



MUNTHER ISAAC

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

A PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN NARRATIVE
OF LAMENT AND HOPE



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CHAPTER NINE

LAMENTING IN HOPE

The Nakba Continues

The year 2019 marked seventy-two years since the Palestinian *Nakba*—our catastrophe. For us Palestinians, we do not simply remember the *Nakba*; we continue to live our *Nakba* every day. The refugees have not returned. The West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza are still under military occupation. Palestinians in the state of Israel continue to feel like strangers in their own homeland, especially with the nation-state law that blatantly discriminates against them. Land continues to be taken from Palestinians by force. We are still being crushed and displaced, dehumanized and discredited. Our *Nakba* continues today.

Despite all the promises, endless summits, UN resolutions, religious and lay leaders' callings, we Palestinians are still yearning for our own freedom and independence while seeking justice and equality. Humanly speaking, we have reached a dead-end.

No other place illustrates the tragedy of the Palestinian people more than the Gaza Strip: a small territory of 365 square kilometers with a population of almost two million Palestinians, making it one of the most densely populated areas in the world.

The Gaza Strip was part of the occupied territories of 1967, and when Israel ended its military and settlement presence from the strip in 2005, it kept control of all its borders. It is important to note that 70 percent of Gazans are refugees from the 1948 war.

The Islamic militant group Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, first through winning Palestinian elections over the Fatah party and then through armed force. Since then, Israel (with the help of Egypt) has imposed an air, land, and sea blockade on the Gaza Strip, which effectively isolates it from the rest of the world. The United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross, among others, have characterized Israel's blockage policy as "collective punishment" and have called for Israel to lift its closure.

Gaza today is almost entirely isolated from the world. Israel controls the import of goods and food, while preventing any exporting. Fuel shortages have led to power cuts of up to twenty hours per day, which affects all aspects of life. More than 95 percent of the water supply is undrinkable. Unemployment numbers have reached almost 45 percent, and 80 percent of Gazans depend on some sort of aid. UN reports today speak of an "unprecedented humanitarian crisis" caused by the Israeli blockade, alongside an internal Palestinian divide and the restrictions imposed by the Egyptian authorities on Rafah Crossing.¹

And since the blockade, there have been three major operations by the Israeli military on Gaza, in 2008, 2012, and 2014. Israel said that these operations were in response to the missiles launched from Gaza, but the response by the Israeli military was disproportional and inhumane, with no regard for civilian life, especially innocent women and children. These three wars have killed more than 3,500 Palestinians, including many children,

and caused massive destruction to the infrastructure. Thousands lost their homes, becoming refugees yet again, and more than ninety Israelis were killed as well.

In March of 2018, the Gazan people launched a series of weekly marches that they called “Great March for Return.” Thousands marched to the fences blocking Gaza to call for an end to the siege and to attempt to return to their pre-1948 homes. They had no weapons. They acted out of desperation. Hundreds of these protestors died and thousands were injured during these marches, which lasted for months. These are precious human beings. And we talk about them as mere numbers and news headlines.

The hypocrisy of the Christian world is so telling when it comes to its silence and even opposition to the right of return of these refugees. On the one hand, they celebrate the “return” of Jews two thousand years later to “their land” while denying the right of return to Palestinians who were expelled from their homes seventy years ago, many of whom still hold the keys to their houses.

After more than seventy years of being displaced and twelve years of blockage, the tragedy in Gaza—the largest open-air prison in the world—which seems to have no end, has been created. God weeps over Gaza. God mourns the continuation of the Palestinian *Nakba*.

So, we ask, is there hope? And if so, where can it be found? Like the refugees in biblical times, we cannot help but lament,

Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us;

look, and see our disgrace!

Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,

our homes to aliens.

We have become orphans, fatherless;
our mothers are like widows. . . .

Why have you forgotten us completely?

Why have you forsaken us these many days?

Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored;
renew our days as of old—
unless you have utterly rejected us,
and are angry with us beyond measure.

(Lam 5:1-3, 20-22)

BEFORE HOPE, LAMENT

Have you ever considered why we have a whole book in the Bible dedicated to lament? And why we have so many psalms of lament as well? Though they might not appear as such for many, the book of Lamentations and the many similar psalms have often served as a source of comfort to those going through difficult times, especially when it seems God is silent. They certainly helped the Israelites in biblical times dealing with their crisis of displacement, their own *Nakba*, to find hope in God.

We must allow the lament and anguish of Jeremiah and the many psalms of lament to challenge us today. We live in a world that has become numb to death and suffering. We hear news of a suicide attack as if it is normal. There is no regard for human lives from the war lords. Some people kill to make political statements, leaving families and loved ones on the other side of the aftermath in tears and despair. This reality has become so normalized that such events cease to move us.

Although it is important to take care of our well-being and that of our communities, we cannot be satisfied with the reality of our

broken world today. We cannot be satisfied with the pending reality of death for the most vulnerable in our world. We who know the power of resurrection must be the ones who lament death more than anyone else! Jeremiah teaches us the value of this act of lament and the importance of tears. You see, if there are no tears, then we have accepted our reality; we are fine with the idea that death, injustice, and pain are the norms of our world.

No! We cannot be satisfied with such a retreat. And if we want things changed, then we must begin by lamenting the realities of violence and oppression in our world.

I do believe that lamenting and grieving are the first steps toward change. Such acts move us closer to the divine as we cry out to God in our anguish and pain. But they also move us toward action. Ironically, our lamentation of death will become the source of movement toward newness and life. Only when we embrace the reality of pain and reject it can we move toward life.

Walter Brueggemann's powerful and monumental work on prophetic imagination has been very influential in my life, and it is how I have come to understand the prophets and their ministry and, in turn, the prophetic ministry of the church today. Speaking on the role of grief and lament, he writes, "We do know from our own pain and hurt and loneliness that tears break barriers like no harshness or anger....The insight of biblical faith is the awareness that only anguish leads to life, only grieving leads to joy, and only embraced endings permit new beginnings."²

Two years ago, I led the Bible studies at a conference for East Asian students as part of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students movement. The conference theme was from the book of Jeremiah, and I spoke one morning on Jeremiah's

prophetic lamentation. That evening during the main plenary session, something took place that left a great impression on me.

The leader of the evening session, Annette Arulrajah, who is an incredibly strong, female Malaysian leader, led the more than seven hundred participants in a session of lament. She encouraged the students, who came from eighteen countries, to cry out to God and lament brokenness in their regions, countries, cities, and neighborhoods. What happened next was profound, as microphones were handed out, and one student after another began lamenting specific issues in their contexts. It went something like this:

- I lament the corruption in my country.
- I lament human slavery in my country.
- I lament religious persecution in my country.
- I lament how women are treated in my country.
- I lament the silence of the church in my country.

It went on like this for more than thirty minutes. This was by no means an exercise of self-pity. These young men and women were not satisfied or comfortable with the brokenness of their world. They wanted to see things transform into a better reality. They wanted to see God's kingdom manifested in their land as it is in heaven. They were not content merely with their own "personal salvation." Their lament was their committing to the kingdom, to being agents of change in this world.

This incredibly vulnerable time of lament was all the more meaningful for me because it was led by a woman who has likely experienced much discrimination, oppression, and opposition in her life (especially as a female leader in the evangelical world). If such an exercise had been led by a male leader, I am not sure

it would have carried the same sense of authenticity, given that in most of our world today, males are able to enjoy a great deal of privilege and transcend particular suffering (this is another reality to lament). From my sister in Christ, I learned the importance of listening to and following the lament of those who have likely experienced more suffering than myself.

Let's be honest, this experience was not your typical evangelical mission conference, where it is more common to sing in joy and celebrate the expansion and growth of our ministries and marvel at how "awesome" God is. I once attended a mission conference by a major international mission organization. The conference took place in India, where we met in what seemed like a fifty-star hotel (hotel staff at some point wanted to carry my handbag!), which was located in the middle of a devastatingly impoverished slum. Inside our hotel, we simply celebrated our work and heard mission reports. I left the conference depressed about the poverty I saw around me and how neither it, nor the Dalit struggle for equality, was addressed during the conference. But I left even more dejected about the numbness of the church.

However, the student conference I attended seemed to be the complete opposite of this experience. We lamented, vulnerably and authentically together, and it was precisely for that reason that I left the conference with a strong sense of hope.

LAMENTING WITH CHRIST

My prayer for the church in Palestine, and around the world, is that God moves our inner spirits to cry and lament the things that are wrong and broken in our communities, nations, and even in our churches.

The week of my ordination as a pastor in the Lutheran church, a friend of mine sent me an old Franciscan prayer, and it was his prayer for me. I still think of this prayer often.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

This quickly became my prayer for myself and for the church today.

It is important for us to remember that Jesus himself actually wept and lamented his context. It brings me great comfort to know that in the face of death, he wept. John 11:35 is known primarily for being the shortest verse in the New Testament, but it is also one of the most powerful verses in Scripture. The Son of God, God incarnate, weeps over the reality and pain of death.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time before his crucifixion, he wept over it! "As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes'" (Lk 19:41-42). This happened while the city of Jerusalem welcomed him in huge jubilation and joy and was ready to crown him king! What a contrast!

The irony here is that I do believe if Jesus were to visit Jerusalem today, he would be welcomed again in a huge march, in jubilation and joy. He would be welcomed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Each community would probably line the streets separately, branding themselves with their own flags and religious symbols. Each would claim him as their own. And I believe he would weep again.

Jesus still weeps over Jerusalem. He laments the injustice and inequality that exists between its dwellers. He laments the division and discrimination that prevails in a city proclaimed to be “holy.” He laments the reality of walls and the actual, physical wall that separates Jerusalem from Bethlehem. He laments the shallow religiosity that exists in our land, how religion is used to dehumanize whole peoples and justify killing and oppression. He laments how we are fighting over things in a way that only further fractures us while not recognizing another way that would lead to peace.

Jesus understood the message and heart of prophetic lamentation. And that is why he proclaimed, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Mt 5:4). If we are not ready to lament the brokenness and death within our world, we will not be comforted and we cannot receive new beginnings.

PROPHETIC IMAGINATION

Our lamentation is not the final word. Lamenting is our gateway to restoration, just as the cross is our pathway to the resurrection. The cross teaches us hope just as much as it does lamentation. Yes, Jesus died on the cross. But that was not the final chapter. He died so that he and his followers might live again. His death paved the way for a new life and new beginning. His crucifixion and

resurrection serve as an example that life from death is possible. The cross reminds us that Friday and Saturday, times of mourning and waiting, must come before Sunday! Without the grief and tears of Good Friday, and the mysterious waiting of Holy Saturday, there can be no celebration and resurrection on Sunday.

And so today we lament in hope because we believe in the God of resurrection and hope. And we know that one day this world will be redeemed, that one day God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Rev 21:4).

This is a lesson that was learned from exile in biblical times. The prophets spoke of restoration and renewal from the midst of destruction and chaos. It was from Babylon that they spoke of restoration and from the recently destroyed Jerusalem that they spoke of a New Jerusalem being rebuilt. The message of the biblical prophets was that an alternative reality was possible, that God would speak it and it would exist.

To usher in these possibilities and to help the people imagine that new reality, the prophets painted artistic and poetic images inspired by God. Sometimes images speak much louder than words. In biblical studies, we understand this kind of vivid depiction of future events as “apocalyptic literature.”

In a class I teach at Bethlehem Bible College on prophetic literature, I conduct an exercise of imagination with my students to help them better understand some of these difficult passages. I ask them to close their eyes and use their imaginations to draw images. As they close their eyes, I read the following:

There are a lost people in the desert—refugees—and they are tired. They have escaped the horrors of war, and survived. These

people are now found, embraced, and loved by a passionate and loving God. They receive mercy and are delivered.

There are houses that are destroyed, complete neighborhoods desolated and burnt to smoke and rubble. But now, these houses are being rebuilt, renewed, and renovated.

A cheating wife, in her shame and fear, disgraced and rejected, is embraced by her husband. She is forgiven. She is loved and accepted again. And there is celebration and other women come and join. They dance and sing together.

An empty and desolate land, once filled with thorns and snares, is now an amazing and fruitful vineyard with workers.

I then ask my students to open their eyes and try to describe the images they just drew in their minds using one or two words at most. Usually, the answers include “healing,” “renewal,” “joy,” “forgiveness,” “inclusivity,” or “restoration.”

This is what the prophets did. They created hope by drawing these divinely inspired images. And because these images are coming from God, there can be hope; we can find motivation and renewed energy to not give up in our fights.

The prophets dared people to hope in something entirely different: a new and alternative reality made possible by God speaking it into existence. As Brueggemann puts it, “It is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order. Energizing is closely linked to hope. We are energized not by that which we already possess, but by that which is promised and about to be given.”³

And with this renewed sense of hope, the future breaks into the present and the divine into the human. This is one of the most important features of prophetic hope. Let me say this

again so that we really understand this revolutionary possibility: the future breaks into the present and the divine into the human! Would such a reversal not change everything about our reality?

The prophets spoke about divine acts that correct the wrongness of this world. It is not merely about the future, but it is more about what God does in the future to establish a new and better reality within this present world. When the eternal meets the finite, change happens. When the divine meets the human, change happens. When the future meets the present, eternity begins and the kingdom of God is enacted here. This inbreaking future into the present brings hope, freshness, redemption, and restoration.

PROPHETIC IMAGINATION TODAY

I believe that it is our prophetic task today to create similar visions of lament and hope for our communities, in a way similar to what the Hebrew prophets did. We need to help our world imagine a better reality, a reality that is in stark contrast to the darkness we encounter today. Palestinian theologian Yohanna Katanacho expresses this in a powerful “dream” he shared at one of the Christ at the Checkpoint conferences. He drew an image that is the exact opposite of our reality in the Middle East. By doing so, he helped us lament the brokenness of our world, while reminding us of the possibilities that await those who lament, hope, and work for this vision. I will share his “prophetic imagination” in its entirety:

I dream of a Middle East in which I have my breakfast in Jerusalem, my lunch in Beirut, and my dinner in Syria. I

ride my car and drive to Iraq, to the Gulf, and I enter into Africa in the same car.

I dream of a Middle East in which people choose their own religion without fear. I dream of a Middle East in which there is no bigotry, radicalism, and hatred. I dream of a Middle East in which all human beings are equal; the ones who wear a Hijab and the ones who put on a Keffiyeh are equal.

I dream of a Middle East in which Jews love Arabs and seek to uphold their rights, a Middle East in which Arabs love Jews. I dream of a Middle East without poverty, hatred, wars, and massacres of human beings.

I dream of peace, peace with God and with all of our neighbors, peace with self and the angels.

I dream of a Middle East without weapons, without traffic jams, without pollution, without discrimination because of sex, religion, age, or weight. My dream is not an illusion but a step forward as I follow Jesus Christ, the prince of peace.

My dream is not something that can be fulfilled in a moment, but it is a celestial kingdom that comes through many generations and many sacrifices, prayers, and tears. Before the dawn there is darkness; before joy there is the victory of sadness; before laughing weeping dominates; before the dominance of the Kingdom of God the kingdom of the devil dominates.⁴

IMMANUEL—GOD WITH US

The book of Daniel is not merely a story of trial by fire but rather of God's sustained presence in a time of tribulation.⁵

Although many consider the important messages of Daniel to lie within the prophecies in the second half of the book, I have always found comfort and guidance in the stories in the first part of the book. The way I read the book of Daniel, it is a story that speaks about life as a marginalized community under the influence of a powerful and oppressive regime and how to respond to such oppression. This story offers us guidance in how we might be faithful as a community in difficult times.

What I love about the stories in Daniel is that God did not simply deliver Daniel or his friends from their imminent death by fire or the lions' den. God was present with them, and in the case of Daniel's friends, he was standing alongside them in the fire! In fact, this is a very important biblical principle—namely, that God will be present with us in our trials and tribulations: “When you pass through the waters, *I will be with you*” (Is 43:2 emphasis added). “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, *I fear no evil; for you are with me*” (Ps 23:4 emphasis added).

I am not convinced that most Christians truly understand the weight of this assurance. The promise is not simply that of deliverance but of God’s presence with us. It is that God will be with us in the valley, in the fire, in the water. God will be with us. That is the promise. This is what we can all be sure of today, that in the most difficult of times, God is with us. He walks with us. *And this is better than deliverance.*

“Where was God?” It is in the moments when we utter these words that our faith is tested. It is in moments like these that we often have nothing to say and no explanations to offer but to surrender to the sovereignty of God. As hard as it is to believe even in the midst of such despair, Jesus is still Lord. We have to believe that God is in control, even though we cannot see or

understand it. It is not always easy to remember the presence of God in the midst of such chaos and tragedy. The Middle East, for example, is on fire these days. It is crazy and unstable, the furthest thing from a situation where we might imagine God's hand is at work. But we must remember and keep faith that God is in control and that Jesus, too, endured suffering during crazy times.

There are many leaders and prophets in our midst who have held fast to lament and a hope rooted in God. Kayla Mueller was a young, brave American girl who spent many years in the Middle East defending the oppressed and advocating for justice. As a human rights activist, among many other things, she labored for justice for Palestinians, African refugees, and Syrian refugees. She witnessed so much suffering and pain in her young life. In a letter from the Middle East to her father in 2011 she wrote, "I will always seek God. Some people find God in church. Some people find God in nature. Some people find God in love; I find God in suffering. I've known for some time what my life's work is, using my hands as tools to relieve suffering."⁶

Kayla discovered God revealed within those who suffer. Two years after she wrote these words she was kidnapped by alleged ISIL members while working for Syrian refugees. She was tortured, raped, and eventually killed. We might consider her one "of whom the world was not worthy."

Palestinian pastor and theologian Mitri Raheb, who pastored for many years in Bethlehem and has seen much suffering, destruction, and pain, also experienced God's silence and presence in the midst of hardship. He wrote the following moving words on God, the God of the land as he has called him:

The God of this land is different than other gods. . . .

His land is plowed with iron. . . . His temples are destroyed by fire. . . . His people are trampled by feet . . . and He does not move a finger. . . .

The God of this land is invisible. You look for his trails but cannot find them. You wish that He comes down from heaven to see, to hear, to have compassion, to save. . . .

His people shout, “Where are you, God? . . . Why do you disappear from us in times of despair?”

His women cry out: “We have no one but God” . . . but he remains unaware, as if he is sleeping . . . or dead . . . or busy. . . .

The God of this land does not fight the invading armies but instead shares the same fate with his people. . . . His house is destroyed. . . . His son is crucified. . . . But his mystery does not perish . . . and from the midst of ashes he arises . . . and we find him walking with refugees. . . . And in the darkness of the night he causes fountains of hope to burst.⁷

THE CROSS—HE WALKS WITH US

We live in a day and age full of religious extremism, where many suffer at the hands of religion and power. During the Easter season in Palestine, I always remind my congregants that Jesus himself died as a victim of religious violence and intolerance. We often forget this, that the crime Jesus was convicted of was blasphemy. I also remind them that the religious institution needed the political institution—the Herods of our world today—to achieve its purpose. It was the unholy marriage between religion and politics that ultimately killed Jesus.

The cross shows us that Jesus suffers with us. He is no stranger to religious extremism, nor to political tyrants. Just like he walked with Daniel's three friends in the furnace of fire, today he walks with us in our hardships. He suffers with us and gives us strength. And when Jesus was on the cross, he embraced his death, for he knew that this death would bring us life. On the cross, Jesus also experienced the silence of God. He cried, "My Lord, my Lord, why have you forsaken me?" Is it not the same question that the land of Palestine has been crying out over the years—"God, where are you?"—that Jesus asked when he was on the cross? "Where are you, God?"

The cross reminds us that God is in solidarity with the oppressed, with the victims of religious violence and state violence. In Jesus, God walked in solidarity and suffered with those rejected and pushed to the other side. And in the cross, we remember that we are not alone. God walks with us in our own "valley of the shadow of death."

Lebanese writer and poet Khalil Gibran, in his famous book *Jesus, the Son of Man*, envisions an insight into the mind of Simon the Cyrene, the one who carried the cross of Jesus. Gibran imagines Simon saying,

And I carried His cross.

It was heavy....

And Jesus looked at me. And the sweat of His forehead was running down upon His beard.

Again He looked at me and He said, "Do you too drink this cup? You shall indeed sip its rim with me to the end of time."

So saying He placed His hand upon my free shoulder. And we walked together towards the Hill of the Skull.

But now I felt not the weight of the cross. I felt only His hand. And it was like the wing of a bird upon my shoulder.

After Jesus dies, Simon says,

Now, the man whose cross I carried has become my cross.

Should they say to me again, “Carry the cross of this man,” I would carry it till my road ended at the grave.

But I would beg Him to place His hand upon my shoulder.⁸

As we walk in the valley of the shadow of death till the end of our road today, we pray and beg to experience Jesus placing his hand upon our free shoulders.

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