Reflection for the beginning of 2024



*From an Early American painting*

Dear Beloved Community,

We have entered a new year. May we thrive together in hope, peace, and love. I am so grateful for you.

As we come together in mutual support, we can acknowledge both our personal challenges and our overall security and blessings: I recently heard in a Ted Talk by Suleia Jaouad, “health and sickness are not a binaries.” We will all be working through the good and the bad in our lives simultaneously.

So too with our complicated world. As I was trying to express in my sermon, I feel we are being called to witness the reality of God’s love and desire for peace and justice. This is a comprehensive project, a “both/and” witnessing. And that is why I feel comfortable asking the congregation to consider creating a banner in which we advocate for a ceasefire and for working toward peace. To help set the frame for this, I am copying a letter below that was written ecumenically by the United Church of Christ and many other denominations. I hope you will take the time to read it. And I plan to set aside time after the service next Sunday so that we can come together to discuss what we want to do and the best way to do it. Please join in that conversation.

I believe that we can lovingly speak to God’s scriptural teaching to “Choose life.”

And so, before the letter, I’d like to offer this blessing and reassurance from Rabbi Rami Shapiro.

We are loved by an unending love.

We are embraced by arms that find us

even when we are hidden from ourselves.

We are touched by fingers that soothe us

even when we are too proud for soothing.

We are counseled by voices that guide us

even when we are too embittered to hear.

We are loved by an unending love.

We are supported by hands that uplift us

even in the midst of a fall.

We are urged on by eyes that meet us

even when we are too weak for meeting.

We are loved by an unending love.

Embraced touched, soothed, and counseled,

ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;

ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles.

We are loved by an unending love.

In faith,

Elizabeth

The letter:

The United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) were among 27 Christian churches and agencies to address a letter to members of Congress today. The letter, in the context of the ongoing war in Israel/Palestine, urged Congress to:

* Publicly call for ceasefire, de-escalation and restraint by all sides
* Prioritize steps to secure immediate release of hostages and ensure international protection for civilians
* Call on all parties to abide by the laws of war, including the Geneva conventions and customary international law

The full text of the letter is below:

Dear Members of Congress,

We have watched in sadness the devastating loss of life in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories over the last several days. As Church based denominations and organizations with deep ties to the Holy Land, we mourn with our Israeli and Palestinian siblings as they grieve the loss of loved ones and remain fearful of continued violence. Our commitment remains to a future in which both Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace, with security and human rights protected for all.

We unequivocally condemn Hamas’ attacks and violent treatment of civilians and call for the immediate release of all hostages in captivity. We also condemn the indiscriminate and violent Israeli response that has already claimed hundreds of civilian lives. The Israeli government’s decision to shut off power, water, and fuel will have a disastrous impact on millions of civilians in Gaza, including over a million children, especially those who need immediate medical attention.

At this critical time it is incumbent upon Congress to act in ways that will help de-escalate the violence and stop further loss of life. Specifically, we call on Congress to:

1. Publicly call for ceasefire, de-escalation and restraint by all sides
2. Call on all parties to abide by the laws of war, including the Geneva conventions and customary international law
3. Prioritize steps to secure immediate release of hostages and ensure international protection for civilians

During this time of heightened tension, we implore Congress to refrain from steps that only exacerbate the violence and increase the risk of expanding war into the broader region. Any Congressional effort that is one-sided, and rushes to send new weapons to Israel, will only intensify the conflict leading to further deaths and destruction. Congress must work to prevent the spread of more violence, including against Palestinian civilians in Israel and the West Bank.

Year after year, we have seen that increasing violence begets more violence. Our past responses have failed to end the bloodshed. As these horrific events unfold, we are reminded once again that only by addressing core systemic issues, including decades of institutionalized oppression and collective punishment of Palestinians through brutal military occupation and a 16-year Gaza blockade, will Israelis and Palestinians live in peace.

We are grateful for your service to this country. We pray for wisdom and discernment on your behalf in the days ahead.

Sincerely,

Alliance of Baptists  
American Baptist Churches USA  
American Friends Service Committee  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
Churches for Middle East Peace  
Church of the Brethren  
Community of Christ  
Church World Service  
Evangelicals4Justice  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
Fellowship of Reconciliation USA  
Franciscan Action Network  
Friends Committee on National Legislation  
Global Ministries  
Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention  
Maryknoll Office for Global  
Mennonite Central Committee  
National Council of Churches  
Pax Christi USA  
Presbyterian Church USA Office of Public Witness  
Quixote Center  
Reformed Church in America  
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Institute Leadership Team  
Sojourners  
The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society  
United Church of Christ  
United Women in Faith