

## **Dr. Mazin Qumsiyeh**

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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Good morning everybody, it is truly an honor to be here with you. I've been to this church over 25 years ago. I've always considered it my church even when I lived in Connecticut even though I was far away but I considered it home. People here some are still around, some have departed, but for 25 years I have kept the relationship with this church and I am truly honored to be back here.

I didn't prepare a speech because I wanted to say just what was in my heart and mind honestly. And since Reverend Steve has spoken of hope, I wanted to make this my theme of my talk.

Why is it that we Christians believe in this hope? I tell you when I was growing up and I would go to school in Bethlehem. My village is actually the shepherd's field where those shepherds heard the angels sing, telling them of this miracle the birth of Jesus, and they went up the hill. Literally my house is down the hill from the Church of Nativity. So I would go up to my school and I come back to the Church of the Nativity and I meditate everyday coming back from school. And I think about this, what is my purpose in life as a child, and I understood my purpose at age 13, really, and I started to work towards it. But what is it that gave me this energy to keep going, it's this faith. Faith in something better, in something bigger. Despite the obstacles and the horrors that we see around us every day. And they asked me to speak to you briefly about what's happening in Palestine. I can say briefly Bethlehem is in a bad, bad situation. There are no tourists, this is going to be the second Christmas without tourism. In Bethlehem we used to get around three million tourists, just tourism to the Church of the Nativity every year, and this is going to be the first time in the history of the Church of the Nativity since it was built by Queen Helena that we had very, very little international tourist, a trickle instead of millions, so the economy is suffering, the people are suffering, the hotels are shuttered, the restaurants, souvenir shops, the economy is really, really bad. Added to that of course Israel closed off the West Bank since October 7, 2023. Closed off our ghetto Bethlehem, so the exits in and out of Bethlehem are mostly closed with the exception of one exit which sometimes is closed. But even our students at Bethlehem University, which by the way is a Christian University and I teach there sometimes, one course. And our students cannot even get to school sometimes from Jerusalem so we hold online courses.

That's briefly what's happening in our town and when people go to pick the olive trees they get attacked by settlers and soldiers. I could go on forever describing the symptoms, and of course there's a genocide and an eco-cide in Gaza destruction of the environment, most of the tree cover has been gone. There's a medi-cide destruction of hospitals and so on. We could get very depressed if we go through the list of all these things. But what gives us hope, that energy to keep on going day in and day out. I myself I work 16-17 hours a day and I am going all the time, 7 days a week. And even this morning I got up at 5:00 to come here, but there's Becky and Ted who are kind hosts.

I'll start with that element, that element alone. People who care, the birds in your garden give me hope, because these are God's creation and they are feeding and they are eating. You look around you and see miracles everywhere if you want. There are people doing good things, there are people doing bad things, but is this something different, is this something new? No, it existed at the time of Jesus when Jesus was walking between the olive trees, some of them are 2- or 3,000-years old olive trees that are

now being uprooted by the Israeli government. When Jesus was walking with them was there more justice in his time than in our time than there is between us? No. It was the same. There was injustice, there were lepers, poor people, people in prison, people suffering, people being crucified, including him. So it was even worse, probably one could argue, at that time. So it is not the conditions of the world as it is that gives us hope.

What is hope? For me what is hope as a Palestinian Christian? It is a very interesting question, what is hope? What does it mean to have hope in the future? Well, the hope is that as somebody said, peace is not that destination. Peace is the road that you take. And the peace of my heart is much more important than anything else that is around me. Even when the Israeli soldiers arrested me for civil disobedience, and even when they kneeled on my chest and cracked my rib, I remember that message of hope. What is a message of hope? Love your enemies. It doesn't mean love the deeds they do to you, by the way. No, we don't love the actions they do, but we love the people and we say leave them a door to change their behaviors towards us, and sometimes we succeed, even with the Israeli soldiers, on two occasions I managed to convince them that they were on the wrong track.

So it is the peace inside, the peace inside us is what makes us feel that we can achieve something. And if other people learn from our peace, from our actions, well fine. If they don't, they don't. To me, the people who oppress us or oppressed Jesus, what did he say on the cross? "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

So we consider it like dealing with somebody, like one of my relatives was a drug addict and an alcoholic, who was self-destructive and destructive to others of course. So we try to help them but ultimately it has to come from them. It has to come from inside. And so our inside, our hope, is drawn from that possibility of change, and we know change is possible. Here is an example of change. Mark Braverman grew up believing in Zionism and ethnocentric nationalism and then he changed. He changed because he saw a reality that we are all human beings, that we can love each other, we can live in dignity with each other.

I draw hope from the girl that I brought here to Connecticut in 2001, that's 23 years ago, a 7 1/2-year-old girl named **Yiamsee (sp)**. I think I brought her to Old Lyme at that time. She was shot in the eye with a rubber-coated steel bullet, and we got her a prosthetic eye at Yale University, I was there then at Yale University and Yale Eye Center and then she went back to Gaza, and she lived in Gaza. Now she and her family they have lost everything, everything. I had lost touch with them. She sent me a picture of my business card from Yale University because I gave her my card and told her to contact me. I didn't have their contact but she contacted me. And she told me the situation that they are living in tents and that they lost their relatives, they lost their house, and so on. Of course her eye is long gone because those prosthetic eyes you outgrow them. That was 2001, so obviously she was 7 1/2, and now she is almost 30 years old. When I talked to her, and I talk to her regularly now by the way, she has since gotten married and had one child who is living with her in one tent with 25 people in one tiny tent, and now the rains are flooding these things. She is hopeful, she is hopeful. Why is she hopeful? She lost everything, and it doesn't look like it's going to improve. It's been 13 months. Why is she hopeful? She told me "I'm hopeful because there are people who care." In fact, I asked her if she wants me to deliver a message to you. She said to me, "Please thank them because we know that people care. They care about us, and they try to help." So this caring, this gives hope to people even in the most dismal situations. You know when Jesus walked with the lepers some of them he cured and some he did not, some may not have been killed, but he gave them that hope, that energy, that energy to keep going on even in difficult situations. That's what gives us hope. It gives us hope that there are millions in the streets saying "Cease Fire," "Stop this nonsense," "Stop this genocide." That they are on the campus at Universities around

the world, that they are asking for this to stop, for this madness to stop. It affects every one of you. It affects every one of us. I am a U.S. citizen, and I tell you my tax money are being used for that. Imagine how much I feel guilty about that. By the way when you relocate, which I did in 2008, I moved to Palestine, I became an ex-patriot U.S. citizen, that doesn't mean you stop paying taxes. You still have to pay taxes. So there's only two things certain in life, death and taxes. So this is reality. Again, you know, on the concept of hope, what is it that keeps us going in life? Everyone has their cross to bear, so to speak, everybody suffers. I lost so many of my friends in the West Bank, I can't tell you. Twenty-five friends of mine in the West Bank are lost. In Gaza I lost track of the numbers of people, friends of mine, who were killed in Gaza. Many doctors, medical doctors, many professors at the universities there, even the president of the university there. All the universities in Gaza have been destroyed. I have good relationships with three universities in Gaza including publications and things like that.

But when I see hope, I see it in the guy, the agricultural person, who lost everything, he is in the tent and he is planting some plants next to his tent. This is hope, this is thinking that the future will be better and that he can do something about it. When he told me we hope, we hope, we hope it will get better, that this will stop, and we will have rebuilding, and that we can go back to our home. I said you have no home to go back to, he said a rebuilt home, well anyways that is what hope is.

My sister she goes to church in Jerusalem every Sunday, she is much more religious than I am when I lived there. Because her church is in Jerusalem, she has to go through Jerusalem but she risked her life going across borders that she is not supposed to because Jerusalem is off limits to us. I as a Palestinian Christian in Bethlehem cannot visit the Church of Holy Sepulcher, because I'm Palestinian Christian and not Jewish. It's as simple as that, they prevent us. So she would risk her life going through the hills and the valleys to get to church and she would get up at 5 or 6 in the morning on Sunday to go there. I admired her for that.

My activism is directed towards rebuilding, so how do I do that? I do it with children. We started this institute called Palestine Institute for Bio-Diversity and Sustainability. It's an institute which is interested in sustainable in human and natural communities, so we bring children every day. Everyday there are children in our museum. We have a botanical garden, a museum of natural history, a museum of ethnography. Children have programs there, and I encourage you to come and visit and see. And we are planting and people tell me you are crazy you're building in the Middle East and everything is going up in flames. I said even if I knew the world was going to end tomorrow I would still be planting today. First of all, again, it's healthy for me, for my own heart to think that there is something better, to work for something better, to plant a tree, to see it growing and see it giving fruit. This is for us what hope is as Palestinians, and we have been doing it from the dawn of civilization.

You know that Palestine is part of the Fertile Crescent where your ancestors and my ancestors, I say your ancestors are Palestinian by the way, whether you want it or not because when we migrated out of Africa, humans came out of Africa to the rest of the world, they came first to Palestine settled in Palestine before they went to Europe and the rest of the world. So everybody in the world except for Africans, of course who stayed in Africa, are coming from descendants of that population on that land bridge of Palestine. Palestine is very important, very important for the world, not only because of religious reasons, being important for Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Bahá'í and other religions but also important because of cultural history. Even the alphabet that you use, you know the ABC's come from Palestine from the Aramaic the proto Aramaic. The A by the way is from the **alp (sp)** which is the bull with the two horns, the B is from **bet (sp)**, a house a line and a half circle, put it on its side you the b in Latin, that's the origin of the alphabet. We all, all of us, owe that land that gratitude and we should not let it burn, so to speak. We should be engaged. This church has been on the forefront of engagement

towards human rights in non-violent ways. I wrote a book about *"Popular Resistance in Palestine"*, it's similar to Howard Zinn's book on *"People History of the United States."* It talks about how people change their society, it's not governments, and you think what are the positive things in this country that happened to us: civil rights, women's right to vote, ending the war in Vietnam, ending support for Apartheid in South Africa, the 40-hour work week, no child labor, social security, all of these things how did they come about? Did them come about because we elected one president vs another, no they came about because we pushed, as people of this country and I speak again as I am now part of this society and also I consider the U.S. as my second home, even though I left in 2008. But we can change this, you can change this, every one of you have the capability to do something, even if it's something small, that is the lighted candle for hope. That's why the Chinese say "Light the candle instead of cursing the darkness." So we lit the candles here, and each of you can light a candle beginning with our own heart lighting a candle and then going on to light the candles around the world, the metaphorical candles of hope, the candles of peace, peace first within our heart, and then peace in our communities. We don't hate each other, regardless of our religions or backgrounds or whatever. We love each other, this is the message of Jesus. I keep re-reading the "Sermon on the Mount" and I encourage everyone to read it at least once a week. It's the most beautiful sermon you can imagine, it's what gives us hope.

Thank you.