

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

Sermon for Celebration of The Rev. Mitri Raheb

Preached by Bishop Dr. Munib Younan

Friday, 9 June 2017

The Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, Bethlehem

Exodus 33:13

“Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.”

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, Dear Brother Pastor Mitri,

For this service honoring you, I have chosen the verse of your ordination 30 years ago.

I took this verse as a theme for my sermon in order that it will continue to guide you in your life. When you were ordained as a pastor you stood in front of the church, asking the Lord the same thing Moses asked for; you have asked for grace in your pilgrimage of leading your people. For Moses said, “Teach me your way in order that I may find grace in your eyes.” Grace is never a merit of achievements or knowledge or signs. Grace is always a blessing from God. We Christians believe that grace is a free blessing granted to us by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, not for any merits in us but for

the merit of his precious blood that he has shed on the cross for us, in order to free us from the powers of sin and oppression and to guide us in the path of love, dignity, and freedom. Those who depend on this grace will find grace. Those who commit themselves, their lives, and the life of their ministry to the grace of our Lord Jesus will be shown the way of true grace. Dear Mitri, you have started the life of your ministry with a well-known Arabic song, "*Can the Lord Perform Miracles on Me*" and the Lord answered,

"Yes, oh yes, today I shall work in you and in your midst."

Personally, I have witnessed your acceptance of the call many years ago in Emmaus Church. From your beginnings, when you were a part of the youth gatherings that I used to lead, I found in you a young man called to serve, a young man who thinks and has a vision and was eager to honor the ministry.

I remember that you could always present a challenge but would find a solution.

I remember that you were not satisfied with a simple Gospel exposition. You wanted to go deeper into the Gospel.

I remember the youth conferences in Haifa when you with your colleague, Sani Ibrahim Azar, invited me into your room at a late hour to discuss the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man. Both of you were special to me.

I remember during the years of your theological education, you would call me every now and then to hear about the news of the church and to analyze it. When you graduated from university you were appointed by the ELCJHL to the ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, after the long service of the late Bishop Naim Nasser, but you did not stop there. You continued to ask, "Can the Lord perform miracles on

me?" And the Lord answered, " Yes, oh yes, today I will work in you."

You ministered this congregation, you preached, and you taught and in your preaching you followed the method of contextualizing the divine inspiration into a Palestinian-Bethlehem context. You mastered contextual theology and you discovered that the boundaries of your ministry should be expanded from Christmas Church, while including the Christmas congregation. You started to fly with your dreams and you asked, "Teach me Lord your ways in order that I may know you and find grace in your eyes." I don't doubt that our Lord Jesus has shown you the way and that you have walked in that way, and expanded the boundaries of your congregation, but what characterizes you is that all of this springs out of your deep theological understanding, out of a deep Evangelical Lutheran theology that is based on the grace of Christ.

The church has allowed you to fly in your visions and your dreams, and to grow in serving your society and your people, and this empowers the youth to remain steadfast on the soil in Palestine and to implant hope in hopelessness. This is exactly the same vision of the Arab Evangelical/Palestinian church.

When you shared with me your visions and dreams, you, me and Mr. Jalan Muallem shared that vision, becoming partners in that pastoral vision. You, Mitri, have implemented these dreams quickly. But what is important is that, while you continue to serve, to dream, and to implement, you do not forget the verse of your ordination: The grace of Jesus is the one who has guided you and will continue to guide you. Continue to depend on this grace.

Dear Mitri, I could record in books many stories from the last 30 years because you have been a partner in the life of this church, and you will remain a partner. This partnership has developed into

friendship and brotherhood, even if sometimes we disagree on how to lead this church or in our political position, or in administrative issues. We have learned together with our colleagues that with the grace that God has given to us, ministry is never individualistic rather it is always in community and for the sake of the Lord of the Church.

You, Mitri, have kept the balance between your congregation, the development of the Diyar Consortium, and for the good of the mother church. For this reason, you have acquired a local pulpit, an international podium, and a regional role. All of your roles are essential so that the world may see the role of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in serving humanity and restoring dignity. The serving church is the church that never depends on its numbers, but on the grace of God that shows Her the way of service.

After 30 years of ministry to this congregation you have asked to be transferred from the ministry of the Christmas Church congregation to the ministries of Diyar Consortium. Please know that even though you are designated to Diyar, you will remain a pastor in the church that you love, and that loves you.

Your service will continue in our ecclesiastical institution.

You will continue to ask the Lord “Can the Lord perform miracles on me?” And You will answer yes, oh yes, today the Lord will show me the new grace.”

We honor you Mitri after we have celebrated the Feast of Pentecost, the Feast of the Bestowal of the Holy Spirit on the Disciples, and at the same time we commemorated 50 years of Israeli Occupation. I tell you that the pastor is the one who needs to be guided by the Holy Spirit and needs to find grace in the Lord in order that they can work for dignity for every human being, and work to end occupation

in order that our people may live in freedom, dignity, justice, and equality.

You, Mitri, do this together and with your other colleagues, and it develops into a prophetic call.

On behalf of myself, my family, the ELCJHL, on behalf of the Bishop-Elect Sani Ibrahim Azar, the President of the Synod, the Council, the Director of Education, our social and health institutions, we honor you along with the Congregational Council and congregation of Christmas Lutheran Church.

Please consider that this honoring is to motivate you to continue in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to find grace in serving the church and the society, and to remain in the call that Christ has given you.

May God bless your wife and your two daughters, and may God bless you, Mitri, as you continue to find grace in the eyes of the Lord.

May the peace of the Lord that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds on the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ our Savior. **Amen**