
Week for peace in Palestine Israel
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
Sept 20, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Usually, the worship themes we use here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church are based on the lectionary which is a schedule of readings from the Bible. Typically, once the readings for the week are known, a theme naturally emerges. Other times, I select a theme I think will be meaningful because of conversations I'm having with different people that suggest that a particular topic is relevant right now.

[image: world council of churches]

Today we get a theme given to us by the Christian calendar, specifically from the World Council of Churches. We are invited to celebrate the "Week for Peace in Palestine Israel". We can celebrate peace this week. But of course, the peace itself is more honoured in the breach. The intention of the week is not to reflect on peace so much as it is an opportunity to reflect on lack of peace. But don't worry - I know the rules. This reflection must end with a message of hope. And I'm pretty sure we will get there.

But I must confess I don't know what people here at SHUC think - or even know - about the situation in Palestine Israel. Some congregations ignore it because it seems too fractious, or perhaps too remote. Well, the topic can certainly be fractious, but I hope you will agree that it is not remote. In fact, the issues raised by the conflict in Palestine Israel are relevant less than 10 km from our church. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

If you follow our media, you might believe that the Palestine Israel conflict boils down to a battle between Jewish people and Muslims. But the situation is much more interesting than that. Our media - and our government - regularly talk about Israel. But for some reason, most North Americans know very little about Palestine, which is strange given it's rich history and it's importance to Christianity.

Although the name "Palestine" dates from Roman days Palestine as a cultural reality has existed for thousands of years, often referred to as "Canaan" in the Bible, and its inhabitants as "Canaanites". The region has always been important for strategic reasons.

[slide: trade routes]

The Silk Route, sea routes to both China and India, and numerous caravan routes all passed through Palestine, driving the economies of many civilizations over the centuries. In biblical times, Palestine was inhabited by numerous cultural groups that have deep ties to the land.

The history of Christians in Palestine goes back to the first century. Jesus was Palestinian. Palestine was predominantly Christian by the 4th century and has until recently enjoyed a rich mosaic of people from different cultures and religions.

So why do we need to discuss peace? Peace does not exist mainly because Palestinians have been displaced from their territorial lands, often using force, leaving behind their possessions and livelihoods.

The displacement began with the UN creation of the state of Israel in 1948.

[slide: land loss]

750,000 Indigenous Palestinians were forced off the land that had been in their families for countless generations. Palestinians call this “The Nakba”, which is Arabic for “catastrophe”. There were a number of pressures making this happen, including the Balfour Declaration in 1917, but the pressure made its impact in 1948 largely because of global sympathies for Jewish people after the Jewish holocaust of the second world war. Britain, the US, and other western powers pushed to create the state of Israel in the hope it would provide safe space for Jewish people. If Israel had been constructed on land ceded by Germany, peace might have come to fruition. But trying to create a new state on populated lands was a recipe for disaster from day one. It is a bizarre twist of fate that Palestinians were punished for the sins of Germany, but that is what happened.

Israel was created in Palestine because of the narrative from the Old Testament that God gave Palestine to Jewish people. Evangelical Christians as well as Jewish people were strongly driven by that idea. Jewish people wanted the land, and Evangelical Christians welcomed the move as an approaching sign of the second coming of Christ.

Which is odd, because in 1948 it was already well-established that this was not historical. It is not biblical. In the Bible, the stories of “God giving land away” are mythical. But even if they were historically true, the land was given to the descendants of

Abraham, which includes both Jews and Muslims. And it's a ridiculous idea anyway. "Erich Fromm, an orthodox Jew, and widely known scholar and author, wrote in 1959, 'the claim of the Jews to the land of Israel cannot be a realistic political claim. If all nations would suddenly claim territories in which their forefathers lived two thousand years ago, this world would be a madhouse.' It is totally nonsensical and irrational that Jews can claim the land of Palestine because their ancestors lived in it thousands of years ago, while the indigenous Palestinians who have never left it should be barred from it. But that is precisely what happened."¹

The key step is to pretend that Palestine, and Palestinians never existed. This is expressed in our lectionary too. I selected the text from Genesis today because this is one text used to support the idea that God gave Palestine to Jews. But the final line is critical. The lectionary wanted us to read "Jacob called that place Bethel" and then stop. But I included the whole verse which reads, "Jacob called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first." Palestine has been occupied for thousands of years by people who had their own lives, families, hopes, dreams, occupations, and traditions. Modern day Israel - and our own lectionary - would rather suppress that part of history. This summer you may recall that the Jewish actor Seth Rogen discovered this too. He reflected on how as a child he was taught that Palestine was unoccupied prior to 1948. He was taught that old phrase "a land with no people for a people with no land" and only in 2020 came to realize that idea is a manufactured lie. Canada - so far - has refused to recognize Palestine.

[image: recognition of palestine]

In more recent history, the justification for creating Israel in Palestine has shifted. The narrative is now less about the land, and more about the people. Recent events point to elevating the Torah above international law, supporting the racist ideology that Jewish people are God's chosen people in the sense that they are superior to other humans. This has led to a change in how Palestinians are displaced, to what can only be called extreme militarism with complete disregard for human rights. Gaza - for example - is effectively a huge open-air prison, where 2 million people are deprived basic human rights, including

¹ Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 2017. pg 31.

access to education, adequate food, water, medicine, electricity, and freedom of movement. At a bare minimum that is collective punishment, which is banned by the 4th Geneva Convention.

This was made concrete in July of 2018 when Israel passed its so-called “Nation State Bill” which enshrined the decision that self-determination in Israel is only eligible for Jewish people². Israel can no longer be considered a democratic state. In one sense this is good news. Because the bill put in writing how Israel had been acting for decades anyway. And putting their racist bill in writing is causing people to push back. 10’s of thousands of people demonstrated in Tel Aviv, with slogans like, “Full equality and nothing less”. “Jews and Arabs refuse to be enemies”. And, “The nation bill is a disaster.” The Israeli paper Haaretz had this to say about the bill, “Those who ostensibly want to glorify the state’s Jewishness are doing the opposite. . . . if, in the name of nationalism, it ignores the tradition of human rights, who can help but criticize it?”³

In general, due to social media - and in spite of our own media - people are learning more and more about the plight of the Palestinian people. And people - including many Jewish people - are standing up to Israel’s injustices. Natalie Portman - “Padmé” from Star Wars who is a Jewish Israeli boycotted a huge awards ceremony in Israel [slide: natalie portman]

saying, “The mistreatment of those suffering from today’s atrocities is simply not in line with my Jewish values. Because I care about Israel, I must stand up against violence, corruption, inequality, and abuse of power.”

Many Jewish people today oppose the occupation of Palestine. For example, the “Jewish Voice for Peace” state: “we support full equality for Palestinians and Jewish Israelis grounded in international law and universal principles of human rights, and we have a large grassroots base of members across the country who lead or work on campaigns. Because we believe in concrete action, and not just words, JVP was the first major Jewish peace group to demand that American military aid be withheld until Israel

² <https://www.rt.com/news/433132-american-israel-racist-bill-protest/>

³ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-nation-state-bill-heralds-israel-s-end-as-a-jewish-democratic-state-1.6265674>

ends its occupation. We also are the only major Jewish group to support the Palestinian civil society call for boycott, divestment and sanctions.”

You might be wondering how hope fits into this. But I want to first revisit my comment that this topic is relevant to us here in Brantford. That we are within 10 km of the same issue ourselves. Consider these 2 maps.

[images: loss of land - Palestine and Ontario]

The map on the left shows the loss of Palestinian lands since 1948. The map on the right shows the loss of Indigenous lands since 1784. The Haldimand Proclamation of 1784 guaranteed almost 1 million acres to indigenous people. Today, the place we call “Six Nations Reserve” is less than 5% of the original land package. And we are less than 10 km from Six Nations. I’m not about to launch into a second sermon right now. And I have a lot to learn about Six Nations before I can do that anyway. But I would invite us to reflect on whether or not we actually want to honour indigenous people, whether they are Palestinians or Indigenous Canadians. As Canadian citizens, we apologize for the colonial actions of Europeans while supporting the ongoing colonization of Palestine. We are living with a lot of cognitive dissonance as a society, that’s for sure.

So here - finally - is where I find hope in all of this. It is human nature to ignore human justice issues until they escalate to a point that we ourselves cannot tolerate. But people are starting to push back on the occupation of Palestine. This requires lifting up the voices that are not currently at the table. Which is the basis of what is called “liberation theology”. I could give you a long boring sermon about liberation theology, but really, it simply boils to understanding that the Bible is intended to be read as “Good News”. Liberation theology is always a product of its context. “African American liberation theology” named the evils of racism in the US. “Feminist liberation theology” emerged as a response to a global history of the suppression of women.

[image: a Palestinian theology of liberation]

And a “Palestinian Theology of Liberation” has grown out of the inhuman treatment of Palestinian people. All liberation theologies share common features - the lifting up of the dispossessed based on the simple principle that if we are all God’s children, then we should all be treated with dignity.

But liberation theology includes one more piece. A piece that perhaps seems odd. The context for liberation theology is lifting up the oppressed. But the oppressors themselves also need liberation. Oppressors - even when they “win” - carry the burden of the abuses that they dish out. Liberation theologies

[slide: sabeel]

are a pathway to liberation for both the oppressed and the oppressors. That is good news.

Natalie Portman expressed it well. She calls people to stand up to Israel because she cares about it. You can be pro-Palestine and pro-Israel at the same time - even though or media tells us we cannot.

We need to support the oppressed by lifting them up. We also need to support the oppressors by pushing back on them and by speaking truth to power.

[slide: love your enemies]

We need to love both the oppressed and the oppressors. Or did you think “love your enemies” meant something else?

Amen.