
World Week for Peace in Palestine/Israel
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
September 19, 2021
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Genesis 28:10-19 and Matthew 18:15-20

Sometimes I wish that I owned a cottage. But not for the reasons you are probably thinking of. A cottage would be a wonderful thing for me ... because of the church calendar. If I had a cottage I could justify being away until Thanksgiving. Because in September the church calendar is just brimming with topics that invite conflict.

Last week the service theme was around the environment, a hot-button topic even when we are not preparing for an election. Next week the given topic is the International Day of Peace. That's a topic that invites either a boring, politically correct message or a message that might divide people and cause discomfort. And this week, almost as a warm up act, is the World Week for Peace in Palestine/Israel, a celebration organized by the World Council of Churches. By the time that Thanksgiving rolls around, most ministers I know are just glad to have made it through the "gauntlet" of September.

I assume we are all at least somewhat aware of what's been going on in Palestine/Israel. After the second world war, there was a great deal of global sympathy for Jews to have their own state. That state should have been built on land ceded by Germany in compensation for the Jewish holocaust of the second world war. But pressures from Conservative Christians, Christian Zionists and Jewish Zionists won the day. And the global powers who believe that drawing lines on a map changes the hearts of the people living on the land decided to place the state of Israel in Palestine. A place that was already populated, a place that carried deep and rich traditions, and a place that had done nothing wrong to the Jewish people. It was a recipe for disaster from day one.

[image: some jews oppose Israel's wars]

And reality has not disappointed. The creation of the state of Israel on populated lands has been a disaster on many fronts. "For the [Netanyahu] Bennet Israeli government,

the occupation of the West Bank is only a problem to be managed rather than the most consequential conflict that could obliterate Israel's Jewish character and its democratic institutions, while shattering the dream of the vast majority of Jews to live in peace and security in a state they have been dreaming of for centuries." The dream of creating safe space for Jewish people has not happened. The dream of Jews and non-Jews living in peace has not come to pass. Which is highly ironic. Because prior to the creation of the state of Israel, Jews and non-Jews had lived peacefully in Palestine for centuries.

[image: cutting the land - Palestine and Haldimand Tract]

In many ways the conflict in Palestine/Israel was directly caused by the way that global powers have always repartitioned maps in order to serve their own objectives. A technique that has had deadly consequences for the local people wherever it was done. Including Africa and the former Ottoman Empire. Global powers - principally the UK and the US - use their influence to feed their own greed with complete disregard for the impact on local civilians in many places. And Palestine/Israel is one more example. Like in our reading from Genesis this morning, where it says, "Jacob called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first". The new promised land was already occupied. How do we imagine this story could have a happy ending?

[image: world jewry]

The situation in Palestine/Israel is complicated by one additional factor. Which is that the Israeli government endorses a Zionist agenda which is inherently racist. Zionism is a non-religious political movement that takes the Jewish narrative while ignoring the religious and social justice aspects of Judaism to push uncritical support for Israel, regardless of how Israel acts on the world stage. Zionism has led to massive human rights abuses in Palestine, most visibly in the form of the illegal military occupation of Palestine. Many Jewish people today oppose this occupation. 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 ends its occupation. We also are the only major Jewish group to support the Palestinian civil society call for boycott, divestment and sanctions.”

[image: reject zionism]

Zionism - being “like” Judaism, but without morals, is considered by many Jewish people to be anti-Jewish. Because Judaism without morals is not a different type of Judaism. Judaism without morals is not Judaism at all. Zionism is fundamentally anti-semitic. The occupation of Palestine is fundamentally anti-semitic. And Christians need to work with others to oppose it.

[image: zionism and nazis]

Global powers have the ability to cause massive amounts of damage and create many human rights violations. But they always take a high-level, top-down view because they don’t want to get their hands dirty. Local people, on the other hand, the people who actually live on the land, can more easily recognize the humanity of the other in their midst. When local people can step away from the rhetoric that they are constantly bombarded with, they sometimes find very creative solutions to the problems of living beside their enemies. We can find hope in some of the local people in situations like this.

[image: said ailabouni]

One Palestinian who recently shared his story is, Rev. Dr Saïd Ailabouni, director

for Europe, Middle East & North Africa region at the Global Mission Unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He has titled his story, “God is on the side of rejected, oppressed, occupied”. As the World Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel approaches, Ailabouni agreed to share some of his lifetime observations with the Word Council of Churches. Here are some excerpts:

Q: Why did you decide to move to the USA?

Rev. Ailabouni: My dad died of cancer when I was six years old, and I wanted to become a doctor to heal people with cancer - that was my dream. As I was not accepted to study at a University in Israel, I decided to go to the US to go to college and study, becoming a medical doctor and then returning to Nazareth.

But I also wanted to understand the Bible, as it was very confusing for me to see so many different teachings about the Bible when growing up. I had many questions. When I finished college as a chemistry major, I decided to go to seminary - to study the Bible, not necessarily to become a pastor.

It was very enriching to go to the Lutheran seminary in St Paul, Minnesota - I was able to put theology with the Bible together, understanding that God is love. I was previously confused about God - in many cases I thought that God was an angry God, I was afraid of God. There were people who were saying that it was God’s will that Palestinians lose their land because it belongs to Jews. I did not like that, and I wanted to see it for myself if that’s really what it’s like in the Bible.

Q: How did studies in the seminary affect your beliefs?

Rev. Ailabouni: Going to the seminary helped me to see God as the crucified God in Jesus, the God who suffers with the oppressed. Not the God who determines who should get what land, but the God who is on the side of people who are oppressed and occupied by others, the weak, women, children, the sick - all of those who are rejected by society.

I understood God as the God who so loves the world that God goes all the way, suffering as the criminal even when not guilty. I felt that my people are suffering in the same way – they did not deserve to lose their land, to become refugees, to be on a cross. I was angry at God for a long time, but then I realized through studying Scriptures that God is not a real estate God, but God actually is ready to die for the people who are oppressed. In fact, God - like the oppressed - suffers even though the suffering is not deserved..

Q: How do you see the situation has changed for Palestinians still living in their land?

Rev. Ailabouni: Palestinians in Israel have more opportunities to have jobs, to go to school, grow economically. But Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank and Gaza have a struggle. Christians or Muslims living in Bethlehem cannot go to Jerusalem which is just six miles away. They need a permit, and that makes it very difficult. There are kids who have grown up just a few miles from Jerusalem, who never have seen Jerusalem, or the Mediterranean Sea. This division is oppressive. And it is also a humiliation of people under occupation. Seeing how people are treated at the checkpoints - it is hard to watch.

Q: Do you think Christians worldwide are understanding what is happening between Israel and Palestine?

Rev. Ailabouni: Unless people go there and see it with their own eyes - they won't know. Media does not cover that very well. And often Palestinians are portrayed as violent stone-throwers - people never see nonviolent resistance to the occupation. Not even the Jews in Israel know, because they are never going to Palestine, they are not allowed.

Now more and more Israeli soldiers are coming out talking about their experiences working in Hebron and other places, saying - we did what was wrong, and we are not happy about it. They come out talking about how they treated Palestinians, and they don't like what they did. But most Israelis do not know it. And most people are not

interested - they are interested in their own lives, they are not concerned about the people they do not see. And you don't see a Palestinian unless you are working in the particular areas.

Q: What do you think are the causes of oppression and suffering taking place? Why would still today someone go to another land, try to take it away and oppress people who have been living there for generations?

Rev. Ailabouni: Unfortunately, some, including Christians and Jews, use the Bible to justify what they are doing. You can justify whatever you want using the Bible.

But there are also a plenty of other Bible verses that talk about welcoming the stranger, treating them as equal, taking care of widows and orphans - there are plenty of verses reminding us that God's justice is intended to be for all people.

Certainly Jews have suffered a lot in their lives, and desire to have a place where they can be free and secure and not be oppressed again. But to oppress the Palestinians in the process - I do not think it is fair or just.

Q: What do you think other churches in the world can do to support justice and peace in Israel and Palestine?

Rev. Ailabouni: Imagining that all of our churches have policies about human rights and anti-racism, we all have values as Christians that we should lift up and hold everyone accountable for. Human rights is an international treaty for all people. And we are against racism no matter who is being attacked.

There is a lot of racism and a lot of abuse of human rights and dignity, and therefore we as churches should speak up against all that. We should be persistent and as loud as we can working with our government officials to help them realize this is not God's intention for humanity.

Q: How could churches more actively support peace in the Middle East region?

Rev. Ailabouni: We need bold prophetic voices to continue speaking. The God we know is the God who loves all people. Including those that we don't like - God calls us to reconcile with each other, to love the enemy, to be peace-makers, because peace-makers will be called the children of God. We have a mandate as individuals and as churches to be that kind of light to those in darkness, whether we see results or not.

I've struggled with hatred myself, and as I grew older, I asked myself can I continue like this, or can I just love, even my enemy. I think we all have to struggle with what's in our hearts, and really to love the other in our lives, whoever they are - especially the ones we do not like. We all can do something, but we have to start with looking at what's inside us and how can we change that for the better.

Thank you Rev. Ailabouni!

[image: Brantford]

What local prophetic voice do we need right here in Brantford? now? Perhaps you'd like to listen to that part of the sermon again, on YouTube. And whatever Rev. Ailabouni says about Palestinians, think about our own indigenous people. Listen for a prophetic voice that might apply right here in Brantford.

Let's return to our reading from Matthew. "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church". This describes a situation where we - perhaps just one of us, alone - become aware of an injustice. What are we to do? First, do what you can to confront the situation directly. If you don't get anywhere, take a few friends with you and try again. If that's not effective, take the issue to the whole assembly.

[image: make hummus]

That's a model for how we can act today. When we are aware of an injustice, we should try to create an ever-increasing circle for support for dealing with the injustice. Perhaps the first step is just naming the injustice, but the key is that we need to expand the boundary of our voice. We have to name our concerns in wider society. By now I'm sure you have figured out that I am talking about our upcoming federal election. We need to identify injustices and human rights violations, name them, talk them up with our friends, and write, call, or visit the people who represent us in government. We need to tell them that we care about human rights issues. If we do not name human rights issues, it's not likely that our politicians will either.

[slide: martin luther king jr. quote don't be silent]

The phrase "If a member listens to you, you have regained that one" might just apply to members of parliament too. But we need to speak up. We need to make the effort to "regain that member". As Christians we need to engage our politicians on human rights issues that we care about. And perhaps we as a church can help each of us do that.

Our election does not just define what colour the flags will be afterwards. Our election also defines who we are by our action - and by our inaction. What issues are you passionate about? Let's talk about that at coffee time and see what we can work on together.

Amen.