



Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16
"Longing For Peace"
November 29, 2009

Last Sunday, I shared impressions of our recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was incredibly spiritual to sit in silence in Gethsemane, to sail on the Sea of Galilee, to pray by the Pool of Bethesda and to experience many of the places that played a significant role in the life of Jesus. It was faith-broadening to reflect on the ministry of the Galilean teacher who sent the trajectory of world history exploding in a new direction.

However, our pilgrimage was not simply a series of personal peak experiences that sheltered us from the misery and oppression that permeates modern Israel. In addition to our personal spiritual journeys, we also saw the signs and heard the anguished testimonies that pervade the land today.

On the first day of our adventure, Roman Catholic nuns served us a sumptuous lunch of chicken and vegetables at a French convent that overlooks Jerusalem. Standing on the grounds of the convent and facing west, we had a panoramic view of the Old City. The golden Dome of the Rock perched on the ancient Temple Mount stood out among the steeples and minarets and helped orient us. Turning to the north, we had a grand view of the Mount of Olives, the site of Jesus' betrayal and arrest. However, intruding on that view was a new high rise going up. Our guide pointed out the Israeli flags flying from its peak and told us that the multi-story building is being constructed for Jewish settlers on Palestinian land. He was amazed that it was already four stories high because when he was standing at the same site two weeks earlier, the building was not there. That was the first of many occasions when we would see Jewish settlements springing up in the midst of Palestinian territory.

All of us have read about the seizure of Palestinian land, and the Caterpillar bulldozers that level their homes so that Jewish settlers can be moved in, but actually witnessing what is happening on the ground brings home the injustice in a disturbing way. Conversing with individual Palestinians also wrecks the stereotype many of us have acquired from our western media. When many Americans hear the word "Palestinian," they picture Yasser Arafat or a suicide bomber. That's about as fair as someone from a middle-eastern country imagining that all American men are bigots and all American women are sexually promiscuous.

Before our pilgrimage, some of us had seen footage of the young, idealistic Presbyterian woman who had tried to stand in solidarity with the Palestinians and resist the takeover of their land. We had seen the grief of her parents after the young woman had been crushed by a

bulldozer whose operator was determined to flatten a Palestinian home and considered her little more than collateral damage.

It brought home to me the words of Elizabeth Burroughs, a Scottish Christian who wrote a devotional piece after visiting a Palestinian home the day after it had been destroyed. The first sentence of the devotional was spoken to her two friends who had stood beside the Palestinian family as the bulldozer turned their home into a heap of rubble. To fully grasp the nature of the words, it helps to know that Palestinians are well known for their hospitality. It is virtually impossible to visit their homes without being offered a cup of coffee or mint tea.

Ms. Burroughs writes,

‘I’m sorry I cannot offer you coffee. My house has just been demolished.’

We stand together, family and supporter...The bulldozer drives away; the soldiers depart, laughing and joking, leaving a pile of rubble; a storehouse of shattered memories.

Here and there remembered objects – The black T-shirt, the embroidered cushion, the Barbara Streisand CD.

‘They gave us ten minutes; ten minutes to retrieve what we treasure most; the toys, the photographs, the keepsakes...But some things we can never replace.

And why? What did we do to harm them? Why does the world allow them to hurt us so?

We do not hate the Israeli people; we do not understand them.

All we want is peace – but peace with justice.’

I cannot answer their questions. I can do nothing but stand with them; hold them, weep with them. We stand together. Family and supporter...

‘I’m sorry I cannot offer you coffee. My house has just been demolished.’¹

There have been documented cases where the teenager of such a family becomes so filled with rage that he becomes a suicide bomber. Injustice breeds violence.

The Holy Land’s tumultuous history makes the term “holy land” an oxymoron. However, we must never forget that this territory that has witnessed such unholy violence and injustice has also given birth to Judaism, Christianity and Islam; worldwide religions, that, when not hijacked by radical fundamentalists, all teach the necessity of justice and mercy.

What does God want us to do about the never-ending violence in the Middle East? Avert our eyes and focus on more pleasant matters? Shrug our shoulders and say, “It’s their problem?” You do not have to connect the dots very far to see the link between injustice toward Palestinians and terrorist strikes in the West.

Presbyterian pastor, Susan Andrews, poses the following questions: What would Jesus say about Israeli generals who call Palestinians ‘lice’ and ‘a cancer upon the earth?’ Or of the Palestinian leaders who call Israeli soldiers ‘Nazis?’ What would Jesus say about Arab young adults, so embittered that they blow themselves up along with dozens of innocent civilians – somehow considering this ‘holy work’?²

While we were in Israel, we not only witnessed abuses of Palestinians, several of us also toured the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. It is a graphic reminder that Jewish paranoia is justified, and it is understandable why they would fight for a safe homeland. Jews have been cruelly persecuted for over 2,000 years, and Hitler’s so-called “final solution” is a chilling reminder of the lengths to which governments have gone to try to erase Jews from world history. Sadly, many Christians have justified the persecution of Jews. Hitler said he was merely carrying out what the church had been saying for years.

Can we get our world on a better path? Is it possible for Jews to have security and for Palestinians to have freedom and opportunity while sharing the same land? Is it possible for

these two peoples to live together in peace? There are countless justifications for giving up hope that the Middle East can ever be anything other than a caldron of chaos and bloodshed. To even pose the possibility that there can be peace in the Middle East triggers cynical laughter from those who believe it to be a dream too preposterous to pursue. However, if we claim to be followers of the Prince of Peace, how can we not entertain visions of the seemingly impossible?

In this morning's brief text from the prophet Jeremiah, we encounter an earlier situation that had been written off as hopeless. In the 6th century BCE, the Babylonians swept through Jerusalem, destroying its infrastructure and killing many of its people. Those who were not killed were taken captive and dragged back to Babylon. The people cried out to God for help, but the silence was deafening. Decades passed and many of the Hebrew people gave up the hope of ever seeing Jerusalem again. People surrender to despair when they cannot fathom a favorable future.

In this seemingly hopeless situation and to a people grown stubbornly cynical, the prophet Jeremiah declared a word of hope. Despite evidence to the contrary, he said God would lead the people back home where they would live in security and justice. And indeed, the people did not disappear in Babylon, but returned home to rebuild.

Hope in the midst of hopelessness is a major theme in the season of Advent. We long for a better world, and declare along with Jeremiah that a new day is coming when injustice and violence and suffering will be no more, and peace will reign.

Some believe that the warring madness will not end and peace will not appear until God establishes it unilaterally. They assume there is nothing we can do except wait patiently for God to establish peace on earth. Is that true? Are we so prone to power, greed and hostility that we are incapable of making the world more peaceful? Must we resign ourselves to current conditions until God straightens everything out? I suspect that if it were all up to God, God would have done something by now. God calls on us to be the divine hands, heads and feet in this world. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God." Christ challenges us to bring justice and compassion to every troubled place so that people may thrive in peace. Goodness knows we cannot do it by relying solely on our own strength and our own wisdom. But working as partners with God, pursuing the biblical principles of justice and mercy, and never surrendering to the voices of despair, we can be a catalyst in transforming the world.

William Sloane Coffin said, "Peace does not come rolling in on the wheels of inevitability. We can't just wish for peace. We have to will it, fight for it, suffer for it, and demand it from our governments as if peace were God's most cherished hope for humanity, as indeed it is."³

Jewish Rabbi, Michael Lerner, says that both the Israelis and Palestinians must break the cycle of always blaming the other side for the violence. The "struggle has been going on for over a hundred years. Who tossed the latest match into the tinder box matters little. What matters is how to repair the situation. The blame game only succeeds in diverting attention from that central issue."⁴

He goes on to ask: "Who are the friends of the Jewish people? They are people who support a path toward peace and reconciliation. Who are Israel's enemies? They are people who encourage Israel to persist in the fantasy that it can 'win' militarily or politically. Today the friends of the Jewish people are those calling for Israel to treat the Palestinians as a people who are as equally entitled to freedom and self-determination as are the Jewish people."

Rabbi Lerner asks: “Who are the friends of the Palestinian people? They are people who encourage a path of nonviolence and of abandoning the fantasy that armed struggle, combined with the political isolation of Israel, will lead to a good outcome for Palestinians.”

Then, he turns to us in the faith community and calls on us to tell both Israel and the Palestinians that they will never achieve their goals until each side adopts a radically different path. He calls on us to “speak out so that the governments of the United States, Israel and Palestine know that there are many rational voices for peace and reconciliation...(And then he says that we in the religious community have a special contribution to make to the peace process. We must keep insisting that “no political settlement will work until each side recognizes the other as equally precious in God’s eyes.”⁵

It’s easy to pick a fight and go to war. It’s easy to demonize the other side and to feel justified in striving for the annihilation of the enemy. However, God calls us to the much more arduous work of peace. It calls for a Herculean effort, but we must never give up; because to give up on peace is to walk away from God.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Burroughs, “An Ecumenical Accompanier in East Jerusalem,” *Light of the World: Daily Readings for Advent*, (Wild Goose Publications: Glasgow, Scotland, 2009), p.44.
2. Susan R. Andrews, “The Present Tense of God,” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, April – May, 2004, p.48.
3. William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p.93.
4. Rabbi Michael Lerner, “*Shalom in the Middle East: People of Faith Must End the Suffering in the Middle East*,” in *Living Pulpit*, October-December 2006, p.27.
5. *Ibid.*, p.28.