

Preaching the Election Season: An Arab American Christian Perspective

With Halim Shukair and Katie Nakamura Rengers



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Introduction

How do you preach to a community that feels hurt and betrayed, amid competing stories and in a political atmosphere where moral high ground is just plain fuzzy?

As an Episcopal priest and grandchild of the Japanese Internment, I find these questions of loyalty, betrayal, and identity really compelling and complex. And, since the most recent conflict broke out in Gaza, I have been hearing about how these have become really heart-wrenching issues for the American Arab community. In particular, because Michigan is an election battleground state, the city of Dearborn has come up again and again in the news as Arab-American residents wrestle with the Biden Administration's response to the war.

Before now, I had only heard of the city of Dearborn through my friend and colleague, the Rev. Halim Shukair. Halim is Lebanese American, and he now pastors two congregations, Christ Church, a primarily Anglo Episcopal congregation, and

Mother of the Savior, an Arabic language congregation. The two churches not only share a pastor but also a building, a sense of shared mission, and fellowship.

This transcript is taken from a conversation Halim and I had over Zoom on May 2, 2024, about how he has approached preaching to his congregations since October 7, and especially as the U.S. presidential election looms on the horizon.

– *Katie Nakamura Rengers*

Katie: I used to only know about Dearborn, Michigan, because of you, Halim. Now I hear about it as a place of political crisis and unrest and people questioning their loyalty and asking, What do I do, how do I respond to this?

Halim: First of all, I am very grateful for those who are recognizing what is going on in the world, particularly at this time among Arabs and in the Middle East. I am also thankful that my advocates in The Episcopal Church recognize the importance and witness of the Arab Christians here (in the U.S.), including Arab Christian Palestinians.

Since October 7, the media's voice has primarily been on the fight between Hamas and Israel, between Muslim and Jew. Rarely do they show the Christian presence in Gaza, with the exception of the coverage of the al-Ahli Arab Hospital, the Anglican hospital that was bombed in the first couple of weeks. But there are Christians in Gaza that have been part of a very ancient Christian community. Remember that last Sunday we heard the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch who was traveling from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. To do this, he had to pass through Gaza! So the Christian Arab community's witness has been important for all these years, and it speaks to the current situation there in Gaza.

This time has been very hard for Palestinian Christians. You may have seen that this last December was the first time Christmas was not celebrated in Bethlehem. The Christian community depends on religious tourism—both economically and to bring and share their voices. Christians are always on the margin in the Holy Land, and these circumstances put an even bigger burden on them.

For us in Dearborn, October 7 was so hard. We have been watching the accumulation of tension for years, long before last October. By Michigan standards, Gaza is only about the size of Detroit. It has around two million people living in very harsh conditions. They cannot move freely through borders, and they have been under Hamas's authority for ten years. Imagine growing up in that area—what is their future? Where can they find hope? There is a lot of pent-up frustration. So 10/7 came like an explosion. Imagine putting your pet in a closed room for 2-3 weeks; when you finally open the door they will explode. Imagine that situation with human beings.

I do not agree with the violence Hamas went on, the killing of innocent Israelis in the settlements. However, consider that these settlements were surrounding Gaza. People on the inside looked at them as the “jail soldiers” who had the ability to freely move around while we are here, imprisoned. They were expressing their anger and agony.

The Israeli response also came as a big shock to my community in Dearborn. Innocent people killed day and night through airstrikes, targeting hospitals and shelters and destroying churches. Why do innocent children have to pay the price? Of course I am against the killing and everything that happened on the night of 10/7. But not all Gazans are Hamas, and in the year 2024 there is no justification for killing women and children and targeting places where people take shelter.

My church, Mother of the Savior, is feeling pain over it all. How do we express that we are Arab Christian Americans? We live in the U.S., we pay taxes, we love this country. America gives us freedom and hope and nurtures respect of every human being. This is the foundation of this country. My people cannot understand the United States' initial support for Netanyahu, which then became a "oh no, you shouldn't do this." We do not understand how, even for the first months, the U.S. could support the killing of these innocent people using American tax money. My people ask, How can we live in this country?

Katie: Thank you for setting up so well this tension that you and your Arab Christian congregation carry. And, particularly because you are the pastor of two, interdependent congregations—one Arab and the other Anglo, I'm curious about how you have been thinking about preaching the Good News—both with compassion, but also staying true to who you are?

Halim: Yes, I would like to share this. In the beginning it was very hard for me personally. I was born in Beirut at the beginning of the Lebanese civil war that started in 1975 and ended in 1991. I have lived most of my life in war, and I know how war creates wounds. Still now, sometimes, when I hear fireworks it reminds me of the war. At the beginning of the Gaza war I was not able to watch TV—I had to read the newspaper instead—because the images reminded me of the war I lived through in Lebanon. And so, at the beginning, I was heartbroken. How would I prepare my sermon, how can I bring the good news? First of all, personally, the good news for me?

Early on, I was on a Zoom conversation with my spiritual director; I was in tears and I was so embarrassed because I was so angry with God. I was asking, How can we say that God is working in this world, that God is beside the hopeless, beside the marginalized, with people who are unseen every day? I found that, in preaching, I needed to preach to myself first. I needed to struggle with the scripture myself first. On Sundays after I finished my sermon at Christ Church (the Anglo community), in the one hour I had to prepare for Mother of the Savior, I would recall that congregation saying, "Did you hear/see this in the news ...?" Many were worried that the conflict might escalate into the West Bank, where they have relatives. I cried several times while preaching. I could look out at my congregation and see the overwhelm in their eyes.

One of my Mother of the Saviour congregants is a Palestinian American whose family was displaced from their village in 1948. He came to me recently and said,

“Father, you are always talking about peace. But we have been talking about peace since 1948 and nothing has happened.” I tried to say that Jesus was born into a situation that was not so different from this. When Jesus walked on this earth there was Roman occupation in Palestine. Jesus witnessed religious and political oppression, especially of the poor and marginalized. But Jesus fought to bring the Kingdom of God and reminded us that, from the beginning we were created in the image of God, who is the bringer of peace for all humanity.

This is what I believe is the mission of God. That we are created in the image of God, that God created in humanity the vision of his kingdom, what he intended in the beginning in the garden of Eden, of all humanity living together. “I created you in my image and likeness so you all can bring this creation together, not to destroy.” War destroys humanity and creates hate. War is not the solution. If you got rid of Hamas and there was justice and peace, another Hamas will just rise up, no matter the name. On the other side you’ll have Netanyahu #2, Netanyahu #3.

I say that “war is not a solution,” because I myself lived through a war. When you’ve lived in a war, you can never say that war is the solution.

Going back to preaching; I need to struggle, like Jacob, first with myself then with the congregation. If you are an Arab Christian, you find yourself in the middle with this conflict. You may have come to this country thinking that it would bring you hope and freedom, so this war brings shock. How could the U.S. support the killing in Gaza? Then, when the protests started here in Dearborn, people became afraid. Sometimes, if you say something in support of Palestine, others will accuse you of being anti-Semitic. But, of course, people protesting Israel aren’t protesting Jews as a religion. Jews, Christians, they have all been in Palestine, they are all part of the history. You forget there are a lot of Arab Jews. They have been all together.

Arabs in diaspora have a hard time because where is their country? Where is Palestine on the world map? Is it the West Bank? The Palestinian Authority? Gaza? The Holy Land? Also your identity as a Palestinian, especially a P. Christian, what is it? Where is your country? People are confused.

Katie: So we are moving toward a presidential election, and elections stir up big feelings around identity, loyalty, frustration, etc ... How are your people feeling about this? And how is that affecting your preaching?

Halim: Yes, there is a lot of pain in the community, both at Mother of the Saviour but more widely in Dearborn. Michigan is a Democratic state and it voted in support of Biden in the last election. And so people have felt betrayed and as though their voices are not being heard. Our people have been called “anti-Semitic,” and Dearborn was labeled a “Jihadist City” by a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed. This in particular created a lot of fear. How, as an American, can I express my freedom of speech without being labeled these things? I am an advocate for justice and peace.

We hosted an interfaith event for Gaza, with Muslims, Jews, and Christians together. Christ Church was packed with over 300 people. Everyone expressed frustration that our voices advocating for peace have not been heard. More and more money is spent on weapons and supporting the military. At that time, the Biden administration was supporting Israel and sending weapons to both Israel and Ukraine—but no one talks about spending money on the people of Gaza, in the form of education and hospitals. There's been a lot of frustration with the administration. However, neither side (Republicans or Democrats) is saying they support justice and peace.

The war will eventually stop, but if there is no permanent solution for justice and peace then in two or three years we will just have another October 7th. I believe that, in this election, people in Dearborn are asking the administration to work toward a permanent solution that recognizes both the rights of Israelis and of Palestinians.

I am not yet a citizen, though hopefully that will be finalized in a few years. When it is, I will vote from my experience as a Lebanese who was educated at an American University back home. I was raised in the neighborhood of the American University of Beirut and all my childhood was spent next to this very beautiful campus. On entering the main gate of the university there is an inscription in Arabic and English: "I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly."

The American University has shaped many leaders, including Palestinians, Lebanese, Syrians, and Jordanians. We were raised with the idea of what it means to be a free person. In many middle eastern authoritarian regimes, people cannot freely express themselves. American University was an oasis to show what it means to receive a liberal education, to be a free person, and to be a human being.

So, when it comes to preaching I ask myself, what is the foundation? What principles are this country built on? Of course I have witnessed racism here and there is still a lot of work to do with racial reconciliation. But the foundational pillars are biblical pillars. When I vote, I look at how I can bring the voice of respecting the dignity of human beings and of bringing about a justice economy for everyone. As an American citizen, it is my duty to work for justice for every community living here and to see the beautiful diversity of people living in this country. I believe in the election we need to emphasize our identity as a community and take away this individualism that tries to root itself in the culture and the media. An election is community work. Yes, I vote for my voice but it will be counted in community. This box that I check to vote is a Communion vote. I cannot vote from my selfishness, or my interest in how it will go for Democrats or Republicans. Both parties need to think about the good of the whole country.

Jesus said, "Love your enemy," that means go and do the work. Do the work from the beginning. Not after the killing of more than 33,000 in Gaza. Christ is calling us to start the work, the peace, from the beginning. Loving your enemy means putting in work and it's not easy!

How do I preach this? Looking into the eyes of a woman who was cut off from her house, from her land and gone into exile—how to look into her eyes and say “love your enemy?” She will have to work all her life to do this. But this is our call and our mission. Christ didn’t call us for an easy thing. The disciples were frightened; they knew they would be persecuted in Jesus. But at Jesus’s first resurrected appearance he said, “peace be with you.” Because if we do not have inner peace, the disciples cannot bring peace to the whole world.

After he was raised, Jesus didn’t appear and say, “Peter, you denied me. You coward, you left me on the cross!” No, even to Thomas he said, “put your hands in my wound.” In this time of polarization in our country and the world, let us bring peace and hope. Remember that, even in the wars we hear about there are people working for peace! People from Europe have come to Gaza to serve and work in the kitchen. Many wounded Palestinians are being treated in Israeli hospitals, and many Palestinian doctors have worked with Israeli patients. These are the stories of hope that preachers need to be telling.