

ADVENT 2012 - IN THE SPIRIT OF ASSISI - HOLY LAND PEACEMAKING

In 2011, all Franciscans around the world celebrated the 25th Anniversary of the World Day of Prayer for Peace (the “Spirit of Assisi”) held in Assisi in 1986. On that occasion, the Ministers General of the Conference of the Franciscan Family wrote a letter to all sisters and brothers in the Franciscan family in which they issued a challenge to read the signs of the times clearly and effectively and become more authentic witnesses of peace. They wrote:

Like Francis and Clare, we must confront contemporary issues and discover how God is calling us to build peace in our world today. Francis didn't simply pray for peace, but he worked actively to address conflict and bring people together. The stories of the wolf of Gubbio, of Francis and the Sultan, of the bishop and the mayor of Assisi, all serve to highlight the great desire of Francis to foster peace, which he felt was a task conferred on him by God. We must seek the urgent need to address the problems of our time.

Taking to heart that call, the Holy Name Province JPIC Directorate and Office would like to offer the following material called: **Advent 2012 -In the Spirit of Assisi - Holy Land Peacemaking.** Drawing on the scriptural themes from the first Sunday of Advent, we would like to hold up several new signs of hope for justice, reconciliation and peace in the Holy Land that are beginning to emerge. These signs are a form of invitation to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace from Bethlehem, and “to do what is ours to do.”

The Sunday readings in Advent are replete with references to Jerusalem. For our ancestors in faith, Jerusalem was more than just a city; it was a symbolic place where their deep longings for a true peace - *shalom* - and God's promises of a reconciled world and harmony within God's creation will one day come to fulfillment. In the morning prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours during Advent, the Church community recites: “*Your light will come Jerusalem, the Lord will dawn on you in radiant beauty; you will see His glory within you.*” It was in Jerusalem that Jesus suffered his passion and was hanged on the tree. Jerusalem also is spoken about in the Book of Revelation, where it is described as a garden of Eden at the center of a thriving urban landscape. The New Jerusalem is also portrayed as a welcoming city whose inhabitants refuse to be an enemy to anyone. This rich metaphor points to a reality wherein heaven finally arrives on earth and where God makes God's ultimate dwelling in the midst of the new, reconciled creation. As Franciscan and Franciscan-hearted people, we are called to be instruments of God's peace and prophets of hope. Can our celebration of Advent in the Spirit of Assisi – and our preaching in particular – help the people of God get a glimpse of a transformed society and renewed earth? Can it help to inspire and motivate people to not only “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (Ps. 122) but also to be God's instruments of *shalom*?

Jerusalem is a sacred home to Jews, Christians and Muslims. It is intimately interwoven into the religious imagination and sensibilities of billions of people around the world. It also is at the center of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has spanned over the past few decades and whose reverberations extend far beyond the Middle East region. Overcoming major hurdles on the way to a just peace in Jerusalem and in the Holy Land could generate an inestimable amount of good will and unleash deep resources of the spiritual energy of Judaism, Christianity and Islam that humanity needs to effectively deal with injustice and violence in many other parts of the world. It's time for us Franciscan and Franciscan-hearted people to join the moral, moderate voices among Jews, Christians and Muslims and engage actively in pursuing peace between Israelis and Palestinians. It's time for us to take center stage away from the extremists and cynics, who warp our vision about the real opportunities for a just peace in Jerusalem, the Holy Land and in the region.

At the height of the Fifth Crusade, St. Francis of Assisi discerned the signs of the times and made a strategic decision to take his peacemaking message to Damietta in Egypt where the Christian crusaders and Muslim warriors were about to come to a violent clash. The story of the encounter between Francis and Sultan Malek al-Kamil continues to challenge Franciscan-hearted people to cross the threshold of their fear and to transcend the political and religious ideologies that, all too often, scapegoat and demonize the “other.” Rather than merely admiring or talking about the courage of St. Francis and his commitment to following in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace from Bethlehem, we are called to live it out in our contemporary context.

Suggested reflection on the first Sunday of Advent readings:
Jeremiah 33:14-16, 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2, Luke 21:25-28, 34-36
www.usccb.org/bible/readings/120212.cfm

In the first reading, God speaks to the people of Israel at a time of great crisis. The Israelites are beaten and taken into captivity in Babylon, where they face death as a people. Their temple lies in ruin and with it, their hopes for a better future. And yet, it is precisely in this time of greatest need and desperation, that Yahweh promises to, “raise up for them a new leader, a prince of peace who will do what is right and just in the land.” Then, “Judah shall be safe and Jerusalem shall dwell secure.” This passage is a bold affirmation of faith in the Creator God who hears and responds to the cry of the poor and their yearning for freedom. The people of Israel will be able to find a true freedom and security – not in a military power and political alliances – but in their faithfulness to God, the only source of a true and lasting peace.

About 2,500 years later, our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land – Christians, Jews and Muslims – face serious challenges as they seek justice and grapple to find security and peace. The 45-year-old military occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and the ongoing blockade of Gaza have exacted a heavy toll on the Palestinian people. Thousands of innocent people have lost their lives. The human rights violations continue unabated. The Israelis, scarred by the long history of anti-Semitism in the West and the horror of the Nazi Holocaust, have been desperately struggling to make sure that the Jewish people would never again fear for their survival. The attacks on innocent Israeli civilians have made it more difficult for the Israeli society to muster the political will necessary to end their military occupation and deal with the issue of the expanding settlements that are spread across the Palestinian territories. The failure to address these issues presents a great danger - not only to Palestinians and to the international community - but also to Israelis, calling into question their future as a democratic, Jewish majority state. There is still a narrow window of opportunity for the two state solution. As friends of both Israelis and Palestinians, and as people concerned about the welfare of all the inhabitants of the Holy Land - Christians, Jews, and Muslims - we ought to be willing to do our small part in paving a way to a just, lasting and comprehensive peace.

For nearly 2,000 years, Christians in the Holy Land have lived out the Gospel. It is from them that our ancestors received the faith that we now profess. Now, however, the Christian Palestinian population, especially in the West Bank areas such as Bethlehem is rapidly diminishing. It is feared that the Christian holy sites will become museums as Palestinian Christians emigrate. The indigenous Christian Arab population yearns to dwell in peace and security, but the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict makes their hope for a normal life and a better future exceedingly difficult.

The survival of Arab Christians in the Holy Land is of vital importance. Historically, their churches, schools, and health service institutions have played a critical, moderating role in the Holy Land and the larger region, often acting as a bridge between Israelis and Palestinians, and between Arab/Muslim countries and the West. Furthermore, the Christians in the Holy Land – “the living stones” – provide millions of Christians around the world with a tangible connection to our common history, faith and identity as followers of the Prince of Peace from Bethlehem.

Today’s Gospel passage hints that the delay in the second coming of Christ had caused some members of Luke’s community to slacken their faith. In the face of the great injustice and suffering that they were experiencing, some of them had begun to doubt God’s ability to keep his promises. A significant number of Christians in Luke’s community had grown so discouraged that they turned to “carousing and drunkenness” as outlets. In this context, the evangelist is trying to encourage a beleaguered church and to help rekindle the faith of its members that God can be trusted. Despite the suffering they are forced to endure, there will come a day when the world will be purged of injustice and violence. In due time, God will act in a decisive way and eradicate evil forever. In the meantime, however, Jesus’ followers must be ever vigilant, keeping their eyes open to the ways He already is present among them and be ready to follow in His footsteps.

While we wait for God’s promise to be completed, we too are called to stay vigilant and look for signs of God’s redeeming action in our world today. When we open our eyes to see what is happening now in Palestine and

Israel, we are able to see many signs of hope in which God's dream of justice and peace is taking root in the land of Jesus. Here is one such story:



The Story of Daoud Nassar

Just a few miles away from Jerusalem, atop the highest hill in Bethlehem District, surrounded on three sides by illegal settlements, live Daoud Nassar and his family. They are Arab Christians, Palestinians whose lives are an embodiment of the principal of active non-violence that was first championed in that same land close to 2,000 years ago by one who is sometimes referred to as "the Prince of Peace from Bethlehem." At the entrance to Nassars' farm, a large stone heralds a poignant message written in several languages: "WE REFUSE TO BE ENEMIES." Daoud's grandfather bought the 100-acre parcel of fertile land over 100 years ago. The Nassar family has farmed it ever since, growing olives, almonds, grapes, pears and figs. In 1991, Daoud learned that the Israeli authorities were planning to confiscate three quarters of his land – a practice that is illegal under international law, but nevertheless widespread on the West Bank. Like many other Palestinians, the Nassar family has endured harassment, threats and attacks from nearby settlers. In one such attack, Daoud Nassar's mother was threatened with a gun. In another, settlers uprooted 250 olive trees from the property. In the face of such grave injustice, other people might have responded with aggression, or just given up and emigrated.



However, these choices were out of the question for Daoud, a proud alumnus of Bethlehem University - one of the brightest beacons of hope in the Holy Land. <http://bethlehem.edu/acrossthedivide> For many decades, this prestigious Catholic institution has been a safe, sacred tent wherein Christian and Muslim students could receive an excellent intellectual, moral, ethical, and spiritual formation. This formation, in turn, has played a significant part in enabling Daoud to become a visionary and committed leader in serving the common good in society. Determined to live out what he has learned at Bethlehem University, Daoud established a project called the Tent of Nations www.tentofnations.org. Its overarching aim is to build bridges between people of different backgrounds, and between people and the land. "We wanted to move away from a circle of blame, and channel our frustration into something positive," affirms Daoud Nassar. The Israeli authorities have forbidden any permanent infrastructure development on Daoud's farm, and have limited access to the electricity grid and public water. In response to these unwarranted restrictions, the Nassars have refurbished seven underground caves, installed a small solar panel and a small, gray water filtration system. Plans today include the installation of additional solar panels and wind turbines on the farm.

Since the establishment of the project in 2000, the Nassars have garnered significant local and global support. Every year, a few thousand people visit Tent of Nations, including dozens of Franciscan friars and lay partners from Holy Name Province ministries. A women's project equips Muslim women from the nearby village of Nahhalin with English, computer and craft skills. Children from Bethlehem are given the opportunity to come to Tent of Nations to reconnect with the land through tree planting and the grape and olive harvest. Through its annual Christmas Alternative Gift Fair, a Franciscan parish in Silver Spring, MD will support a special two-week-long summer camp, by the Bethlehem University students for a group of 50 Palestinian, Christian and Muslim children from the Bethlehem area. The program will include a strong environmental justice component and will seek to instill in children scientific, spiritual and religious dimensions to care for creation.

Each year, Daoud and his family run a tree planting campaign on the farm; in 2009, the goal was to plant 1,000 trees on the land, with the help of hundreds of people – including local Palestinians, Israeli peace activists and international supporters. Volunteers also visit the farm throughout the year to help with the grape, almond, fig and olive harvests, and to take part in artistic projects. In a show of solidarity, members of "European Jews for a Just Peace" visited the property in 2003 and planted 250 olive trees to replace those ripped out by settlers. Two years ago, when the Tent of Nations received a demolition order from the Israeli authorities, a very focused and resolute advocacy action on the part of several ministries of Holy Name Province – in addition to the expression of solidarity and support on the part of the network of friends of the Tent of Nations – are credited with the temporary suspension of the demolition orders.



It's unlikely that Daoud Nassar will change the reality of the Occupation or bring a just and lasting peace to the Holy Land. And yet his personal Christian witness through the Tent of Nations project provides a convincing testimony that Jesus' path of a peaceful non-violent resistance to injustice is as powerful and transformative as ever.

There are many other compelling signs of hope in the Holy Land: the ministry of the friars of the Custody of the Holy Land www.ffhl.org; Bethlehem University www.bethlehem.edu; Catholic Relief Services <http://crs.org/countries/jerusalem>; Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation www.hcef.org; and Churches for Middle East Peace www.cmep.org; to name a few. They all point us to how, even now, Jesus Christ dwells, teaches, nourishes, heals and empowers the faithful to seek peace and justice in the Holy Land. Even beyond the exclusively Christian circles, one can find plentiful signs of hope: Parents Circle www.theparentscircle.org; Rabbis for Human Rights <http://rhr.org.il/eng>; Holy Land Trust www.holylandtrust.org; National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East <http://www.nili-mideastpeace.org> and many others.

The Gospel this first Sunday of Advent invites us to be vigilant. Could it also be calling us to recognize the signs of God's dream of reconciliation, charity, justice, and harmony within all creation – of true shalom – being made tangible in the work of the Tent of Nations and the other groups and organizations mentioned above? When we dare to live out our faith and follow in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace from Bethlehem, each one of us can become a bearer of God's dream for a transformed world that more fully reflects God's own glory.

Selected resources for prayer and action:

1. Consider adding to the Prayers of the Faithful the first Sunday of Advent one of these petitions:
 - ❖ For the Mother Church of Jerusalem, that her members may be strengthened by the Holy Spirit and continue to courageously seek a just and lasting peace for Jerusalem, we pray...
 - ❖ For political leaders, that they may take bold initiatives for peace in Jerusalem, we pray...
 - ❖ For zealots on all sides, that they may put aside their animosities and be still for the sake of Jerusalem's peace, we pray...
 - ❖ For Catholics in the United States that in this Year of Faith, they make a special effort to visit their Christian brothers and sister in the Holy Land and the holy sites, we pray...
2. Include in your parish bulletin or website statements from John Paul II, Benedicts XVI, or other faith leaders, that help educate people on the issue of the Holy Land.
<http://uspartners.crs.org/downloads/holy-land-resource-guide.pdf> (page 45-46)
3. Encourage others to join Advocacy efforts in support of peace in the Holy Land: www.cmep.org or www.confrontglobalpoverty.org

