

Week 6 Devotion: Bishop Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straits of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”—Isaiah 58:5–6

During my time as an ELCA pastor in Jerusalem, I never managed a consistent Lenten fast. On Ash Wednesday, I might resolve to abstain from fried foods or sugar, but before long, I would be invited to breakfast with piping hot falafel fresh out of the fryer, or someone would bring a tray of sweet knafeh for a birthday. To refuse these gifts of Palestinian hospitality for the sake of an arbitrary fast felt wrong to me, and when I returned to the wisdom of the prophet Isaiah, I remembered why.

Our Lenten practices—including fasting—are embodied acts of participation in God’s story. But what is that story? As Isaiah says, and as Jesus proclaims, it is the story of a world of justice and liberation for all. Our faith practices are not about making ourselves perfect but about practicing to live in the world God intends for us and for all people.

Palestinian theologian Daniel Bannoura has pointed out that for Christians, God’s story is the gospel—good news. But if, as Christian Zionists interpret the Bible, that Palestinians do not have the right to exist in their own homeland, Bannoura says, “This is when the Bible stops being good news for [us], God’s word for [us], and begins to be God’s word against [us]. If the gospel is not good news to me as a Palestinian, and good news to the Israeli and to the Jew and to the Arab and to the Muslim, and to all people from all backgrounds, it’s not the gospel. It’s not good news.”

This Lent (and always), may we proclaim with Isaiah and with Jesus that the gospel is good news to all people, and may we practice this good news in love, in hospitality and in the pursuit of justice.

Week 6 Discussion and Prayer:

Bishop Johnston Aelabouni

Questions:

1. What is something you learned about the Palestinian Christian experience this Lent?
2. What was hard to hear in this Lenten series?
3. How does the oppression experienced by Palestinians connect to stories of oppression in our own contexts? What can we do to loosen these “bonds of injustice”?

Prayer

God of love and liberation, we pray to you in all places and all times of trouble. Teach us to fast from hatred and fear and to practice justice and mercy. Bring the good news that really is good news to Palestinians and Israelis, and all people, that our practice may become the reality of the world you so love. In Jesus' name, amen.

Bishop Johnston Aelabouni

Bishop Johnston Aelabouni was installed October 2024 and serves the ELCA Rocky Mountain Synod. She lived in Jerusalem for five years as theologian in residence to the ELCJHL and pastor of the Jerusalem Redeemer Lutheran English-speaking congregation.

