

# “Where is God in the Midst of War?”<sup>1</sup>

*Isaiah 64:1-9*

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—<sup>2</sup>as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!<sup>3</sup> When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.<sup>4</sup> From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.<sup>5</sup> You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.*

*<sup>6</sup>We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.<sup>7</sup> There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.<sup>8</sup> Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.<sup>9</sup> Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.*

Thanks for your warm welcome to TUMC. We arrived from Beirut on Friday night so we're still adjusting from our Mediterranean climate to winter in Canada. And thanks for this opportunity to share about the work we do together with MCC in Lebanon and Syria.

Advent begins in darkness. We light one candle to express our hope in the growing light of Christ's coming. But Advent begins first by recognizing the darkness in our world, and coming from the Middle East we see a lot of that. We live in a region of people searching for hope amidst so much darkness and devastation.

The UN states the cold hard facts. The greatest humanitarian disaster in recent history. Over 200,000 dead with almost half of Syria's population of 22 million in desperate need. 7.2 million in Syria are displaced. 3.2 million have fled as refugees to other countries. Over a third of them, the estimates range from 1.3 to 1.5 even 1.8 million to Lebanon where we live. Imagine Canada being inundated with 12 million refugees? That's the scale Lebanon is struggling with, a tiny country the size of Cape Breton Island. And in Syria the war wages on—into its 4<sup>th</sup> year.

Mark's apocalyptic gospel text for today captures the imagery: Mark 13:24-25

<sup>24c</sup>“But in those days, the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
<sup>25</sup>and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”

Advent begins with a cry to God that things are not right in this world.

The prophet Isaiah pleads for God to do something. (Isaiah 64:1) "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" It's the anguished outburst of a desperate people: "Where are you, God? Where are you?"

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Here Bishop Selwanos, of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Homs, utters his prayer to God amidst the destruction in St. Mary's Church in the old city of Homs.

This statement captures the struggle.

“When you go to a house where 2 children have died, what can I say? They ask me, ‘Where is God?’”

In our Isaiah text, the prophet says, “You have hidden your face from us O God” (Isaiah 64:7)

So Isaiah's cry, or the Syrian's cry, “Where are you God?” raises a question for all of us. How do we answer that cry? Where is God in the midst of this war?

Perhaps God seems absent in all this darkness because we're looking for God in all the wrong places. Where is God in all this mess? God is in the unexpected places.

In the book *Night*, Nobel winning author Elie Wiesel describes a scene in the Auschwitz death camp, a scene which could be replicated numerous times with the barbaric accounts in Syria. As a boy hangs from Nazi gallows, someone in the ground asks, “Where is God?” Wiesel writes: "And I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is God? Here he is ... He is hanging here on this gallows.'" (*Night*, Bantam Books, 1982, pp. 61-62.)

This is the Christian answer to the question "Where is God?" When we are looking for God to tear open the heavens and come down, we begin by looking at the one who hung on the cross for our sins. Jesus turns the whole question of suffering around. In Jesus we begin to see that the answer to "Where is God?" is precisely this: God is with those who suffer. That's where God is.

A couple Sundays ago we met with Pastor Ibrihim Nseir, of a Presbyterian Church in bombed out city of Aleppo. His church building was destroyed but the church continues to meet on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of an apartment. Here's what he said.

“God is in Syria.

Through all these difficulties, I want to insist on one thing: God is with us.

We feel that God cries with us

And we feel God's peace with us.

The life of the Spirit is reflected in the life of the church that is suffering now.”

Hope amidst suffering. God is there. In unexpected places.

Rahaf is a volunteer with MCC's Canadian Foodgrains Project in Syria which feeds over 30,000 people every month ongoing now for 2 years. She says,

“Our town had become home to about 15,000 people who had left Damascus, Homs and other cities to escape the fighting. Then, in November 2013, Deir Attieh was attacked.

After the first big explosion, I told my parents, ‘I can't live here. I think I will die from fright.’ We lived in the basement for a month. I was so afraid of dying, and I missed my friends who died.

Even though I am afraid, I want to help people in Deir Attieh.

Since the invasion, people struggle to get enough food to eat... Some people say they go to sleep hungry. It's very hard to hear.

I don't want to see one of my people, the Syrian children, die because they cannot eat food. I no longer want to leave Syria. Helping people makes me want to stay."

Rahaf's commitment is a sign of hope.

Another story of hope needs to be told in Deir Attieh. At one point in the battle extremists were going to desecrate the church in the town. But the local Muslims occupied the church and said to the extremists, "If you want to desecrate this church you will have to kill us first." This was a courageous act of non-violent resistance in support of their Christian neighbours offering hope to the whole community.

Samer Laham, of the Middle East Council of Churches, orchestrates our largest Canadian government funded projects in Syria and delivers MCC shipments of relief kits, school kits and hygiene kits. He lives in Damascus.

He says: "Muslims come to the Christians for aid, knowing they're secure and can get services with dignity. It means so much that you as Mennonites join us in solidarity. This area is the cradle of Christianity. But we are losing the 'living stones' by Christians leaving...God wants me to stay in Syria. He wants us to keep witnessing in his name. Now we are living the 'exam' of witness. Are we going to stay in Syria as Christians or leave?" He says: "The role of the Christians is to stay and work with the communities in Syria, both Muslims and Christians."

Our text in Isaiah 64 concludes with these words (verses 8&9),

*<sup>8</sup>Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.... Now consider, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people."*

Listen to what Pastor Ibrihim from Aleppo says,

"You know we are not only supporting Christians, we are supporting the whole community -- Muslims, Christians, Kurds, Armenians -- all those who knock on our door and ask for help. We are here for a message and this message should be clear for everyone, that God loves ALL people, and I insist on the word all!"

A light of hope in a country now torn apart by radical ideology. Not how Syria was before.

So how can you help those who are risking their lives for hope and peace in Syria?

First pray. Bishop Jean Kawak of Damascus always says, "Remember to pray for us." We need your prayers. The people of Syria feel abandoned by the West. Prayer builds solidarity with our sisters and brothers.

Bishop Jean is quick to add "And we need prayers that are tangible."

This leads to a second response which is to give – to give a gift of hope. This is the MCC Webpage for the Syria Crisis. The needs now are greater than ever before and our resources have declined so please give so we can keep helping. This Tuesday is GIVING TUESDAY and MCC has a generous donor who has agreed to match donations from new donors up to \$10,000.

A third response is to pack kits. Relief buckets, school kits, hygiene kits. Blankets. Ontario is packing kits this week in preparation for a shipment to Syria. These shipments of material resources bring hope to many people.

A fourth response is advocacy. Encourage the Canadian government to support peaceful negotiations between all parties in Syria instead of seeking a military solution to the conflict. Don Peters, MCC Canada Executive Director, included these words in his recent letter to the Canadian government, "MCC firmly believes that there are a broad range of alternatives to armed intervention that can stem the threat of violence and make a constructive contribution to building the prospects for peace."

Pray, give, pack kits and advocate. Four practical ways you can help bring hope to the Syrian people.

A voice from Syria: "As Christians we are children of hope. We tell people Jesus is with us and he will lead us out of this."

When we learn where to find God and where to be with God, then Isaiah's prophecy will finally come to pass: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness--on them light has shined. For unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given and he shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:2,6)

Restore our hope, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Amen