

December 1, 2019 (1st Sunday of Advent) | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Luke 23:33–43](#)

TITLE: Words of Hope from the Cross

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Recently I and a group of 29 other travelers returned from spending eight days in Israel-Palestine. It was a joint trip with members of ELPC and of Temple Sinai synagogue. We visited historic sites important to both our faith traditions (Christianity and Judaism). We also saw places at the heart of the current tension between Jews and Palestinians, such as the West Bank cities of Ramallah and Hebron, the disputed neighborhoods of East Jerusalem, the illegal Jewish settlement in Shiloh, and the tense border region between Israel, Lebanon and Syria known as the Golan Heights. We saw firsthand the complexity of life in that region—how the distance of a few miles separates entire worlds from one another: Arab-speakers vs. Hebrew-speakers; Israelis with passports who can travel, Palestinians denied passports, trapped in third-world, crowded cities vainly hoping for a better life for themselves and their children.

Part of everyone's daily awareness is the fact that violence is always close at hand. It's there for Jewish citizens who patrol the border with Syria and always expect war; it's there when Palestinians are forbidden to drive on certain highways and suffer the indignity of being held up for hours at checkpoints staffed by 18 year old Israeli army recruits with machine guns. It was there during our visit when Israel attacked a location in Gaza, which prompted missiles to be fired back into Israel but which were blocked by Israel's Iron Dome defense system. Our group then adjusted our itinerary and avoided spending the night in Tel Aviv. But within a day or two, things returned to an uneasy status quo with both sides feeling vulnerable and under siege; with casualty imbalances of over 20 innocent dead in Gaza vs. a few injured in Israel; and with a sense of hopelessness that peace in the Holy Land is just impossible to achieve.

We had two wonderful guides for our trip: Julie—an American-born Israeli Jew, and Ibrahim—a Palestinian Muslim. They had never worked together before and were intrigued how our interfaith group broke from the usual itinerary of Christian tourists only interested in places associated with the life of Jesus. Everywhere we went, we saw busloads of tourists anxious to stand on the hilltop where Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount or to dip their hands in the waters of the Sea of Galilee. We saw people from all over the world wanting to kneel by the spot where Jesus was supposedly born in Bethlehem, to see the place where Jesus' crucifixion took place, or to glance into the borrowed tomb where Jesus' body was laid on Good Friday and from which he was resurrected on Easter Sunday. We saw all those places—and with our Jewish colleagues, we also saw important Jewish sites, such as the old temple in Shiloh where Samuel served the high priest Eli and the burial place in Hebron where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are supposed to be buried. Touring these locations helped make the bible stories of old come alive for all of us.

But everywhere we went, the two-thousand year old Holy Land sites were thickly overlaid with 21st century realities—vendors anxious to pull you into their souvenir shops

along the streets where Jesus walked; countless traffic jams; soldiers with weapons patrolling the land of the Prince of Peace; condos of wealth and shabby apartments of poverty erected over the ancient hills of Palestine. We met Israeli settlers who were sure God wanted them to build their illegal cities on Arab land. We heard from Palestinian entrepreneurs trying to carve out careers in a place that was their home but in which they were denied basic freedoms and rights. The only messages of hope we heard came from a few groups we met that intentionally bring together Jews and Palestinians to model a different way of life. But they seemed like small, fragile flowers trying to take root in a harsh, rocky, and cynical landscape.

Why is peace so elusive in Israel-Palestine? That is a complicated question—and frankly, it is one of many complicated questions we all ask ourselves every day. Why is America so divided? Why are we not doing more to address gun violence, opioid addiction, wealth disparity, and racial injustice here and around the world? A big part of the challenge with these questions is that they have no simple answers. The topics of Israel-Palestine, climate change, and frankly what to do with Donald Trump, are complex and multifaceted. They require non-linear thinking. They require broader perspectives. I've come to appreciate that this non-linear, broader perspective is captured in the words Jesus spoke from the cross 2000 years ago—and which sorely need to be heard again today.

We have been taught to associate Jesus' time on the cross with a series of statements—what is commonly known as the “Seven Last Words of Christ.” But you only come up with seven last words if you compile the descriptions of Jesus' crucifixion as recorded in all four gospels. In Luke's gospel, Jesus only makes three statements from the cross. Luke was a very thorough writer. He shaped his gospel so that people would come to understand how this rabbi from Nazareth was the Messiah, the Son of God. He included stories of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem under Roman oppression, his life of healing miracles and of teaching parables such as the stories of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. Luke then moved to the tragic hours of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, and for final words, he recorded three last statements of Jesus: *Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing. Today you will be with me in Paradise. Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit.* Three statements we do well to bear in mind as we consider our world today, our nation right now, and the troubled lands of Israel-Palestine.

First, how do we try and solve life's complex problems? Do we find a simple answer and make that our guiding principle to the exclusion of all other options? *Might makes right. America first! Israel for the Israelis. Oppressed peoples of the world, arise!* The problem with using such slogans as guides for action is that they intentionally deny the interconnectedness of life on earth and are blind to how limited our knowledge truly is.

One case study: The destruction of the rainforests to carve out grazing land and crop fields is one factor affecting rainfall around the world, leading to killer heat waves in India and droughts in the Middle East. These droughts prompted Syrian farmers to move into the cities seeking work, leading to social disruptions that threatened the

Bashar al-Assad regime, refugee crises that spilled over into Europe, and wars still being fought today. Suddenly in Syria America pulls back and Russia steps in; Iran sees an opportunity to expand its influence and Israel feels more existential pressure. So missiles are launched, Palestinians are killed, Israelis have 30 seconds to find a bomb shelter when the sirens go off. No bumper-sticker slogan can solve all this. We need to acknowledge how limited our wisdom is and how persistently selfish our motives are. We need to take Jesus' first word from the cross: *Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.*

Second, there is no way forward as a nation or a civilization if we cling to ideologies of division. There is no future simply insisting that all will be well once the other side comes to their senses, when facts force the Republicans to do what is right or convince the Democrats to change their partisan ways, when tougher laws finally fix the immigration problem and abortion crisis, believing things will finally settle down just as soon as (fill in the blank) happens. Returning to the Middle East, Israel sees itself as little David, surrounded by the Goliath of Muslim nations intent on their destruction, even as Palestinians and Jordan and Lebanon see Israel as Goliath, a nuclear superpower wrecking havoc on the lives of Arabs both inside and outside their borders. One of the last things Jesus said was a statement of reconciliation to a stranger—a criminal, an expendable outcast by the world's standards. Jesus offered him a relationship and a home at last. *Today you will be with me in paradise.* Salvation has never been a private contract between us and God, between "our people" and "our Lord." There is no "me" without "you." There is no "us" without "them." The way forward to Paradise is mutual and relational, or it is nothing at all.

Finally, we're told Jesus committed his spirit into his Father's hands. Human beings are spiritual creatures, whether we always accept that or not. We are moved to connect with the divine present in this world in countless ways: by preparing bread for Passover and praying towards Mecca, by lighting candles, singing hymns, creating cathedrals, and allowing our souls to be stirred by the beauty of this earth. We've known this for millennia, even if we have different ways to express this. We are part of something larger, something holy; and by committing ourselves to God—in our tradition known as Creator, as loving Savior, as life-giving, ever-present Spirit—we are made whole. We become people of love, peace and hope. *Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit.*

The future for Israel, for Palestine, and for us involves taking these three statements to heart every day—our need for forgiveness, our caring for others as our central life priority, and daily recommitting ourselves to God as the healer of the world for this life and the life to come. By grace we can do this, and in that we become Christ's people of hope. Shalom. Amen.