

After the Sermon Hymn: *Stepping down to the congregation:*

Isa 2: 2-5

“Sing With Joy”

(12/25/2011)

- by Rev. Peter Dennebaum -

God’s peace with u!

Today, Christmas Day 2011 the shepherds would have had no chance to come to Bethlehem to see Jesus. Yes, probably even Mary and Joseph wouldn’t have made it... Bethlehem is meanwhile cut off from Jerusalem and the north of Israel by a wall. 2003 the Israeli government built this wall to secure itself against terroristic attacks from Hamas and to underline the political claim for a greater Jerusalem, allowing Jewish settlers to settle and to keep Palestinians outside. A mighty 25foot high concrete wall and military watchtowers surround the 4 square miles of our “little Town of Bethlehem”; a total of 6 miles border, including electric ones, buffer zones, trenches, barbed wires and sensors.

Tourism was always important for our “Little town of Bethlehem”. And with enthusiasm the 25,000 people of Bethlehem prepared in the year 2000 themselves and their town for its anniversary. Groups often preferred the cheaper Palestinian hotels in Bethlehem compared with the more expensive ones in Jerusalem, only 6 miles north of it. Day tourists came and with them money for the families in Bethlehem. Around 65% of its economy is based on tourism. But then the 2nd

Intifada started and Israel answered with the wall. Now the touristic business is down, the daily crossing of the check points so cumbersome that groups only rarely stay overnight. The big hotels had to close again. Day visitors from Jerusalem have to change at the border bus and tour guide. Olives wood carving businesses had to laid-off many of their employees. And not only this – the Palestinian craftswomen are in addition victims of the globalization --- meanwhile u find carvings in the market, which get sold as Palestinian handmade carvings, but which get produced in Korea. A couple of years ago only 2 souvenir shops at the central Manger Square in the Old City were open. Only on Christmas the Little Town of Bethlehem flourishes again – for one week...

Last Saturday the fifth annual joint simulcast [seiml-cast] Christmas service was celebrated between the National Cathedral in DC and the people of Bethlehem. The video recording of it is still available on the Website of the National Cathedral.

Mitri Raheb welcomed from Bethlehem the people in Bethlehem, in DC and people around the world online. Mitri Raheb is the pastor of the Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem. Looking into the camera, watching at us, Mitri Raheb said: “Surrounded by walls we want to build a bridge, reaching out and reminding the Christian community worldwide that Bethlehem is a real city, still under occupation. And that the people of Bethlehem are Palestinians, who are still the same people, who heard the ‘Gloria in excelsis’, who

hosted the baby Jesus, who believed in him and went out to proclaim him kind and savior.”

Let us hear the sermon text for today. It is a text from Isaiah. We heard it already last night. The text we will hear now has become important to Mitri Raheb and the around 5,000 Christians, who remain in Bethlehem. His Theology of Liberation is among other bible verses based on this text from Isaiah. This old Jewish prophet Isaiah remains as hope for both, Jews and Christians. I will read Isaiah, chapter 2, the verses 2-5

²In days to come the mountain of ADONAI'S house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of ADONAI, to the house of the God of Jacob; that she may teach us her ways and that we may walk in her paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of ADONAI from Jerusalem.

⁴She shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares [plaff-shaers], and their spears into pruning [pruening]-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

5 O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of ADONAI!

... So far Isaiah...

Two parts of this text seem to be especially important – one in the beginning, one in the end. The one in the beginning is: ²In days to come the mountain of ADONAI'S house shall be established as the highest of the mountains; ALL the nations shall stream to it. The Palestinian Christian Mitri Raheb, born 1962, doesn't deny that Israel is God's chosen nation. Far from it – he points it out! When he was a child, Mitri Raheb and his friends liked to hear in children's worship the story about David and Goliath [G^e-léi^eth]. And they clapped their hands full of joy, when David won. He, David, the Jewish guy was the good guy. But the shepherd boy David from 1000 BEFORE Christ became political, when Israeli tanks and the well equipped Israeli army occupied his home land, Palestine. Mitri started to identify himself with the boy David, who fought against almighty Goliath [G^e-léi^eth]-Israel. Mitri didn't forget that Israel was God's chosen nation. But he started to question, WHY God had chosen Israel and he asked himself, if Israel might be able to loose its status as chosen nation.

And also another thing confused him: In Germany professors of Theology started in the 70ies to develop a theology after Auschwitz. For us Germans there never can be another theology then the one after Auschwitz. It means: Never, never again to allow genocide. Never, never again to betray with Anti-Judaism God's chosen people.

Mitri Raheb didn't get it – as Christian he wanted to believe what he heard out of Germany, the motherland of the Protestantism. But as Palestinian and his day-to-day experience of the occupation he came to other results. Was God just? Did God allow the suffering of HIS, of MITRI'S people, the Palestinians? Mitri became Lutheran minister, tried to understand how Christmas could become reality, how Jesus message of peace for the world could become reality. He looked for bridges to Israel, knowing that Jesus was a Jew, that we Christians are rooted in Judaism.

Mitri Raheb took our text, the one from Isaiah 2 and he understood, that ALL nations are invited to gather around the Zion: It will be not Israel alone, it will be also Palestine. ALL nations are called. And Mitri learned to make a difference between the state Israel and the Jewish community. Mitri learned from the Hebrew bible, that God gives and takes away – even the status as chosen people ... because this status is indispensable connected with the fulfilling of God's law and justice. But God's justice only can be fulfilled when ALL nations will gather around the Zion. This is our all hope. This is very political. Because it means that people in Asia, Africa or Latin-American have the same rights as we have according the access to resources like water, education, health care, or safety. Israel remains as chosen nation, but its role must be a leading one for corporation and acknowledgment, that not nationalism, but Internationalism is the answer. The front is NOT between Jews and Christians -- and also Not between Israelis and Palestinians. The front runs between nationalists and Internationalists, runs between the Islamic Hamas

and the Jewish right wing settlers on one side and the mass of for peace yearning people of all religions in the middle.

The second important part of our Isaiah reading today is the following: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. End of the quote. Isaiah talks about a just peace. Peace can only be, where justice has been realized, where people can live in freedom, self-determination and with the same possibilities for self-fulfillment. This addresses us. The weak results of the world climate summit two weeks ago in Durban, South Africa, show us all: We are in the middle of a war about resources. Only when we learn to see ourselves through the eyes of our international neighbor we will be able to follow the star of Bethlehem, which should lead us to the Zion. This is something, what we in the United States can learn from the Palestinian Christian Theology of Liberation: To share what we have, to limit ourselves in such a way that each human being has the same chances and conditions we take for us like a ducks takes to water.

This gets me get to my last point for today. Mitri Raheb asked us last week to build bridges over the wall, the wall he faces day for day. As Christians we share with him together a symbol, the symbol of the cross. The cross is the answer to his request.

This is a cross; please imagine here a wall. If you turn this cross around and lean it against the wall – what do we get? ... Correct: The beginning of a ladder! The first rung is Jesus sacrifice. He did the first

step. Now it is on us to add OUR own rungs to it. Until we have enough and can climb on the wall. And dance on it – like East and West Germans danced on the Berliner Wall November 9th 22years ago.

The star of Bethlehem shines above the wall. The star of Bethlehem calls for unification of all human beings, irrespective of race, sexual orientation, nation or religion. But the star of Bethlehem is also a permanent exhortation to fight intolerance and selfish nationalism. In this holy night the star of Bethlehem wants to shine in our homes. The star wants to warm our hearts so that the story of liberation can start with us, when we keep the star in our hearts, when we walk through the darkness of our nights. The story of peace goes on. Isaiah prophesied the peace; Jesus liberated us with his sacrifice to this peace. The star tells us this story and lights now for us the walls of this world. May the peace start with us. This is the call and the promise of Christmas – for BOTH sides of the wall. And the angels will sing with joy their “Gloria in excelsis’.

I know that Mitri Raheb speaks 4 languages – Arabic, Hebrew, German and English. I wish u in all for languages Merry Christmas.

In Arabic Idah Saidan Wa Sanah Jadidah,
in Hebrew Mo'adim Lesimkha. Chena tova!

In German: Frohe Weihnachten.

Merry Christmas!