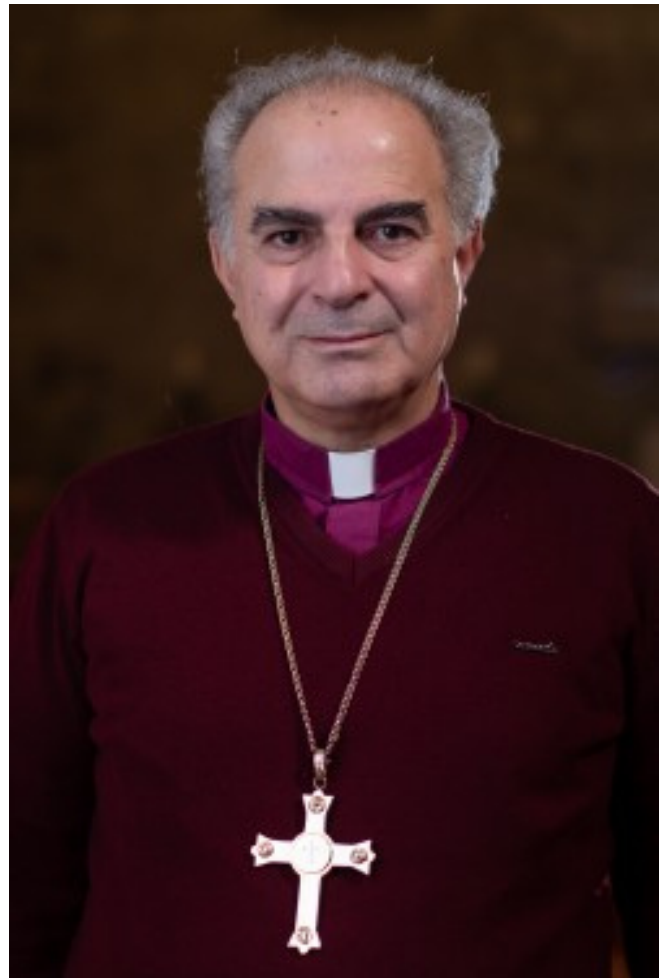


Week 4: Immanuel

Bishop Azar, Bishop of the ELCJHL

Philippians 4: 4-9: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”





Devotion

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land is a product of two thousand years of Christian witness in the Holy Land. It has been home to thousands of faithful Christians for over a century.

The church's story, like Jesus' story, is full of displacement. Jesus, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt to avoid a genocide. Christians faced persecution in the earliest centuries, which led to Christianity reaching even the farthest corners of the earth.

Eighty percent of the Palestinian Christians in our church are refugees. In 1948, our church members were forced out of cities such as Haifa, Jaffa and Nazareth and came to Jerusalem, Bethlehem or other places in the West Bank. My own parents were expelled from Jaffa and became refugees in Lebanon and later in Bethlehem.

Advent is meaningful to us Palestinian Christians, and to anyone else displaced, because the Savior was born in a city different from his own due to a census ordered by the occupying power of that time. Mary could not choose where her child would be born, and often, neither can our mothers or daughters. This is why the verse in Philippians truly brings good news: "In every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Our rootedness in this faith comes not only from God's promises to us but also from our knowledge of Jesus as someone who lived what we live. In an imperfect world, a Savior who knows only power and control would not be good news to the oppressed, the displaced or those facing injustice. Our Savior began his life in a manger. He was displaced, persecuted and even crucified. He knew suffering. He knew death itself and overcame it. He was invited to mingle with the powerful but chose to break bread with the vulnerable and oppressed. This kind of Savior is beyond our wildest human imagination.

In Palestine, as Christians and specifically as Lutherans, we are a church that not only speaks but also acts. In our congregations and schools, through our diaconal center, through our work for environmental and gender justice, we look toward what is true, noble and right, as Paul encourages us. We are a church of the displaced, but we remain rooted in lifting up the vulnerable even when we find ourselves to be vulnerable too.

Jesus made a path and a future for all those who follow him. As Palestinian Christians, we know that our faith informs our steadfastness in our land. We trust that Jesus Christ, who was born into displacement in Bethlehem, who lived as a refugee in Egypt, is always with us. His response to oppression, persecution, displacement and even crucifixion was radical love. The Scripture reads, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me — put it into practice."

We are not Jesus Christ, and yet we strive to put into practice what he taught us. In every situation we remain rooted, putting into practice all we have learned from Christ, our Savior. In our steadfastness, our sumud, we find that the God of peace is always near.



Prayer from an ELCJHL Young Adult

Lord, we bring you our sorrows and hopes, asking for your peace that heals and calms.

We trust in Your will and wait for Your promises to be fulfilled in our lives.

We thank You, Healer of hearts and Forgiver of sins, for Your mercy and strength in our trials.

Fill us with Your love, guide us in Your ways, and teach us to forgive as You forgive us.

Lord Jesus, open our hearts to hear Your voice each day.

Shine Your light in us, steady our steps in truth, and walk with us in every season.

We pray for our church and nation—protect it, grant peace to its people, and make it a fountain of Your light and hope.

You are our joy, our peace, and our everlasting hope.

Amen

-Siraj



Discussion Questions

- 1. What's one emotion you felt when listening to this devotion?**
- 2. What did you learn about sumud (steadfastness) and displacement from Bishop Azar?**
- 3. What is the role of faith in displacement?**
- 4. Who is displaced in your community? How has displacement touched your life? What role did faith play?**
- 5. Why does Palestine mean so much to the indigenous Christians there?**
- 6. What does Bishop Azar say about rootedness? How might you think about rootedness in your life?**