

Advent Season: An Ancient Cry and Moment of Truth in the Holy Land

Scott Wright

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not raise sword against nation, nor shall they train for war anymore.” Isaiah 2:1-5

I've just returned from a Pax Christi International delegation to the Holy Land, to visit partners and to be present at the conference initiating the release of the Kairos Palestine document to the churches entitled [A Moment of Truth: Faith in a Time of Genocide.](#)

Sixteen years after the original Kairos Palestine document issued a cry of hope to the churches of the world to respond to the suffering of the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation, a new and even more dramatic challenge was issued on November 14 with the release of the Kairos II document. It does not mince words.

Attending the event were Palestinian Christian leaders representing Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholic churches, including former Latin Patriarch and Pax Christi International Bishop President Michele Sabbah.

Lutheran pastor Munther Isaac, whose 2023 Christ born in the rubble manger scene drew the attention of the world to the death and destruction of children in Gaza, called the document “a cry born of catastrophe.”

One year ago, after visiting Palestine and the West Bank twice in 2024, I wrote that “Gaza is a living hell on earth.” That is true even more so now, as hunger, cold, disease, violence, and forced displacement continue.

A year ago, 45,000 Palestinians – 70 percent of them women and children – had been killed in the bombings, and 1.9 million Palestinians – 90 percent of the people of Gaza – had been forcibly displaced by the Israeli military. Now the figure is 70,000, with thousands more buried under the rubble, and those already displaced have been displaced many times more this past year.

But while the murder and forced displacement continued in Gaza this past year – and have not ended despite a ceasefire – so have the settler attacks backed by the Israeli military advanced in the West Bank.

It is difficult for people in the United States to fully grasp what is happening in Palestine. How we understand our own history, how we understand human rights and international law, and how we understand our faith, has not prepared us to be able to see and respond to the violence and destruction of an entire people and their roots on the land.

We must not close our eyes to what United Nations and international human rights advocates – as well as prominent Jewish historians like [Ilan Pappe](#), scholars of the Holocaust such as [Omar Bartov](#), and Holocaust survivors – are saying about apartheid and genocide being committed by the Israeli government against the Palestinian people.

Equally important, and we heard this on many occasions, this is not a religious conflict, and increasingly we see how Christian, Jewish, and Muslim solidarity with the Palestinian people is speaking with one voice, both in Western nations as well as within Israel.

West Bank: “All My Dreams Have Been Erased”

On the first two days of our week-long visit to Bethlehem and the West Bank, we heard testimony from some of the 32,000 survivors of the January 2025 attacks by the Israeli military on the refugee camps in Jenin, Tulkarem, and Nur Shams.

According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch entitled [“All My Dreams Have Been Erased.”](#) these attacks were “the largest displacement of Palestinians in the West Bank in one operation since the 1967 war,” and constituted “crimes against humanity” according to international law.

On our trip through the Jordan Valley, we stopped in the Palestinian Christian town of Zababdeh, where we spoke with a Melkite priest and several women and children from the Jenin refugee camp who were sheltered by Palestinian Christians in very tight quarters.

“We just want to go home,” one woman told us. But where is home? These women and children have been refugees since 1948, and once again they have no home. “The refugee camp is our life, the air we breathe,” she added. “My soul is in the refugee camp.”

Another woman told us “We cannot compare our suffering to what our families experience in Gaza. Still, my home has been demolished. Please, tell your government to stop supporting what the Israeli government is doing to our families and homes.”

We also witnessed the testimony of a deeply traumatized 12-year-old girl, who spoke haltingly and quietly of what she had suffered during the attack. Several Palestinians spoke of the trauma and psycho-social impact of the violence, particularly on the children.

In addition to our encounter with the refugees, we visited a Bedouin community, one of hundreds of communities under attack from Israeli settlers and the Israeli army. We could see the Israeli settlement and outpost across the road. The community members told us that they continued to be attacked twice daily by the settlers, who seek to drive them from the land, either by threat or by force.

Kairos Palestine: Faith in a Time of Genocide

Our Pax Christi International delegation also spoke with Palestinian partners in Bethlehem and the West Bank. What stood out for me since my visit fifteen months ago was how the violence that the world had witnessed these past two years in Gaza had slowly advanced in the West Bank.

You could see it in the number of checkpoints surrounding towns and cities, the encroachment of settler violence on Palestinian and Bedouin farmers, the Israeli army attacks on refugee camps, and the emigration of four hundred Palestinian Christian families from Bethlehem.

So, we were prepared to hear strong words from the Palestinian Christian communities and

churches. But to hear their testimony and their words now made public in the Kairos document was sobering. We were part of eighty delegates from twenty nations across the world invited to witness this historic event.

The message of the Palestinian churches to the world was clear: Kairos II emerges “from the heart of the assault on Gaza,” a war that has caused mass displacement, starvation, the destruction of every sector of life, and the burial of families under the rubble. It speaks of a cry of hope in a time of genocide, renewing faith, hope and love in the darkest moment.

Strong words were specifically addressed to Western nations and Western churches. While Kairos I (2009) named the Israeli occupation as “a sin against God and humanity,” Kairos II (2025) takes this reading of reality a step further and speaks with theological clarity. In Rev. Munther Isaac’s words: “Refusing to name genocide, apartheid, or settler colonialism is not theological caution: it is moral failure.”

Forty years ago, the original Kairos South Africa document challenged their own churches as well as the churches of the West to refuse to back apartheid and the state theology of the South African government – or attempt to stand in the middle – but rather be courageous enough to assume a prophetic stance in clear opposition to the state violence of apartheid by a minority white government.

The message of the Palestinian churches to the churches of the world is equally insistent. Neutrality is not a Gospel option.

The message of Kairos II is clearly critical of Christian Nationalism and Zionism for giving religious justification to a system of state violence against the Palestinian people taken to the extreme.

At the same time, the Kairos document calls for building relationships “with prophetic Jewish voices, those who oppose genocide and confront Zionism at great personal cost.”

They condemn Hamas for “war crimes” committed on October 7, 2023, as they condemn the Israeli government for “the genocide, ethnic cleansing, and forced displacement unfolding before the eyes of the world.”

Kairos II also rejects “every attempt to conflate antisemitism with opposition to apartheid” and state violence. It also condemns every form of racism and exclusion, including antisemitism, Islamophobia, and persecution of Christian churches.

A Call to Creative Nonviolent Resistance and Costly Solidarity

“On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom ... He shall judge the poor with justice and decide aright for the land’s afflicted.” Isaiah 11:1-10

I recently heard [Rabbi Ismar Schorsch](#), Chancellor Emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary – the same institution where the beloved Abraham Joshua Heschel taught in the 1960s – criticize the Israeli government and speak to the absence of the prophetic tradition at this moment in history:

“The unremitting violence against helpless Palestinians in Gaza and their wholly innocent coreligionists ... and the messianism driving the current government of Israel is sadly out of kilter with traditional Judaism -- and an utter moral abomination.”

The Palestinian churches make the same point when they challenge the churches to break free from their neutrality and indifference and in the West to respond with a “costly solidarity” that is consistent with the Gospel.

As we enter this season of Advent, we do well to sink our roots in the weekly readings from the prophet Isaiah, as he proclaims a day when *“God shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the lands afflicted.”*

The Palestine Kairos document is harsh in its criticism of Western nations and Western churches, and stark in the language it uses to describe the Palestinian reality – just as the Biblical prophets were harsh in their criticisms of those who oppress the poor and remain indifferent or complicit in the face of the suffering of those who are oppressed.

But the Palestinian churches also speak to the hope of their people – “a hope against hope.” Kairos II affirms “creative nonviolent resistance is the logic of love and nonviolence and makes it a central ethical imperative.” Such resistance includes sanctions, boycotts, and divestment; an arms embargo; prosecution of war criminals; reparations; and a restoration of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) as crucial to the well-being of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

In the words of one of the authors of Kairos II, Rev. Munther Isaac, “We are calling for a renewed theology of *sumud* – steadfastness as spiritual resistance.” Often, we heard Palestinians refer to their determination to remain on the land as *sumud*. But *sumud* is not, according to Munther Isaac, “romanticized suffering,” it is “a deliberate, embodied, faith-driven refusal to surrender to the reality of injustice.”

A Call to Faithful Nonviolent Resistance, Defiant Hope, and Costly Solidarity

The Kairos document honors Palestinian women as “the unbending backbone” of their nonviolent resistance, and Palestinian youth as “the treasure of hope.” It affirms the connection with the Palestinian diaspora – half of all Palestinians live outside Palestine, and many still long to return. “We are woven into the fabric of this land,” the Palestinian Christians say. “Its very soil knows us as its own.”

I witnessed this determination to remain on the land on our recent visit, tinged by a certain weariness and “hope against hope.” I heard it in the reference to the tenderness with which Palestinians refer to their olive trees as members who have been part of their family for hundreds of years. “For every one olive tree the Israelis uproot, we will plant ten more,” they say.

Above all, I heard the determination of the Palestinian people to remain on their lands, echoes of Saint Oscar Romero and the prophetic Church of El Salvador I knew during the years of civil war when I accompanied the Salvadoran people so long ago. Now it is our turn, as U.S. Christians and churches, to respond to the Palestinian people with faithful nonviolent resistance,

defiant hope, and costly solidarity, and to work for a just peace in the Holy Land for Palestinians and Israelis alike.