



Wednesday Prayer

3rd Sunday after Epiphany – The Refuge in the Rubble

**“For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from God.
God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
Trust in God at all times, O people; put your heart before God; God is a refuge for us.”
Psalm 62:5-8**

Several years ago, while I was waiting for The State of Israel to grant permission for exchange student Dema to leave Gaza, she texted me. Her text read, “we are being shelled again.” Just like that. No exclamation points. No concerns, just like she was writing about the weather. “We are being shelled again.” I thought that this should not sound so normal. Not for any child. “We are being shelled again.”

When Dema finally arrived in Iowa she found much of our lives here perplexing; driving from state to state without papers, no signs of bombings, drinkable water at any time and power available with the flick of a switch. The wide-open spaces without restriction were a different way of living.

For the people of small-town Iowa, Dema brought perplexities with her. Dema is Muslim and chooses to wear a hijab, much like many of us wear a cross, as a sign of her faith. She is also Palestinian. So, a hijab wearing, Muslim, Palestinian who is also fluent and articulate in English, beautiful and confident, was living with the Lutheran pastor. She changed the perception of all these identities for the people of this small town. For those who met Dema, they cannot hear of Palestine, West Bank or Gaza without Dema’s face and a name in their mind. Dema is a child of Gaza.

With all the bombardments that Gaza has endured in the past decades, children there don’t know how to grieve because loss is so “normal.” In the past 100 days alone, 10,000 children have been killed there. 10,000 future teachers, writers, faith leaders, diplomats, doctors... are gone. This is not normal.

It is unimaginable what traumas the people there, particularly the children, are suffering. About half of the population of Gaza are children. And yet, if you listen to those there, as they are digging out family and neighbors from the rubble, comforting the grieving, binding the wounds of the surviving the cry to Allah is everywhere. Christians and Muslims together cry to Allah, not as a curse or in anger but as a real belief in the presence of God, with them, comforting them, steadying them even as they wait for the next blast bringing the next wave of trauma and loss.

The people of Gaza are necessarily resilient. Those who still live will be resilient. They have learned that the rest of the world is dependably indifferent to them but that Allah, God, has held them together even as their world lies in ruins. They do not blame Allah but cling to Allah as the only reliably safe place for their dead to find peace even while the living are being shelled... again.

Today, Dema is in Turkey at University studying diplomacy. Her dream is to be the first Ambassador from Gaza and the first woman in that role from her culture. Her mother, father and younger siblings escaped Gaza with nothing but the clothes they were wearing. Their home, school, belongings, relatives and friends are gone.

Oh God, may all who call upon you find refuge. Now that we have prayed this, help us be that refuge to those for whom we pray. Amen.

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