

Evening Sermon for Sweden

Bishop Sani Ibrahim Azar

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?

² My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴ He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵ The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

⁸ The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

It is an honor to be here with you tonight, and to share a Word of hope with you. I bring greetings from the Holy City of Jerusalem, and from your sisters and brothers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. We thank you for your prayers, and for your faithful

accompaniment of our church, as we strive to remain steadfast in the land where the Christian faith was born.

I speak to you this evening as a Palestinian Christian who has lived under military occupation for more than fifty years. The churches of the ELCJHL are all in occupied territory, which means the 2,500 members of our congregations are directly affected by the measures of occupation. Our members struggle with restriction of movement because of the separation wall, but we also struggle with unemployment, housing shortages, and a crushing sense of hopelessness among the young people, which comes from not seeing any valid peace process on the horizon today. It is a difficult time for my church—for your partner church.

Nevertheless, Palestinian Christians do wish to stay in our homeland. We desire to remain in the land where Jesus was born, where he ministered, where he was crucified for our sins, and where he was raised again on the third day, granting us eternal life. We have been in the land for 2,000 years, and we wish to remain for 2,000 more.

So you might ask: Where do you find the strength to do this? How do you find the courage to stay?

In response, I would point you to the Holy Scriptures. The Psalm we just heard, Psalm 121, is a perfect example. It reads:

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
² My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

Our hope comes from the Lord! Palestinian Christians take great comfort and courage from Holy Scripture. When we read the words of the Bible, we don't think of them as fictional stories. We have the great

privilege of walking the streets where such words were composed, and where such stories took place. Therefore, perhaps we have a greater sense that these words are for us today—for **all of us today**. The Bible is a Living Word, a gift of God given freely to strengthen us in difficult times and to challenge us in comfortable times

When Palestinian Christians struggle with the measures of occupation, we do look to the hills, from where our help comes. We look to the hills covered in olive trees, some of which have been rooted and growing since Jesus' time. We look to the hills, where we always see the sun rise after the darkest nights of war, of violence, of prejudice. We look to the Mt. of Olives, where we see Augusta Victoria Hospital, a living witness to the good the Church can do when it works together.

And we look to the hill called Calvary, the place where Our Lord Jesus was crucified and died for the sake of – and in solidarity with—all those who suffer, all those who are oppressed, all those who are occupied.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, our brother Martin Luther said that the Bible is the “cradle in which Christ is laid.” Sadly, sometimes in the Holy Land the Bible is used instead as a weapon. It is used as a tool to justify occupation, to promote extremist views of the end-times and of Jerusalem, and even to deny that Palestinians exist at all. This is, frankly, heresy. The Bible should never divide the people of God. If it is the cradle in which Christ is laid, then it is always a source of Good News, of hope, of liberation, of unity in diversity. The Bible should never be a wall between us. It should always connect us with God, and with one another.

Today I give thanks for the Holy Scriptures which we share, across continents and cultures. I give thanks for the Word of God which strengthens us and encourages us in our mutual struggle for justice, peace, and reconciliation among peoples, nations, and even churches.

And if you are struggling today in your church, in your community, in your life – I invite you also to look to the hills, from where your help will come. God is faithful.

The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

⁸ The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.