

A Lenten Invitation: Joining Hands in Prayer



A Palestinian home sits along the edge of Bethlehem, which is surrounded by concrete and wire.

The Joining Hands Initiative of the Presbyterian Hunger Program connects U.S. presbyteries and congregations with networks in nine countries around the world, working together to end hunger and to change the root problems that keep people poor. Groups of churches in 11 U.S. presbyteries are linked to networks in nine countries. Greater Atlanta Presbytery is linked to the Joining Hands for Justice Network of Palestine.

Waiting on Resurrection

In Bethlehem today, there is a 30-foot wall surrounding the city and there are military checkpoints at its entrances. The Israeli government claims the wall is for security, a way to stop terrorists. Palestinians say the wall is a way to annex Palestinian land into Israel since much of it runs deep into Palestinian territory. No one goes in or out without a permit, unless, of course, you are a tourist.

None of the wall surrounding Bethlehem is built along the internationally recognized borders of Israel and Palestine, which were set by the United Nations in 1949 as an armistice line.

The Anastas' are one of the Christian families trapped behind this wall. Claire Anastas' house is not just behind the wall: the only view on all four sides of the house is the wall, just a few feet away.

Once prosperous merchants, the Anastas' house stood on Bethlehem's main street, a few hundred feet from Rachel's Tomb, a site held holy by Jews and Muslims. The tomb is now annexed onto the Jerusalem side of the wall, practically ensuring that it remains a holy site only for Jewish pilgrims and other tourists. Access to the tomb by Bethlehem's Palestinian population is virtually cut off.

Many houses lining the street were destroyed, but the Anastas house was instead surrounded. Two families - with a total of nine children - now live there, scraping together enough to live on, barely getting by. With little access to the street, their businesses have closed and the families are left with debt. They have no money to buy a new house elsewhere and they have reportedly not received compensation from the Israeli authorities.

Daniel, 8, asked his mother: "Mommy, why are we living in a tomb?" His mother says that her children have lost all hope. "They cry at night, 'Mommy, can't you do something?' But there is nothing I can do. I can't offer them anything and this has killed me."

Claire Anastas is pleading that Christians around the world notice her family and help remove the wall so that they can be resurrected into life. "They are burying us alive," she says.

The family name, anastas, means 'resurrected one.' And the Palestinian Christian community here insists that Jesus came to this walled-off world to lead us out of deadness into new life. The Anastas children of Bethlehem are inviting you to pray with them as they await resurrection:

Lord God,

*Author of all life, we confess that we often search for miraculous signs and wonders of your activity in our lives.
We have failed to trust you, or acknowledge that you see far beyond our human capacities.*

As we prepare our hearts to remember Christ's death and the coming joy of His resurrection, we pray that you will bolster our commitment to you that we might believe, even in our unbelief. Likewise, help us to inspire others to faith as your disciples did for us on that first Easter morning at the tomb.

We accept the fragility of life, yet we know that only through you can we serve as agents of hope and healing in a world often as cold as the stone that closed your grave. Instill us with the wisdom and courage to follow where you lead us, and to humble ourselves to seek your guidance in faith. In your name we pray,

Amen.

(Prayer by Michele Finseth, PC(USA) Mission Personnel and Joining Hands facilitator in Palestine; Material is adapted from reflections written by the Ecumenical Advisory Group, International church workers living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories)

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