

Christmas in Bethlehem: A Liturgy of Lament

On Dec. 23, 2023, the Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, Pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, gave a fierce sermon, "Christ under the Rubble: A Liturgy of Lament." Dr. Isaac, a Palestinian Christian pastor and theologian, designed and placed in his church a quickly famous creche of the infant Jesus lying amid the rubble of destroyed buildings. The following are excerpts from his sermon. The full video is available [here](#).

Christ under the Rubble

We are angry.

We are broken.

This should have been a time of joy; instead, we are mourning. We are fearful. 20,000 killed. Thousands under the rubble still. Close to 9,000 children killed in the most brutal ways. Day after day. 1.9 million displaced! Hundreds of thousands of homes were destroyed. Gaza

as we know it no longer exists. This is an annihilation. This is a genocide.

The world is watching; churches are watching. The people of Gaza are sending live images of their own execution. Maybe the world cares. But it goes on.

We are asking here, could this be our fate in Bethlehem? In Ramallah? In Jenin? Is this our destiny too?

We are tormented by the silence of the world. Leaders of the so-called "free" lined up one after the other to give the green light for this genocide against a captive population. They gave the cover. Not only did they make sure to pay the bill in advance, they veiled the truth and context, providing political cover. And yet another layer has been added: the theological cover with the Western Church stepping into the spotlight....

In our terminology in Palestine, we speak of the Empire. Here we confront the theology of the Empire.



Munther Isaac YouTube channel

The baby Jesus, born under the rubble in Gaza.

A disguise for superiority, supremacy, “chosenness,” and entitlement. It is sometimes given a nice cover using words like mission and evangelism, fulfillment of prophecy, and spreading freedom and liberty. The theology of the Empire becomes a powerful tool to mask oppression under the cloak of divine sanction. It divides people into “us” and “them.” It dehumanizes and demonizes. It speaks of land without people even when they know the land has people—and not just any people. It calls for emptying Gaza, just like it called the ethnic cleansing in 1948 “a divine miracle.” It calls for us, Palestinians, to go to Egypt, maybe Jordan, or why not just the sea?...

This war has confirmed to us that the world does not see us as equal. Maybe it is the color of our skin. Maybe it is because we are on the wrong side of a political equation. Even our kinship in Christ did not shield us. So they say, “If it takes killing 100 Palestinians to get a single Hamas militant, then so be it!” We are not humans in their eyes. But in God’s eyes, no one can tell us that.

The hypocrisy and racism of the Western world is transparent and appalling! They always take the words of Palestinians with suspicion and qualification. No, we are not treated equally. Yet, the other side, despite a clear track record of misinformation—lies—their words are almost always deemed infallible!

To our European friends. I never, ever want to hear you lecture us on human rights or international law again. And I mean that. We are not white—it does not apply to us according to your own logic....

In the shadow of the Empire, they turned the colonizer into the victim, and the colonized into the aggressor. Have we forgotten that the state they talk to was built on the ruins of the towns and villages of those very same Gazans? Have they forgot that?

We are outraged by the complicity of the Church. Let it be clear, friends: Silence is complicity, and empty calls for peace without a ceasefire and an end to occupation—and the shallow words of empathy without direct action—fall under the banner of complicity.

So here is my message: Gaza today has become the moral compass of the world. Gaza was hell on Earth before October 7th, and the world was silent. Should we be surprised at their silence now?

If you are not appalled by what is happening in Gaza; if you are not shaken to your core—there is something wrong with your humanity. If we, as Christians, are not outraged by the genocide, by the weaponizing of the *Bible* to justify it, there is something wrong with our Christian witness, and we are compromising the credibility of our Gospel message!

If you fail to call this a genocide, it is on you. It is a sin and a darkness you willingly embrace.

Some have not even called for a ceasefire. I’m talking about churches.

I feel sorry for you. We will be OK. Despite the immense blow we have endured, we, the Palestinians, will recover. We will rise. We will stand up again from the midst of destruction, as we have always done as Palestinians, although this is by far, maybe, the biggest blow we have received in a long time. But we will be OK.

But again, for those who are complicit, I feel sorry for you. Will you ever recover from this?

Your charity, your words of shock *after* the genocide, won’t make a difference. Words of regret will not suffice for you. We will not accept your apology after the genocide. What has been done, has been done. I want you to look at the mirror ... and ask: Where was I?...

In Gaza today, God is under the rubble. And in this Christmas season, as we search for Jesus, he is not to be found on the side of Rome, but our side of the wall. He is in a cave, with a simple family, an occupied family. He’s vulnerable, barely and miraculously surviving a massacre himself. He’s among the refugees, among a refugee family. This is where Jesus is to be found today.

If Jesus were to be born today, he would be born under the rubble in Gaza.

When we glorify pride and richness, Jesus is under the rubble.

When we rely on power, might, and weapons, Jesus is under the rubble.

When we justify, rationalize, and theologize the bombing of children, Jesus is under the rubble....

This manger is our message to the world today—and it is simply this: this genocide must stop *now*. Let us repeat to the world: *Stop* this genocide *now*.

This is our call. This is our plea. This is our prayer. Hear, O God. Amen.