

Cries

By: Larry Greenfield
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Good thing the son of elderly Elizabeth and Zechariah – commonly known as John the Baptist – was born in a “Judean town in the hill country” (Luke 1: 39) and not “in and around Bethlehem” (Matthew 2: 16).

Otherwise, pregnant Elizabeth would have shrieked a much different cry than the one she loudly shouted when she heard the greeting of the recently impregnated Mary from Nazareth.

And it wasn't just Elizabeth who was excited to hear and see Mary. The story goes that the fetus in Elizabeth's womb “leaped” as soon as it heard Mary's voice. As Elizabeth confessed to Mary:

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb...For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.
(Luke 1: 42, 44)

That, in turn, causes Mary to cry out in song:

My soul magnifies the Most High,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
who has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant.

And the remainder of Mary's psalm would, then and over the centuries, bring cries of joy to those who, otherwise, would have to live without hope:

God has shown strength with God's arm,
and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
God has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty...
(Luke 1: 42-43, 51-53)

These cries from Elizabeth and Mary and all those of low estate are the joyous cries responding to the presence/incarnation and work/ministry of a just and merciful God.

But only months later, after the births of sons to Elizabeth and Mary, the *other* cry -- that much *different* cry – came from mothers “in and around Bethlehem.”

That was because the birth of Mary's son – a child named Jesus – was seen as a threat to the rule of a king, a threat interpreted to be so serious as to cause the king to send his

armed forces into the area “in and around Bethlehem” to kill – get this -- every single child two years of age and younger. All of them!

John and Jesus were spared: John because he was still with his parents far away from Bethlehem, and Jesus because his father, Joseph, was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt.

The deaths of all those other children, which became known as the “Slaughter of the Innocents,” was seen, tragically, as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah. It was the cry of Rachel for the butchery of her babies:

A voice was heard in Ramah,
Wailing and loud lamentations,
Rachel weeping for her children;
She refused to be consoled, because they are no more.
(Jeremiah 31: 15, Matthew 2: 18)

So, in the space of just a few days, a few weeks, a few months: two radically different cries: cries of overwhelming joy and hope and cries of unbearable sadness and despair.

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Last year at around this time (December 27, 2008 – January 18, 2009), there was again a massive attack against Palestinian people by a ruling power, this time in the Gaza Strip, based again on what was seen as a threat to its security (not, by common consensus, a threat to its *existence*, even though one of the two Palestinian (Hamas) parties refused to acknowledge Israel’s right to exist.)

The Israeli attack followed a nearly five-month and largely successful “lull” in the longstanding conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Yes, both sides accused the other of violations and failing to live up to commitments. But the “lull” was broken on November 4, when Israel raided a disputed tunnel near the border, killing six Hamas combatants, and provoking a rocket response from Hamas. Over the next six weeks several attempts were made to re-establish the ceasefire, but finally Israel took the offensive and began its “Operation Cast Lead” on December 27 with massive air and rocket attacks, followed by a ground invasion on January 3, 2009.

The result of the 22-day war?

I suppose there were some cries of joy and satisfaction on one side. Only thirteen Israelis lost their lives (ten combatants, and of those, four by friendly fire), injuries were minimal, and the country suffered no physical damage.

But on the other side there has been, to quote the Gospel of Matthew, much “wailing and loud lamentations” for the large losses incurred in the war: 1,434 Palestinians killed, of which 235 were combatants, leaving just under 1,200 civilians (288 children and 121 women) who lost their lives – the very ones who are to be protected under international

law and the laws of war. Just over 5,300 Palestinians were injured, which includes more than 1,600 children and 828 women. In the range of 400,000 Palestinians were left without running water; 4,000 homes were destroyed or severely impaired; 80 government structures were destroyed or damaged; thousands of people were left homeless.

It is important to note that not all Israelis cried out with joy and satisfaction. Israel's daily newspaper, Haaretz, stated on February 1:

The questions are troubling; the mass killing of civilians, among them 300 children and 100 women; the shooting at medical crews; the use of illegal munitions against civilian populations, including white phosphorus shells; the prevention of the evacuation of wounded; bombing and shelling of schools, hospitals, supply convoys and a UN facility. These questions cannot remain unanswered. The suspicion that Israel committed war crimes in Gaza is liable to cause it great damage. This is precisely the moment at which Israel needs to preempt the others and investigate itself.

But that self-investigation never happened.

Instead, over Israel's objection, a United Nations inquiry was created in April, led by Judge Richard Goldstone (a distinguished Jewish jurist from South Africa, with an impeccable record of rigorous and fair assessments of war crime and human rights disputes). The inquiry produced an extensive report (575 pages) on the Gaza conflict in September, which was endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council in October, finding war crimes and possibly crimes against humanity on both sides – on *both* sides – including the rocket attacks by Hamas into civilian villages as war crimes and a conclusion that “the Israeli military operation was directed at the people of Gaza as a whole, in furtherance of an overall and continuing policy aimed at punishing the Gaza population, and in a deliberate policy of disproportionate force aimed at the civilian population.”

The Goldstone report recommended that there was sufficient evidence to demand that both parties – Hamas and Israel – carry out thorough self-examinations of the charges placed against them, and that if they failed to do so the UN Security Council should determine if the matter needed to be referred to the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Any chance these cries for self-examination will be heeded?

I suppose it is understandable that both parties would resist that invitation, especially Israel, since it refused even to participate in the inquiry at any stage of the process and has consistently dismissed the credibility or even the basis for the inquiry.

But what about other nations? In the United Nations vote adopting the central recommendations of the report, 114 voted affirmatively, 44 abstained, and only 18 voted

against it, including the United States and seven members of the European Union (the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Slovakia).

In opposing the report, the Obama administration also undermined the leadership of the Palestinian Authority by pressuring it to agree to a delay on action regarding the Goldstone recommendations – a position that, bowing to popular pressure in Palestine, the Fatah leadership soon had to reverse. And, perversely, the American position ended up crippling the Middle East peace process that it had worked so hard to advance.

Adding insult to injury, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to call on the President and the Secretary of State “to oppose unequivocally any endorsement or further consideration of the Report on the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict in multilateral fora.” The bi-partisan vote was 344 in favor, 36 opposed, and 22 registering present.

So much for an (official) American hearing of Rachel’s cry!

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There is an even more recent cry (December 11, 2009) – one that doesn’t easily fit the pre-established categories of “cries.”

It, too, comes from the Land we call Holy, from a group of Palestinian Christian leaders of numerous communions, calling for an end to the occupation by Israel.

Known as “The Kairos Palestine Document” (to acknowledge relationship to a similar statement from South African churches in the mid-1980s), it is entitled: “A moment of truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering.”

The statement defies categories because it is inclusive of both suffering and hope:

We, a group of Christian Palestinians, after prayer, reflection and an exchange of opinion, cry out from within the suffering in our country, under the Israeli occupation, with a cry of hope in the absence of all hope, a cry full of prayer and faith in a God ever vigilant, in God’s divine providence for all the inhabitants of this land. (From the Introduction)

After an extensive descriptive, analytic, and theological discourse, the document ends with this affirmation:

In the absence of all hope, we cry out our cry of hope. We believe in God, good and just. We believe that God’s goodness will finally triumph over the evil of hate and of death that still persists in our land. We will see here “a new land” and “a new human being,” capable of rising up in the spirit to love each one of his or her brothers and sisters.

In these days when we Christians find ourselves “in and around Bethlehem,” and amidst all the cries of joy and jubilation of this season, we are also invited to hear the cries of those across the globe who await the coming of the God of justice and peace.

Could it possibly be that we, feeble and finite, could be incarnations of that God, as we attempt to be followers of the bearer of the truly Good News – witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth? (Acts 1: 8)