
Week for Peace in Palestine Israel
Chapel in the Park United Church
September 15, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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

Usually, the worship themes we use here at Chapel in the Park 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.

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 "World 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 still don't know what people here at CITP think - or even know - about the situation in Palestine Israel. I preached on the subject in the spring, but did not get a huge amount of feedback. Some congregations ignore the whole issue because it seems too fractious, or perhaps too remote. Well, the topic can certainly be fractious, but I hope that by the end of this reflection you will agree that it is not remote. In fact, some of the issues raised by the conflict in Palestine Israel are relevant right here. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

If you follow our major media outlets, you might believe that the Palestine Israel conflict boils down to a battle between Jewish people and Muslims. But the situation is much more complex 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.

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. Today, Gaza is also valuable as a conduit to an estimated \$524 billion of oil.

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. Palestinians are victims of an ongoing colonization.

The displacement began in earnest with the UN creation of the state of Israel in 1948. 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 that it would provide safe space for Jewish people. And while that intention may be noble, the project was never optimized for peace. 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 idea is not historical. It is not even biblical. In the Bible, the stories of “God giving land away” are mythical. But even if they were literally true, the land was given to the descendants of Abraham, which includes Jews, Muslims, Samaritans, and quite a few other groups of people. Jews make up a relatively small portion of the “children of Abraham”. Plus, it’s a ridiculous idea anyway. “Erich Fromm, an orthodox Jew, and widely known scholar and author, in 1959 wrote, ‘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 has happened.”¹

If we want to understand what is happening today, we need to fully grasp that many forces are working to make you pretend that Palestine, and Palestinians never existed. This is even expressed in our lectionary. 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 populated for thousands of years by people who had their own lives, families, hopes, dreams, identities, and traditions. Modern day Israel - and our own lectionary - would rather suppress that part of history.

A few summers ago 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. Palestinians are people in exactly the same way that Jews are.

In more recent history, the justification for creating Israel in Palestine has shifted. The narrative is now less about the Jewish holocaust, and more about the people. Recent events point to elevating the Torah above international law, supporting a racist ideology that Jewish people are God’s chosen people. This has led to a change in how Palestinians

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

are displaced, to what can only be called extreme militarism with complete disregard for human rights and international law.

Gaza - for example - has been under a siege for decades, and under an Israeli blockade for the past 17 years. Prior to October 7, 2023 Gaza was best described as an open-air prison, where 2 million people were deprived basic human rights, including 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. Since October 7, Gaza has been subjected to a literal genocide. With the death toll now estimated at about 200,000 if we include the people - and children - buried in rubble and missing. And over 1 million people who are being intentionally starved to death - which is a war crime.

Due to social media - and in spite of our paid 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 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 [Israeli] 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 ends its occupation. We also are the only major Jewish group to support the Palestinian civil society call for boycott, divestment and sanctions."

This is literally what Jesus is calling for in our reading from Matthew. That we need to speak up when we see injustice. That we have to confront evil even when it is our "friends" who are committing the evil. We need to speak truth to power, even when that truth is unpopular.

So where is the hope in all this? Good question.

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 and against the genocide. 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.

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

Arwa Damon, the founder and president of the International Network for Aid, Relief and Assistance put it this way. “We need to understand the past, the traumas of the past, traumas that have been passed on generation to generation, both on the Israeli and on the Palestinian side. We need to understand those intense emotions that can embed themselves in and change our DNA - paralyzing fear, the desperate need to belong, the longing for home and safety, the desire for a dignified life. We also need to understand how those emotions have been historically manipulated, twisted, and how from the start the failings of the key power brokers - incidentally neither Palestinian nor Israeli - have led to where we are today.”²

² <https://newlinesmag.com/first-person/as-gaza-braces-for-a-ground-invasion-the-circle-of-violence-continues/>

Natalie Portman expressed it well. She calls people to stand up to Israel's genocide because she cares about Israel. You can be pro-Palestine and pro-Israel at the same time - even though our media tells us we cannot. Moreover, none of us are free until all of us are free. We need to support both sides (albeit in different ways).

Palestinians and Israelis have far more in common than they have differences. One doctor from Gaza has spent his career working in hospitals in Gaza and in Israel. He believes that dialog and understanding need to be the next steps towards peace. This doctor, Dr. Izzeldin Abuellaish, published the book, "I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor's Journey". In it he says, "The occupation and oppression of the people in Gaza is like a cancer, a disease that needs to be treated. It's all about the will to solve the problem rather than the determination to keep the anger front and centre. Arguing over who did what and who suffered more is not getting us anywhere. We have to move on; we have to build trust and mutual respect between the peoples. You can't respect someone you don't know. So let's get to know one another".³

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. Speaking truth to power happens in many different ways. At demonstrations, through letters to politicians. Lots of ways. Recently, here in Canada, "when the NDP dissolved the supply-and-confidence agreement that protected the Liberal government in a confidence vote, they specifically stated that the lack of clear policy on Gaza was 'absolutely amongst the frustrations' that led to the agreement being dissolved."⁴ We all need to speak truth to power in every way that we can.

In case you missed it, the United Church has been trying to do exactly that. On Aug 13 Rev Michael Blair, our General Secretary sent a letter to Trudeau on this subject. The letter calls on Canada to:

- Condemn the targeting of schools by IDF and all acts of violence against civilians.

³ "I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor's Journey" by Dr. Izzeldin Abuellaish. pg 106.

⁴ National Council of Canadian Muslims email, Sept 10, 2024.

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- Call for an immediate ceasefire and an end to the blockade on Gaza.
 - Support international efforts to investigate those responsible and hold them accountable.
 - Increase humanitarian aid to Gaza and support reconstruction efforts.
 - Work towards a just and lasting peace in Palestine and Israel.
 - Recall Canada's Ambassador to Israel.
 - Revoke the credentials of the Israeli Ambassador to Canada.
 - Implement a comprehensive, two-way arms embargo on Israel:
 - Suspend the Canada-Israel Free Trade Agreement, at minimum until such time as trade supporting the occupation of the OPT is excluded.

I hope that we all find some hope in the fact that globally we are moving - even if too slowly - towards peace as more people speak truth to power. Because everyone needs liberation. The oppressed and the oppressors.

I opened this reflection saying that the subject of Palestine Israel is not a remote problem. That in fact the problem exists right here.

The denial of the reality that Palestinians are a people has contributed to what can only be called anti-Palestinian racism. And I am constantly struck by how much anti-Palestinian racism there is in Toronto. Not to mention Islamophobia in general.

Now I could launch into a second sermon, but instead let me just say that racism is one place where you and I can make a difference. You and I can confront people directly when we see or hear racist behaviours. None of us have the political clout to do an arms embargo. But all of us can be honest - and speak truth - when we see racism in any form on our own streets. We need to condemn all forms of racism, including anti-Palestinian racism.

We can tell people that we oppose racism in all forms. We can tell people that all people are children of God.

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

Amen.