

# Kairos Palestine Christmas Alert



2023



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## Kairos Palestine Christmas Alert 2023

"The mission of the Church is prophetic, to speak the Word of God courageously, honestly and lovingly in the local context and in the midst of daily events. If she does take sides, it is with the oppressed, to stand alongside them, just as Christ our Lord stood by the side of each poor person and each sinner, calling them to repentance, life, and the restoration of the dignity bestowed on them by God and that no one has the right to strip away."

*Kairos Palestine Document – A Moment of Truth, Chapter 3.4.1*

# Introduction

In this 2023 Christmas Alert, Kairos Palestine points to the dire, tragic situation of the Palestinians in Gaza. It provides theological reflections and prayers to encourage deeper solidarity and more meaningful actions.

Because things are far from normal—even the so-called “normal” of a people under a brutal occupation—Palestinians are experiencing a historic Good Friday/Holy Saturday moment. Like those first disciples of Jesus, we feel helpless. We feel powerless. We feel abandoned, even by some of our friends. Gazans are bringing their children to the church to be baptized—worried that they may not make it through the genocide that Israel is imposing. On some days, our only comfort is to be found in one another and in our common realization that Jesus, too, was the victim of the occupier’s brutal violence. He was dehumanized. He was tortured. He was killed.

We hunger for the joy of the season. Our children need it.

But this year, we will not light a tree on Manger Square. Plans for our celebratory parade have been cancelled. We will, both as an act of worship and an act of resistance, gather in our churches on Christmas Eve to welcome the Word that became flesh and lives still among us, full of grace and truth.

***We need you, your prayers, and your solidarity.*** This year, we plead with you to act in concrete ways to insist that the imperial powers create a path forward for a just peace. Then, send us word and/or pictures of the actions you have taken, the letters you have written, the sermons you’ve heard, the texts you have posted on social media... This is our appeal.

# The role of the church is to defend the weak and the poor

*By Rifat Kassis*

On the 1st of November 2023, appalled by the Israeli genocidal war on Gaza and the Palestinian people, representatives of Kairos Southern Africa and Kairos Palestine published an Open Letter to church leaders and Christians in the USA, Europe and the ecumenical family, questioning the silence of their churches on these war crimes and crimes against humanity. We wrote, "Most of the churches in Europe and the USA seem not to have repudiated their colonial and racist history."

In this Christmas season, one wonders why, historically speaking, some churches align with oppressors neglecting the oppressed? Is it the intertwining of religious and political power structures? Is it because political rulers sought to co-opt religious institutions to legitimize their authority and, in turn, churches sought protection and privileges from powerful secular leaders?



Figure 1: Kairos Palestine members visit to the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius in Gaza in March 2018

Is it the theological interpretations and doctrines that have been used to allow those in power to maintain control and (mis)use religious texts to justify their oppressive systems and to suppress dissent and the weak?

Is it the fear of persecution or losing influence that churches felt compelled to align with those in power—to protect their own interests, safeguard their followers, or avoid persecution themselves—and to compromise their moral principles?

Is it because the oppressive systems are strong and widely accepted—their narratives dominating the public sphere, media and political institutions—that churches have been reluctant to challenge prevailing beliefs for fear of isolation, retribution, being labeled or denounced?

Having said this, we also need to note that while some churches have sided with oppressors and dehumanized the oppressed, many religious leaders and Christian communities have actively advocated for justice and equality and defended the rights of the poor and oppressed. For these, we in Kairos Palestine salute you, stand with you, and thank you for your costly solidarity!

*Rifat Kassis has long been active in the non-violent Palestinian struggle. He founded the Palestinian section of Defence for Children International and was elected as Global President of the international movement in Geneva. He co-founded the Alternative Tourism Group, served as Executive Director of YMCA and founded the YMCA/YWCA Olive Tree Campaign. He worked also in Central Asia representing some ecumenical donor agencies and also ran WCC /EAPPI program as well as the country director of the Lutheran World federation in Jordan. He is one of the co-authors of Kairos Palestine document and its General Coordinator as well as its global coalition. He is an author and has published two books and contribution in 16 other books.*

“We say, ‘Words matter.’ The words the Church uses says a lot about the Church and its response to the issues of the day. We urge our brothers and sisters not to choose words that soften the harshness of the crimes perpetrated upon Palestinian. When the Church refuses to call Israel’s laws and actions apartheid, the Church contributes to the continuation of apartheid.”

**A Dossier on Israeli Apartheid:  
A Pressing Call to Churches Around the World,  
Part 5, Page 29**

# First Sunday of Advent

By Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac

***“In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.” (Luke 2:1)***

Christmas celebrations are cancelled this year in Bethlehem. There will be no tree lighting, no street parades, and no festivals. It is not possible to celebrate or rejoice when our families and people in Gaza are being massacred and ethnically cleansed. This is a time of mourning. This is a time of lament. The Empire has crushed our lives, homes, hopes, and dreams.

When we consider the true meaning of Christmas, we will realize that it sits well in this context. The backdrop of the birth of Jesus according to Luke is a census by a ruthless Caesar, for the purpose of domination and taxation. The census caused a lot of disruption. The holy family was one of many that had to journey and register, otherwise they would have put themselves in danger of retaliation from Caesar's army for “breaking the law.” As Palestinians living under apartheid, this is a very familiar experience. Permits, IDs, and magnetic cards, common vocabulary, are part of our daily experience. They are one part of the Empire's tools for domination, segregation and control.

We watch in horror and agony as one child after another is pulled out of the rubble in the genocide in Gaza, reminding us of the ruthless massacre of the children of Bethlehem at the hand of the Empire—yet another reminder of the relevancy of the Christmas narrative.

We will not celebrate. It is hard to rejoice. We are afraid. We are broken. We are shaken. But the Christmas narrative brings God closer to us in our state of brokenness and despair. Christmas is God's solidarity with us. Jesus is born with the occupied and oppressed. While in his mother's womb, he took the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem



at the demand of the Empire. While a little baby, he became a refugee when his family escaped to Egypt. Christmas is God's solidarity with the oppressed and dehumanized. Jesus became human among the dehumanized to reclaim our humanity, dignity and worth.

*Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac is a Palestinian Christian pastor, theologian, writer, speaker, blogger and, more importantly, a husband and a father. He now pastors Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem and is the Academic Dean of Bethlehem Bible College. He is also the director of the highly acclaimed and influential Christ at the Checkpoint conferences and is a board member of Kairos Palestine.*



**Figure 2: Ayah and Aboud Abo oun who were killed in the Israeli Attack on their house on Oct 17th, 2023**

## Prayer:

God, bless the census the world takes this Advent, day-by-day counting the loss of life and naming each victim. We pray your Spirit to move us to rise up from our mourning to actively seek justice. In the name of the One who persevered to the end, our Lord Jesus, Amen.

## Action:

This week, write a letter or send an email to your elected officials, briefly describing the situation and making your own plea for a way forward to a just and lasting peace. Please copy Kairos Palestine on any correspondence ([kairos@kairospalestine.ps](mailto:kairos@kairospalestine.ps)).

## Second Sunday in Advent

By Youssef Alkhouri

**«And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.» (Luke 1:46–53)**

God stands on the side of the oppressed and marginalized. Mary knows her God and where He stands. Her song is not an example of individualistic and self-centered spirituality, but rather a reflection of the collective desire for a divine intervention to liberate her people. Mary's song is a magnificent declaration of praise of her God who lifts up the humble and meek. This is an eloquent socio-political and spiritual manifesto. An expression of a profound understanding of God's Kingdom, a world upside-down.

Mary's context is no different than that of the Palestinians in the 21st century. The Roman Empire occupied and persecuted Palestinian Jews, Mary's people. The Empire mobilized its rhetoric to justify its exploitation and mass-slaughtering of the Palestinian Jews. Mary and Joseph once were forcibly displaced and had to run away from Herod's genocide against the children of Bethlehem. The Empire tortured her son, our Lord Jesus, and eventually killed him. Palestinians today are enduring a similar violence perpetrated by the Israeli colonial empire. They are also victims of religious rhetoric that weaponizes religion and the Bible against them.

Mary's song echoes a consolation to all oppressed people, including the Palestinians, and a prophetic warning to Christians who celebrate the powerful and wealthy. God does not stand on the side of the nations that rely on their mighty military and media powers. Instead, God reveals himself and expresses solidarity with the humble, and those violated and marginalized by the Empire.

**Yousef AlKhouri:** *A Palestinian Christian theologian and activist, and a lecturer of Biblical Studies at Bethlehem Bible College. He is also a board member of Kairos Palestine and Christ at the Checkpoint.*



**Figure 3: Dima Alhaj, a WHO worker who was killed on Nov. 21st, 2023 alongside her husband, her 6-month old son and more than 40 members of her extended family during an Israeli assault on her father's house South of Gaza.**

**Photo credit: WHO**



## Prayer:

God, give us the willing spirit of Mary to say “Yes” to you, the vision of Mary to see the world turned upside-down, and the courage of Mary to proclaim the truth of your will and ways. Amen.

## Action:

Ask your faith community to learn about and participate in the Palestinian’s nonviolent Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. Read the BDS Guidebook and the dossier on Israeli Apartheid that Kairos Palestine and Global Kairos for Justice have created. In the U.S., work with your church, school, union and other organizations to make the Apartheid-Free Pledge. Please inform us of any action at [kairos@kairospalestine.ps](mailto:kairos@kairospalestine.ps).

## Third Sunday of Advent

By Mays Nassar

***“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’” (Luke 2:8-14)***

As I write this reflection, we find ourselves amidst the 39th day of the unjust and devastating war on Gaza. The situation in both Gaza and the West Bank continues to deteriorate. Each day, we grapple with the question of whether it can worsen further, only to wake up the next morning to scenes of relentless attacks, massacres, destruction, violent arrests, harassment, and targeted killings. Indeed, each passing day seems more harrowing than the last.

In the face of this grim reality, the normalcy of our lives as Palestinians has been completely disrupted. Our days are now consumed by indescribable rage, sorrow, and fear. Often, these emotions paralyze us, prompting us to question if there is any hope left to cling to.

A dear friend once imparted a wish to me that I will forever carry with me. She said, «Mays, I wish you small rays of hope in everyday life.» Now is the time for us to open our eyes to some overlooked sources of hope. Consider a photograph capturing Dr. Ghassan Abu Sittah and other medical staff smiling as they operate on an injured girl in AlAhli Hospital in Gaza, signaling resilience with the caption «Still going strong.» Think of journalists enduring the loss of their families and homes yet persisting in

their work to report on the happenings in Gaza. Picture the Camps Breakers Crew, dancers who, despite the adversities, perform and teach Gazan children, seeking solace through dance in UNRWA shelter schools.

There are also stories of Palestinians in Musafir Yatta, the most vulnerable population in the occupied Palestinian territories, standing resolute, refusing to abandon their lands and homes despite ongoing settler violence, restrictive measures, demolition orders, and actions.

As a Palestinian, these instances echo the call, «Do not be afraid,» spoken by the angel to the shepherds announcing the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ. Amidst the numerous challenges, these scenes serve as my wellsprings of hope, patience, and faith that this injustice will not remain. And through our resilience, we indeed teach life to the rest of the world.



Figure 4: Elham Farah, an 84-year-old Gazan Christian music teacher who was killed on Nov. 12th, 2023 by the Israeli soldiers outside the Holy Family Church in Gaza City.

*Mays Nassar is Palestinian Christian woman from Beit Jala. With a passion for advocating for justice and the human rights of every Palestinian, Mays has played a pivotal role in coordinating and implementing projects that align with the mission and values of Kairos Palestine. Mays is also passionate and supports social projects for children with disabilities.*

## Prayer:

"Rays of hope," God, open the tearful eyes and the broken hearts of our Palestinian sisters and brothers to see the rays of hope around them. Move us, their family, to offer the light of your love to them and others in concrete and practical ways. In the name of the Light of the World, our Savior Jesus.

## Action:

When you receive the Eucharist today, carry with you a family of one of the children killed in the bombing attacks in Gaza, and/or receive communion as an act of solidarity with Palestinians—Muslim and Christian—who cannot attend their places of worship because of Israeli closures. As preparation, share with your friends the sermon preached on October 28 in Bethlehem's Lutheran Christmas Church. Please email to tell us of your experience at [kairos@kairospalestine.ps](mailto:kairos@kairospalestine.ps).



## Fourth Sunday of Advent

By Shireen Awwad Hilal

***“When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.’” (Matthew 2:16-18)***

At Christmas in Bethlehem on the West Bank, however difficult life may be, we normally focus on family and the joy and wonder of our children as we recall the birth of the Christ child—the Prince of Peace. Yet, let us not forget that Jesus was born into the harsh reality of military occupation under the Roman Empire.

This year we are catapulted into the catastrophe of Gaza. As I write (early November), over 4,000 children are among the 11,000 killed in Gaza. Whole families are being killed. We are seeing the killing of the innocents all over again. Like Rachel, we cannot find comfort. Like Rachel, our hearts are shattered by this fearful and violent loss of life, including children who had many years of creative life ahead of them.

Gaza over the past month has revealed extremes of violence, destruction and fear. Over one million people have fled their homes in search of safety. This massive movement of people is a reminder of the Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948. Many see history repeating itself. Their flight reminds us of the flight of the Holy Family two thousand years ago. Today, these uprooted people find no security, no home of safety. Please join us in prayer for those who mourn and live in fear. May we one day know true peace that has a strong foundation, not a temporary one. Peace based on Justice not Fear. Amen.

**Shireen Awwad Hilal** began her career as a teacher at the Evangelical Lutheran School in Beit-Sahour, before becoming an administrative secretary at Life Agape-Jerusalem and then an administrator at Beit Al Liqa in Beit Jala before joining Bethlehem Bible College. Shireen was the Dean of Students at Bethlehem Bible College, as well as a lecturer. She is now the Director of Bethlehem Bible College Community & Outreach. She is a leader for women and is involved in a youth ministry that works for rights/reconciliation and leadership.



**Figure 5: Marwan Tarazi, a Palestinian Christian and photo archivist from Gaza who was killed during the Israeli attack on the Greek Orthodox Saint Porphyrius Church in Gaza City on October 20, 2023**



## Prayer:

O LORD, in our fear and through our tears, we cry with the Prophet Isaiah, that you would tear open the heavens and come down to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence. Until that day, strengthen us to make your name known, through the logic of Christ's love, in bold acts of nonviolent resistance. In the name of the Prince of Peace, amen.

## Action:

If there is a demonstration calling for Palestinian freedom and human rights near you, take to the street. If not, write another letter or send another email to your elected officials, calling for an end to Israel's apartheid and increasing genocide. Please, let us know what action you have taken this week by sending an email to ([kairos@kairospalestine.ps](mailto:kairos@kairospalestine.ps)).

# Christmas Day Message

Patriarch Emeritus Michel Sabbah

***"I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people" (Lk 2: 10).***

Christ is born, the Word of God became a human being and lived with us.

**Let us rejoice.**

Happy and Holy Christmas to all. In this year of war in Gaza, and in the hearts of so many everywhere, our Christmas wishes are peace and justice—in Gaza, in all Palestine, Israel, and the world. The good news of the Angels, amidst the death today, is this: Peace, Justice.

***"In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came into being, not one thing came into being except through him. What has come into being in him was life, life that was the light of men" (John 1:1-4).***

This is the deep mystery of Christmas. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God... and the Word became a human being, like us.

In the beginning was the Word. In the depths of time, in the eternity of God, we meditate upon the mystery of Christmas, the mystery of God that surpasses understanding. In this eternal light, we also look to the mystery of death in our Holy Land. Thousands of houses in rubbles. The human being in rubbles. Death from Gaza reaches and fills the

hearts of all of Palestine. We stand torn before the sublime mystery of God, and before the mystery of death in contrast to it, in Gaza, Palestine and Israel.

In the beginning was the Word. God created men and women good, in his image and likeness. We stand today in Bethlehem, on Christmas day, silent. God is love, yet humanity, created by God in his image, became a killer of his brothers and sisters in Gaza and elsewhere. This is the mystery on which we meditate this Christmas. The two realities intertwined: God Almighty, his infinite love, source of justice and peace; and humankind, the work of his hand, hates and kills. They carry weapons of death and destruction and annihilate what God has created. Palestinian or Israeli, God created them, loves them. Both equally human beings, equally loved by God, equally children of the same Father who is in heaven. In Gaza, it does not seem so.

In the depth of Christmas joy, we see life and death, sorrow and pain. We hear the angel's message—Joy for the whole people—yet we look to death in Gaza, and in human hearts. The human being is destroyed in both the Israeli and the Palestinian. One is oppressed, one is oppressor. Both are human beings, and yet both are destroyed.

On Christmas this year, we pray, we praise God, we thank God for his infinite love, because he sent us His Son, His eternal Word, to become a human being born in our land. His birth is a joy for the whole people, for all of humanity. But in Gaza, the humans, broken, are crying and unable to rejoice. We pray and prostrate before the mystery of the love of God, and we ask for mercy for those who die, for all on both sides. We ask mercy for the Palestinian who dies, who is killed, only because he is in his land and his home. This is the only reason for all the tragedies of the Palestinian people. They are in their land, but Israel tells them, "Go away, and you will find peace." But why should they leave their homes? What people has the right to come to another people and say to them: Leave your land and your home, to find your life and security? The international community has known for a long time what is due to the Palestinians and what is due to the Israelis, but it has remained always silent and inactive. Today, too, before the genocide of Gaza, it remains inactive.

However, our message on this Christmas—from the midst of the ruins, the sorrows, and our confusion before the mystery of humankind that kills and the mystery of God who came to reconcile humanity with God: Pray and seek truth in this holy land. Your word of truth, you all who love this Holy Land, will liberate us and remove death from our land. Our message is a message of hope, firmly established in our faith in God. We, members of Kairos Palestine, wait always for the moment of God's appearance in our land. He will come, he will give us peace and justice. Christmas itself is a Kairos. It is a time when the Word of God visits us to wipe away death and every form of oppression. We mourn with the people of Gaza. We try to announce to them the new joy of Christmas. We tell them, Light a trembling candle amidst your ruins. God will come. The love and justice of God will prevail over the evil of humankind.

***"The Word became flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).***

**+ Patriarch Emeritus Michel Sabbah** served as the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem from 1988-2008. He served the parish and the Palestinian nation locally and internationally. He is the president of the Palestinian Christian Initiative, Kairos Palestine, and one of the authors of the Kairos Palestine document, "A Moment of Truth." He currently works in the field of interfaith dialogue and believes in pluralism, equality and preserving human dignity.





## Prayer:

We praise your name, God. You are holy, holy, holy, the Alpha and the Omega. Today, may we find our hope affirmed and our strength renewed in the celebration of the birth of Jesus through whom you have made your home among us mortals. Amen.

## Action:

Prepare a Palestinian feast to celebrate the birth of Jesus with your Christian siblings in Palestine. Invite friends to share; then pray together for the end of hostilities in Palestine/Israel and for a way forward to a just and lasting peace.

