
Sabeel: Pathway to peace in Palestine Israel
Martin Grove United Church
Sept 16, 2018
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Often, the worship themes we use here at Martin Grove United Church are based on the lectionary - a schedule of readings from the Bible. Usually, 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 "Week for Peace in Palestine Israel". We can celebrate 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 sermon must end with a message of hope. Fortunately, part of my continuing education this year included participating in a workshop on "A Palestinian Theology of Liberation" in May, which included messages of hope. And if you are curious, "Sabeel" which is Arabic for "Path" is the name of an ecumenical liberation theology centre in Palestine. The founder of Sabeel was one of the guest speakers, Naim Stifan Ateek.

[slide: Rev. Paul and Naim Ateek]

If you follow our media, you might believe that the Palestinian Israeli conflict boils down to a battle between Jewish people and Muslims. But the situation is much more complicated - and interesting - than that. Our media - and the church - regularly talk about Israel. But for some reason, most North Americans really 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 - around 100 AD - 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 himself was born in Palestine, and his ministry was localized to the area between Galilee and Jerusalem. Palestine was predominantly Christian by the 4th century and has always enjoyed a rich mosaic of people from different cultures and religions.

So why do we need to discuss peace? Peace does not exist, because Palestinians have been displaced from their territorial lands, often at gunpoint, leaving behind their possessions and livelihoods. The displacement has happened in 3 phases.

The first phase of displacement was the UN creation of the state of Israel in 1948.

[slide: land loss]

750,000 Indigenous Palestinians were forced off the lands that had been in their families for countless generations. Aboriginal Palestinians call this The “Nakba”, which is Arabic for “catastrophe”. There were a number of pressures making this happen, including the Balfour Declaration, 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 others, pushed to create the state of Israel in the hope it would provide safe space for Jewish people. It is a bizarre twist of fate that Palestinians were punished for the sins of Germany, but that is exactly what happened.

The second phase of displacement happened about 1 generation later. The event people remember was the 6 day war in 1967 when Israel gobbled up land using illegal military action, but there was a swing in attitude too. In 1948, support for Israel was primarily a way to provide support to victims of the Jewish holocaust to the second world war. But 1 generation later, the driving narrative behind support for Israel was the Old Testament story that God gave that land 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 it was already well-established that this was not historical. For example “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 difference in the “why” of supporting Israelis over Palestinians was very important. Previously, when the justification for displacing Palestinians was around the Jewish holocaust of the second world war, Jewish people were seen as victims who needed to be protected. When the justification changed from that to one of exceptionalism, based on a particular reading of the Old Testament, the methods by which Palestinian lands were stolen became more harsh, more militaristic, more lacking in any sense of mercy towards Palestinians. Supporting Israel became less about supporting victims and more about killing the enemy.

The third phase of displacement - about 1 more generation later - is happening now. In phase 2 the driver was the story of the holy land being for Jewish people. In phase 3, this changed to specifically 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 another change in how Palestinians are displaced, to what can only be called extreme militarism with complete disregard for human rights. Gaza - for example - is now a huge open-air prison, where 2 million people are deprived basic human rights, including access to education, adequate food, water, medicine, electricity, or freedom of movement. At a bare minimum that is collective punishment, which is banned by the 4th Geneva Convention. All this is justified by reading the Torah badly, and the net result is that in Israel, the Torah now takes precedence over democracy itself.

This was all seen very publicly in July of this year when Israel passed it’s so-

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

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 a sense that is very good news. Because the bill simply states how Israel has 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.”

In general, due to social media - in spite of our own media - people are learning more and more about the plight of the Palestinian peoples. And people - including many Jewish people - are standing up to Israel’s injustices. Natalie Portman - “Padmé” from Star Wars who is a Jewish Israeli recently 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.”

It has been observed that in the right hands, all religions are religions of peace, and in the wrong hands, all religions are religions of war. That observation begs the question, is God a God of peace or a God of war. And the simple truth is that if we look to the Bible, and if we want to cherry-pick verses, we can easily find verses that support the notion that God is a God of peace. Unfortunately, we can also easily find verses that support the notion that God is a God of war. We can find images of a small-minded, tribal, racist, exclusivist “god”. We can also find images of an inclusive universal God who loves and embraces all people. So what’s going on?

Some people argue that God has evolved. However, Palestinian priest and theologian Naim Stifan Ateek

[slide: naim]

argues that “God’s nature has never changed. From eternity to eternity God was and is and will be forever the God of love. God did not evolve from a God of war and violence

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

to a God of peace and compassion. What evolved is our limited knowledge of God.”³
And if people’s knowledge of God has evolved, then surely we would want to imagine
God as a God of love.

That is the basis for what is called “liberation theology”. I could give you a long
boring sermon about liberation theology, but really, it simply boils to 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 inhumane 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. It’s simple to say anyway.

Now - wake up for the hopeful part. Really!

One other feature of all liberation theologies is this: 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.

At the workshop on a Palestinian Theology of Liberation all the speakers came
with prepared speeches - of course, because they give their speeches so many times. But
I was stunned that most of them - part way through their prepared speeches - went
completely off-script and made a passionate plea of hope that Israel would become a
place worthy to be called a holy land. The speakers - many of whom had lived through
the Nakba themselves, still held up hope for peace in Palestine Israel, but real peace,
which always starts with justice. Peace that comes from real democracy. Peace that
comes from remembering that everyone is a child of God.

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

³ Naim Stifan Ateek, pg 88.

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 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.