
World Week for Peace in Palestine Israel
Chapel in the Park United Church
September 21, 2025
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on James 2:1-20

This week, the World Council of Churches invites us to celebrate the “World Week for Peace in Palestine Israel”. It is of course a celebration in the breach. Nobody would describe the reality in Palestine Israel as “peace” today. Particularly this week - because this week a United Nations commission of inquiry has determined that Israel has committed genocide on Palestinians in Gaza. The world week for peace is an opportunity to reflect on the need for peace and - hopefully - a chance to discuss how we ourselves can contribute to helping make that peace a reality.

And believe it or not, I do have a suggestion - something we can all actually do.

I honestly hope that before I retire, there will come a time when I no longer need to preach to this topic because peace has actually become a reality in Palestine Israel. I do not enjoy preaching this topic. The topic can generate a lot of heat because we may come with different perspectives. Please know that I’m trying to help us all find a path towards a more peaceful future. For everyone. And I look forward to discussions with you all over coffee time.

And yet, we do need to discuss this topic from time to time. Because faith is not just about ivory tower theoretical notions, or feeling the spirit in our midst. Faith also requires engagement. As we just read from James, “Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, “Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!” and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup - where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?”

Sometimes, our faith requires us to act.

In the United Church of Canada we have often felt compelled to act out our living faith. Particularly around social justice issues. Even at the risk of upsetting people.

For example, in the 1980's, the United Church fought for justice for homosexuals and for legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada. Personally, I joined that work around 1986. For my efforts, some people told me I was too political. I was told that my idea that homosexuals were human beings was just “my opinion”. I was told that I should stick to praying and singing Kum-By-Ya. But looking back, I have to say ... it was worth it. Because back in the 1980's supporting homosexuals was a human rights issue worth fighting for. And yes, in the process many people were upset.

And today, we have to work to stop a genocide.

We have to talk about this because so many of us are thinking about it.

Two weeks ago a number of us met for an online event that discussed the environment. And part of that event included asking people to name their hopes, and also, their laments. Often, laments are about situations that we feel terrible about but cannot find any way to fix. Anyway, when people were asked to share their laments, over 1/3 of the responses in the chat were about the genocide in Palestine. Even though the event was about the environment, many of the laments named were about the genocide. And if the subject is on our minds and hearts - we should talk about it.

We also need to discuss this because many people are highly conflicted these days about Israel. Many people in general want to support Israel and Jews, but cannot wrap their heads around the fact that Israel is committing a genocide. That creates a lot of cognitive dissonance. I have Jewish friends who say that Israel no longer represents them. And for some of them, they find that revelation deeply painful. You might have your own moral

struggle too.

I want to show a video made by a Jewish American. But due to copyright, we cannot show it. I put a link to it in Chit-Chat this week. But here is a summary of her points.

[image: accidental Zionist]

- Accidentally a Zionist because she did not know there was another way to be Jewish.
- Hebrew schools were all about how Jews had to support Israel.
- But her Jewish community was big on social justice.
- She knew nothing about Palestine and Palestinians.
- She learned all about women and gender studies. She knew about anti-colonial resistance.
- She came to realize that if colonization is wrong around the world, it is also wrong in Palestine.
- You can't oppose colonialism around the world and not oppose it in Palestine.
- Many young American Jews are critical of Israel and support Palestinian freedom.
- False accusations of antisemitism are used to smear people standing up for justice in Palestine.
- As a Jewish person I need to challenge Jewish institutions that uphold Zionism and white supremacy.
- "Standing up for Palestinian freedom is about freedom and justice for all people and that in no way is it anything near anti-semitism."

[image: peace butterfly]

So how did we get here? As always, it is not easy to know where to start any story. But I will start the story today 2000 years ago. Because we need to start with antisemitism. Meaning, hatred of Jewish people simply because they are Jewish.

Antisemitism comes from a variety of sources, but I want to discuss Christian antisemitism. One important part of that comes from the New Testament.

[image: pilate]

Consider the story of Jesus coming before Pilate on Good Friday. You remember, it was Pilate who sentenced Jesus to be crucified. In Matthew's version, Pilate is addressing a crowd. Pilate offers to release to the crowd either Barabbas or Jesus. And the crowd screams "release Barabbas". Then Pilate asks what should be done with Jesus. And the crowd screams, "crucify him". Pilate points out that Jesus had done nothing wrong. And the crowd in Matthew 27:25, said "His blood be on us and on our children". Which they obviously did not say. However, that line was later used to justify the trope that says, "Jews killed Jesus", which was used to justify antisemitism for centuries.

Of course, the idea that "Jews killed Jesus" is ridiculous. Our best understanding of what actually happened with Pilate is that the Pharisees paid a group of people to scream for the crucifixion of Jesus. That small group of people did not represent Jews as a whole. Not 2000 years ago. And certainly not today.

[image: peace butterfly]

But there is no doubt that Christian antisemitism was a powerful force that impacted the development of Europe, and therefore North America. And rampant antisemitism enabled - if not caused - the Jewish holocaust of the Second World War. And that was a horrific atrocity.

The Jewish holocaust of the Second World War led to the UN creating the state of Israel in 1948. Taking land from Palestinians to pay for the sins of Germany.

Post-war, in North America there developed a broad consensus that antisemitism was actually wrong. In many ways - as a society and as a church - we became better at seeing antisemitism and fighting against it. The label “antisemitic” became seen as very negative. And that was a good change. One could lose their job for being antisemitic. The pendulum had swung in the other direction.

Post-war in Palestine Israel, however, conditions were not good. The forced displacement of 0.75 M Palestinians in 1948 is what Palestinians call the “Nakba”. Which is Arabic for “catastrophe”. Forcing Palestinians off their historic homelands was not a recipe for peace. Aggressive military actions were taken by both sides.

As usually happens, when the pendulum swings, it swings too far. In an effort to support the Jewish community two other problems were created.

One problem was that here in the West we never cared about Palestinians. The west provided weapons and money and political cover for Israel. But we never even recognized a Palestinian state. There is a manufactured lie that says that Palestine was “a land with no people for a people with no land.” And we have acted as if that was true. It was never true. Palestinians were there and were thriving, as they had done so for many generations.

It was very odd that Canada claimed to support a “2 state” solution, and yet only ever recognized one of the states. All that even though the indigenous Palestinians had been forced off their homeland. But of course, forcing indigenous people off their land was not a new thing.

The other problem was that Israel was given impunity by the West. One member in a former congregation put this succinctly, “Because of the Jewish holocaust, Israel can do whatever it likes”.

No person or group should ever have impunity. Because with impunity, bad behaviour only gets worse. Because there are never any consequences.

The pendulum had swung too far.

We might wonder why this happened. One common idea is that it was caused by collective guilt. Guilt around the Jewish holocaust of the Second World War. And guilt around antisemitism that had been allowed to flourish in our societies for so long.

Another idea is that God gave that land to the Jews, so they should have it. That is simply wrong. According to the Bible, that land was given to the “Children of Abraham”. But Abraham’s children includes Muslims, Jews, and many other groups. In fact - according to the Bible - Jews make up less than 5% of the “Children of Abraham”. If we want to take that part of the Bible literally, the land should be shared by all. In peace. Which is a good description of the land prior to the year 1900 and the invention of Zionism.

The reality is that since 1948, Palestinians have never played on a level playing field. Israel got money, weapons, and political cover, while we pretended that Palestinians never even existed.

Our mainstream media has pushed that narrative. In our media, Palestinians are always portrayed as terrorists and barbarians. And if you actually believe that, I encourage you to speak to actual Palestinians - there are many here in Toronto - and you will gain a fresh perspective.

Our media has always mis-represented Palestinians. For example, a user named “mona” used ChatGPT to expose the different attitudes towards Palestinians and Israelis. This was done in Oct 2023. At the time, ChatGPT simply revealed what was in the database we call the Internet. Which means it was a great tool - not for getting at the truth - but for

learning about people's attitudes.

[image: ChatGPT justice for Israelis]

Mona asked ChatGPT, "Do Israelis deserve justice?". To which the answer was, "Justice is a fundamental principle that applies to all individuals and groups, regardless of their nationality or background. Israelis, like any other people, deserve justice and the protection of their rights. Justice should be pursued for all, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, or any other characteristic." And I hope you agree with me that that is a good and sensible answer. Of course Israelis deserve justice.

But then, Mona asked ChatGPT, "Do Palestinians deserve justice?" And we should get the same answer, right? ChatGPT just said that all people deserve justice. And Palestinians are "a people" in exactly the same way that Jews are "a people".

[image: ChatGPT justice for Palestinians]

But the answer she got was "The question of justice for Palestinians is complex", followed by a lot of weasel words.

Palestinians have never played on a level playing field. And Israel's impunity is perhaps the largest barrier to peace in Palestine Israel today.

[image: peace butterfly]

As one example, on Sept 9, Israel bombed Doha, in Qatar. Qatar is a sovereign state. Israel has no right to bomb them. Moreover, the people gathered there were there to discuss the peace proposal that Donald Trump had initiated. Trump had invited diplomats to meet to discuss his own peace proposal. And Israel bombed them. You cannot bomb diplomats! Unless you are Israel. Impunity is a barrier to peace.

Israel has violated International Law numerous times with no consequences. The settlements in the West Bank are illegal. The occupation of Gaza is illegal. Using starvation as a weapon of war is illegal. And of course, genocide is illegal.

And we need to say a bit more about antisemitism too.

Sadly, antisemitism still exists. And every time I see it I fight it - verbally. But today we are faced with a new problem. As I said earlier, being called antisemitic can get you fired. Which means that the label “antisemitic” is a powerful tool. So for years there has been an effort to broaden the meaning of the word antisemitic to include criticism of Israel.

But criticism of Israel is not antisemitic. And yet people who criticize Israel are being smeared with the label “antisemitic”, or called Hamas lovers.

- Hands up anyone here who criticizes the US government?
- Now hands up anyone here who hates all American citizens and wants them all to be murdered? Anyone? No, of course not.

You can criticize the US without hating all Americans. And you can criticize Israel without hating Jews.

Today, Jews who oppose the genocide as being smeared as antisemitic. Incredible, right? I have a Jewish friend that was kicked out of their home synagogue because they said they oppose genocide. But genocide is not a Jewish value.

Recently, the Los Angeles Holocaust Museum put this on the social media:

[lahm: never again graphic]

“Never Again” can’t only mean never again for Jews.

[lahm: standing with humanity]

And this, “Standing with humanity does not betray our people. It honors them”.

And for those posts, the Los Angeles Holocaust Museum was accused of being antisemitic. When Jews and holocaust museums are being accused of antisemitism, the word antisemitic has been twisted in a way that completely dishonours the actual victims of the Jewish holocaust of the Second World War.

[image: peace butterfly]

So now I suppose I have 3 minutes to say something hopeful, right. And in particular, to say how we can all engage with this topic.

Believe it or not, I have an idea to offer. Well, I took an idea from Jesus.

[image: sheep and goats]

I’m reminded of the story of the sheep and the goats. As found in Matthew 25. Here’s a summary of the story.

Jesus separates people into two groups - sheep and goats. And the sheep are destined to go to heaven while the goats are destined to go to hell.

So when the story opens, it sounds like Jesus is being a bit racist here. Separating people into “good people” and “bad people”.

But then Jesus pulls a fast one. The distinction between the sheep and the goats is not

based on ethnicity, or religion, or race, or money, or power. The distinction between the sheep and the goats is based only on how people treat each other. What makes a person a sheep who is destined for heaven is - to quote Jesus - "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, I was naked and you clothed me, I was isolated and you visited me." And just to drive the point home, Jesus says that whenever you did those things to the most disadvantaged people in your society, you did it to Jesus himself.

That is the exact opposite of racism. Racism says that whether you are a good person or a bad person is determined by your membership in a particular group. But Jesus says that what separates good people from bad people is their behaviour.

I hear this as a call to fight against all forms of discrimination. Racism, sexism, you name it. And to focus on how we treat each other. And just to push that idea a bit further, perhaps we can all spend a bit of time this week to reflect - deeply - on any hidden biases we might carry ourselves. And be honest to yourself about that.

Peace will come - to Palestine Israel but also to Canada - when racism is banished. When exceptionalism is banished. When supremacy is banished. When impunity is banished. And we can start by creating that peace inside our own hearts today.

Accidental Zionist: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pepci6bEEF4>

Rabbi David Weiss: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gIX368TtOJs>

Peter Beinart : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXJaFk1mZzc>

Amen.