“The harvest is plentiful, the labourers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest”

Matthew 9:37-38

The story of the Nassar family farm, more commonly known as the Tent of Nations, goes back over a hundred years, when the grandfather of the Nassar family legally purchased the land during the Ottoman period in 1916. It was reregistered in 1924 and 1925 during the British Mandate. The family possess the land registration documents defining the boundaries. On the land itself, their ancestors planted fruit, olive trees and grape vines.

In 1987 and again in 2000 they updated their land documents at the Bethlehem land registry. In 1991 the family started to experience problems with the Israeli authorities, when portions of the West Bank, including the Nassar family farm, were declared as “state land”. The family land is surrounded by three illegal Israeli settlements - Neve Daniel, Efrat and Elazar. The Nassar family have been forbidden to build structures above ground, have electricity and running water. However, the neighbouring Israeli settlements have all the necessary amenities, as well as connecting roads. These settlements continue to build and expand.

Since then the family has been in the Israeli military courts and the High court of Israel, fighting their case. It has cost them their time as well as staggering legal costs. They responded by building underground cisterns in order to collect and contain rainwater, and installing and using solar panels for electricity. The family have been offered a blank cheque by the Israeli settlers, and told “name your price” for the land. Their response has been “we don’t have the right to sell our inheritance”.

Over the years they have received demolition orders, even on the dog kennel, as well as harassment, attacks and intimidation. As a family, they discussed how they would respond to these experiences and came up with the following four principles:

1) We refuse to be enemies
2) We refuse to hate
3) We will act differently because of our faith
4) We are people who believe in justice

The Nassar family chose to use their energies in a positive way. Daoud Nassar, the family spokesperson, says “When you stand up and act, you empower yourself, and you help empower others” Over the years the Tent of Nations and the Nassar family have been an inspiration to many. They have attracted thousands of visitors from around the world, many returning to work on the land as volunteers. They come to learn, to share, and to offer their solidarity. The visitors have undoubtedly ensured – through their donations towards legal costs, as well as being a presence on the farm - that the Nassar family land and farm have, thus far, not been taken. Their situation has caused international awareness of their plight, and also that of the Palestinians, in general, who are also fighting similar land issues with the Israelis.

Over the past three years, I have had the opportunity to visit the Nassar family at the Tent of Nations many times. It is a place of beauty with stunning views towards the Mediterranean Sea. I have also visited with many groups and volunteers, listening to Daoud share about his family’s situation, and have witnessed their shock by what they have experienced, and yet, inspired by how they have chosen to respond to the daily injustices they face. I was there with the World Methodist Council delegation along with the family, when they became the recipients of the Methodist World Peace Prize award in 2018, for the recognition of their peaceful and non-violent ways of responding to violence and injustice.

A few months ago, I stood in shock and silence, witnessing devastation as far as the eye could see due to a recent arson attack on their land. The rancid smell of smoke still hanging in the air permeated my nostrils. Photos cannot convey the smell that I experienced. Standing in utter disbelief, and wandering around with Daoud as he showed us the remains of destroyed fruit trees, I was left speechless as I recalled what the Nassar family has gone through over the years.
As I observed the dark ashes still smouldering on the land days later, and thought of the many visitors to the farm pre the world pandemic we are now experiencing, I felt overwhelmed.

There have been no tourists to the Holy Land since the pandemic began, and equally, there has been no international presence here as there once had been. The family has been facing further harassment, uncertainty, pressure and now this devastation. We heard that it took eight hours to put the fire out, with limited resources. It had taken the Palestinian fire crew from Bethlehem hours to be able to respond, all the while, the Israeli fire crew stood by and watched, prepared to put the fire out only if it moved in the direction of the nearby settlement. My heart boiled over with both anger and sadness, but started to soar when I heard that no one was harmed from the family, including children who were helping to put the fire out. Although the fire came right up to some buildings, animal pens, and vehicles, no structures, animals or people were harmed, because the wind changed direction and they were all saved. We started to thank God for His protection. The hand of God could be seen in the midst of what was terrifying and destructive motives intended for evil.

Some weeks later, I received another call to go quickly to the farm. We were unable to get on the farm whilst the Israeli soldiers had entered with their military vehicles and cut down over fifty olive trees. Another blow to the family! As we stood once again on their land observing destruction by others, I witnessed for the first time a feeling of giving up. It was all too much! Then within minutes the peaceful fighting spirit of Daoud returned as he said “we will rise up” - not with arms, but by getting back on the tractor and starting to plow the burnt ashes and clearing the damaged land. Hope still rising!

Along with my colleague from the Presbyterian Church (USA), we were able to do what many desire to do and cannot at this moment in time - to be in solidarity with the family. We were able to help Daher plant and water new vines, and pick the year’s grape harvest. We all worked hard together for eight hours under a blistering, hot sun. Unfortunately, on the lower slopes of the hillside, some of their harvest had been stolen. We needed to get the job done before the perpetrators returned. The theft had been reported to the Palestinian police, who came out to the farm in response. They sat in their vehicles and watched us, one commenting “put your hat on!” In time, the same policeman came to help us load the harvest onto the tractor. That’s what the inspiration of the family does to others; their refusal to be enemies towards those who cause them harm. We witnessed once again their perseverance and determination to respond in non-violent ways. Their neighbour commented, “you Christians never retaliate!” No wonder the Nassar family was awarded the World Methodist Peace Prize award!

Last Easter, Daoud shared “we live in a different reality, we are people of the resurrection, we are people of hope, we are people of light. We don’t know what tomorrow will look like, but our call is to remain, to change hearts even in times when we feel we are still in the dark tomb”.

The harvest was plentiful, thank God, but the labourers were few. Please continue to earnestly pray with us during this devastating period of the pandemic, that tourism will once again resume to the Holy Land; that groups and volunteers will be able to return to support the economy and be a presence once again to stand with the Nassar family and others in great need, while struggling with injustices in a non-violent way.

Until that time, we continue to stand on your behalf in person with the family, hoping that next month we can join the olive picking, praying for a successful harvest, Inshallah – “God willing”!

Thank you for your concerns, prayers and donations supporting the Nassar family.

Salaam, Shalom, Peace
Angleena Keizer - Methodist Mission Partner in the Holy land
9/27/2021