

Farewell Address of the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb to the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church

At the completion of his work as its pastor in order to give his full-time ministry to academic work and continuing to be a Palestinian Christian voice for justice, freedom and peace.

June 9th 2017

“As for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:6)

Your Beatitudes; Your Eminences; and Your Excellencies;

Honorable Foreign Ambassadors; Fellow Pastors; Members of the Presidential Committee for Ecclesiastical Affairs; and our dearly beloved Church Family:

Some thirty years ago – more precisely in May 1987 and just prior to my return from Germany – this pastorate of the Christmas Church here in Bethlehem was entrusted to me.

At that time, serving this congregation would not have been my preference, for I had high hopes to become pastor in Ramallah or Beit Jala; but I perceived that in the Church’s decision there was a divine call. I accepted without hesitation. Only few months had passed since my arrival before the outbreak of the First Intifada; most of the confrontation occurred around this church. I witnessed the arrest of the youth and adult members of the church by the Israeli soldiers – without charges or trials. My doctorate offered me no help in situations such as those. I only had to listen to the sufferings of my people, as well as to their hopes.

God willed that I begin my ministry at the time of the Intifada. My prayer on the day of my ordination on May 22, 1988, was “O my God, You see my people vacillating between fear and hope, at times frightened by doubt, at other times overwhelmed by joy. Will You not give me a prophetic word to enlighten their path? ...a word that would unveil their present to them and illumine their future?” That was the essence of my call!

A week later, I was installed as pastor of this congregation. For that day, I chose as a motto for my ministry here the words of Jesus: “You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.” I said then: “The Land of Palestine is in need of you, fellow Christians! For what good is this land without you? You are its salt, you will restore to it its flavor. You are but a small segment of the Palestinian people, but your significance far outweighs your numbers.” I concluded my sermon with these words: “Therefore rise, O Church of the Middle East, to the place that has been prepared for you; be mindful of your vocation. And you, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, re-awaken to serve your people and your homeland; come, you the Bethlehemite congregation, let us light up the streets of our town keeping before us what the Lord has said to you – that you are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. Be just that, for the Land is in need of you, and the world awaits you!” That became the vocation of this church!

Throughout the course of the past thirty years, the church responded to its call; it recognized that it has a mission in this Land, a mission to serve its people. This little flock that had lived on the margins of the ancient city became a lighthouse – not only for this city but an international, global magnet that hosted heads of states, cabinet ministers and innumerable delegations and pilgrims who came to taste the flavor of Palestinian

Christianity, and to become acquainted with its role in this society and, more particularly, a society under the siege of occupation.

For thirty years we have lived together for many historical moments...and at each stage of the journey we left remarkable footprints: At the beginning of the First Intifada we launched the writing of a Palestinian Christian theology; with the advent of the [Palestinian] Authority, we recovered the property on Mount Murair; and as part of the Bethlehem 2000 project the International Center of Bethlehem [Dar Annadwa] sprang up. During the Second Intifada, we led the largest peaceful demonstration with a Candlelight Procession invoking "The Light of Right, not the Power of Might."

Through all of this our social mission never took priority over the spiritual life of this congregation. Indeed, the opposite is true – it has always been our spirituality that inspired our social ministry.

During the past thirty years, this family of Christians has learned to take sermons very seriously. A sermon was no longer a boring address to be ignored, but a powerful tool linking the text with the context and the [daily] reality. It helped to re-discover the relation between the Biblical narrative and the Palestinian narrative.

As we studied the Bible together during the special seasons of the Christian Year, this church delved deeper into Biblical truths. There, it understood the meaning of contextual theology and was trained to read the Bible in the Land of the Bible and in its historical and its cultural and geopolitical context.

During the last 30 years, we paid special attention to our youth. To our best ability, we tried to invest in them, and to equip them academically. We sent tens of young persons to foreign universities to acquire new knowledge and understanding. They all came back. Not one of them stayed away. They returned to serve their people and their homeland. Today, those young ones have assumed important positions in the institutions of the church and society. I do not exaggerate if I say that we have been able, during the past thirty years, to stem the tide of emigration; for in all those years only one single family – not more – has left. We can be proud that 5 individuals of this church studied theology; of those, two females received doctoral degrees.

Yes, this church has embraced its call. For that, it has continued to increase in giving – year after year. Each year, it challenged itself to reach a higher giving record...It was as if to say, "It is not how much I can get out of church, but how much can I give to it." If there were to be one test by which the health of the congregation could be gaged, or a barometer of its spirituality, it would be the measure of its giving. Over the years, this congregation has proven to be a spiritual one par excellence.

During all those years, we have given serious attention for the history and heritage of this congregation...We completed a building restoration project from the ground up to the tip of the steeple – so that this church may remain lofty in its witness. Yet we have not only cared about the stones; we have turned our attention to our living stones and heritage. As a result, we published a biography of the late Bishop Naim Nassar, and another about the Reverend Bassem Nijm, and a third about Ms. Karima Abboud, a daughter of this congregation, a female pioneer in the field of photography. Today we are launching our newly-published Arabic history of the church so that it may be within reach of all. Currently, too, in addition to tens of other publications that record an oral history and numerous creative initiatives of our people, we are working on publishing Memoirs of [the late] Tawfik Can`an, the acknowledged father of Palestinian anthropology.

Nor have we overlooked the Lutheran identity. For this we launched the first electronic Arabic website on Luther [and Lutheranism], with an Arabic translation of Luther's most significant Works from German. In addition, my weekly Sunday sermons have been posted

on my personal website that has been visited by numerous preachers from the Levant to Baghdad, and from Egypt to Tetouan [Morocco].

I would not be exaggerating if I say that Bethlehem has become a source of inspiration for many projects of other congregations – for tourism and for culture, even for fundraising. Others have followed our model and borrow our ideas and methods. If this is to mean anything, it should prove that God has willed for us to be a source of inspiration for many.

Today, as I step down from my position as pastor of this congregation, it does not mean that I am leaving the Church. On the contrary, I shall remain a pastor giving my full-time to ministries beyond this flock. There are still many things that I want to accomplish during the remaining chapter of my life: from today onward, my primary preoccupation will be the role of the Church in society; and as I leave this position I have two things that will demand my full attention:

First is the Dar al-Kalima University College that was planted eleven years ago and has become today a “city on a hill.” To date, it has become the largest project of this church since its founding. Second, there is also an urgent need for a Palestinian Christian prophetic voice in international gatherings: a voice that will uphold the truth, that will proclaim liberty and will defend human dignity.

In the past five years, I have participated in establishing several unique Middle Eastern and international platforms for civic engagement and theological networking. These will claim some of my time and effort. Today, I have become increasingly convinced that the reign of God is larger and greater than the Church; thus we cannot confine our work within the walls of the Church. The great wide world is the stage for the work of the Kingdom.

Thirty years have passed. I recall someone saying to me when I first became pastor here, “You will not stay; you will emigrate.” I stayed. I did not emigrate. I carried the church on my shoulders; and the church carried me forward. I did neither emigrate nor surrender my call. On the contrary, I have never any day regretted a moment of my ministry in this church. And I shall remain faithful and sincere to its calling. It is the church of my fathers and my ancestors. My grandfather, Mitri al-Raheb, was the first Bethlehemite to enroll in the Schneller School in 1868.

During the past thirty years, our road was never paved with roses and basils. In fact, neither the winds of politics nor the whims of economy have been in our favor. The Israeli Foreign Ministry has continued to declare war on us. Others, filled with envy and disdain toward us, have fought us from within the Church and from without. Innumerable attempts have sought to destroy our work. All of that has done nothing save to confirm our resolve to strive forward – if only to leave a glimpse of hope for this Land.

When I ponder the past thirty years, I cannot help saying, God has placed us in the right place – Bethlehem. This has all been in God’s good time – despite its insurmountable obstacles: the occupation, the wall, and many other challenges. Together with apposite partners who have believed in our cause and who have never held back their support and encouragement, we have continued to be a witness. God has put in us the right vision, a vision of hope in time of despair, an undertaking of labor without complaint, a mission to proclaim life in the face of a culture of death.

Today, after thirty years, the hour has come to pass that which I too have received – the trust that I have been given – on to my colleague, the Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac. I have not left this congregation before arranging for a smooth transition and making certain that it would be in good and faithful hands, with well-qualified leadership to guide it unto new horizons. So I leave with a soul quite content, with a heart fully convinced that “the One who began a good work in you will see it to completion...”

After thirty and a half years, departure is difficult. For in those years, we rejoiced and laughed together. We dreamed and labored together. We wept and danced together. We broke bread and drank the cup together. We celebrated and heard stories of Himo [the donkey of Jesus' triumphal entry]; and in all of those celebrations we have demonstrated a creative resistance...

After thirty years, departure is difficult. For in them my wife and I have walked together with you in good times and bad, in sickness and in health. We shared in all occasions, fully believing we are one family.

Yes, thirty years, my wife has been my best partner, companion and friend. She has never missed a single opportunity to do more than what might have been required of her as a pastor's wife. Without her it would not have been possible to do all that we did.

Thirty years of hard work. I loved it because it was evidence of God's grace toward me. Wherever I may have failed, it was my own error. To err is human. I alone bear responsibility! If I have offended anyone of you, I ask your forgiveness. As we part, I covet your prayers for me, my wife and our family.

I Thank God for this call, for this church. I thank our bishop, partners, and friends for their continuous support and prayers.