal is served by the prophetic role of interreligious dialogue which builds bridges of understanding and the acceptance of diversity in our broken and globalized world.

The experiences of your country strengthen my optimism that in my own context the walls will come down and reconciliation will be achieved. The walls in my land are not eternal; they will eventually come taken down. In the meantime, they will not bring security. The separations they maintain will instead only create more hatred. Walls need to come down so reconciliation

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<sup>2</sup> Václav Havel, “The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World.” Speech delivered at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, July 4, 1994. Available online at

can be achieved. What happened to the wall in Berlin is a sign of hope for us in the Holy Land. It is my hope that the concrete and steel used to build walls today will soon be used by Palestinian and Israeli children to build bridges of understanding, justice, and reconciliation.

What would Isaiah prophesy if we were come today to the Middle East and back to his home in Jerusalem? What would he say to Israelis and Palestinians? In what way would he accuse the United States and the European Union? Would he tell us that we have achieved his vision or would he accuse us like he accused his own people so many centuries ago? Would he be impressed with those who claim to be implementing God's will while they trample their neighbors? In today's reading, Isaiah tells the people that God does not hear our prayers when our hands are full of blood. Or would he again place us in the court of the accused, calling us to give up our ambitions of exclusive holiness, to cease to do evil to our neighbor, to wash the blood from our hands?

For the vision of reconciliation based on justice to be achieved throughout the Middle East, it must first be achieved among Israelis and Palestinians. Among today's politicians, there is now little willingness to do the hard work of establishing a just peace. They must see that reconciliation based on justice is a priority for their countries, for the communities in their care. To achieve this goal, we must hold both religious and political leaders to account, drawing them away from the temptations of religiously-sanctioned political extremism toward the promised fruits of coexistence and hope.

We have a choice. We can let those who would carve the world into false dichotomies—of us and them, good and evil-doers, tax collectors and the righteous—define our world and how we engage it. Or we can resist xenophobia and exclusion, allowing our mind to be transformed by God's embrace. Instead of instilling a fear of the other that promotes anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, or Christianophobia, we can instead see others as *imago Dei*—persons created in the image of God. We should never allow fear, hate, and extremism to hold our world hostage. Any move toward dehumanizing the other harms our own humanity as well. "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4.18). Love overcomes fear, allowing hope to reside within us. This is reconciliation par excellence.

I call on the church in the world today to be prophetic; this is not only to please the policies of its government; but when it calls its government to work for reconciliation and justice not only for its own people but for all people who are downtrodden. That is the witness of Jesus and the prophets, including Isaiah.

It is a witness as relevant today as it was millennia ago. God calls the church today to pursue justice.

Building on a passage in the Babylonian Talmud, Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho tells the story of a rabbi who gathered his students together and asked them:

‘How do we know the exact moment when night ends and day begins?’

‘It’s when, standing some way away, you can tell a sheep from a dog,’ said one boy.

The Rabbi was not content with the answer. Another student said:

‘No, it’s when, standing some way away, you can tell an olive tree from a fig tree.’

‘No, that’s not a good definition either.’

‘Well, what’s the right answer?’ they asked.

And the Rabbi said:

‘When a stranger approaches, and we think he is our brother, that is the moment when night ends and day begins.’

The day breaks when we recognize that the Other who is different from us is a sister or brother. This is what we need in our world today. This is what we need in the Middle East. It is my dream that one day Palestinians will see the face of God in the Israelis and that the Israelis will see the face of God in us Palestinians. When we see the face of God in the Other, we will be recognizing one another’s humanity. This recognition of human dignity will lead us to mutually recognize and promote one another’s human, civil, religious, and political rights. Only then will the Holy Land become a land flowing with milk and honey for both Palestinians and Israelis alike.

Sometimes I wonder how this vision can be realized. As a Christian liberated by grace and justified by faith, I trust that it is not a far-fetched dream. It is our evangelical call to transform our world from hatred to love, from animosity to trust, from division to reconciliation, from denial of the Other to acceptance and embrace. It is our evangelical mission to reconcile, to empower, and to transform our planet into a world our children deserve, a world with the values of love, a world of peace based on justice and reconciliation based on forgiveness. May Jesus Christ, our reconciler, continue to give us the power of love and kindle in our hearts Passion for the Church and for the World.

“Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

And may “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding ... guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4.7). Amen.



