
Lenten Peace
Chapel in the Park United Church
March 17, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Deuteronomy 7:1-6, Judges 1:27-30, and Matthew 5:38-48

If you read our weekly email - Chapel Chit-Chat - this week, you know that I want to talk about peace today. And I offered that we will discuss both internal emotional peace and external peace which has to do with security, justice, and human rights.

However I need to open by saying, I do NOT want to talk about peace today. To be honest, I have been putting it off for awhile. Because we are still getting to know each other. And talking about peace is not easy - not today anyway. And if I say anything that upsets you I look forward to talking with you later. I'll even buy you lunch so that we can have a proper conversation. I do want to know what you think. And we have to start the conversation somewhere.

Now to be clear, I am always delighted to talk about internal peace. I'm a huge fan of the emotional peace that comes from our own internal healing. That is the type of peace that Jesus actually talked about. And so, for everyone's comfort - including my own - know that I will close this message speaking about peace in the sense of our inner, spiritual peace. And we will close with an exercise leading to that type of peace. And it will be very appropriate for Lent because it is about giving up something.

But do I feel compelled to open this message talking about external peace in the sense of lack of conflict. Because peace in that sense seems to be largely lacking today. In many parts of the world military conflict is leading to - as it always does - massive numbers of dead, displaced, and injured civilians, including many children. All of those stories are tragic.

But of all the conflicts happening today, one conflict we need to discuss is the situation in Palestine / Israel. And we need to discuss it because we - as Canadians and as Christians - are involved in the crisis. We are complicit in what is happening now.

I have not spoken about this subject before here. And I do not know how much you already know about the history of Palestine / Israel. So let me cover some history.

In fact, let's go back to the very early days. Which is why I selected those Old Testament readings today. Because those readings are about the origins of historic Israel. The two readings describe two very different narratives.

Our reading from Deuteronomy is a narrative where the Hebrew people went to a land that they thought their "god" gave them - and to be blunt they kicked ass. They utterly destroyed everyone and everything that was already living in the land. They went to a land called Canaan, and they completely controlled and dominated it.

In contrast to that, our reading in Judges is a narrative where the Hebrew people went to a land that they thought their "god" gave them - and to be blunt they had very little military success. They moved into the land but did not dominate anything. And so in Judges, when the people got to the land, they survived by co-existing with other cultures that were already on the land.

The Bible gives us two very different stories of the Hebrews going to what they called the "promised land". One story is about domination, control, and the elimination of all enemies. The other story is about peaceful co-existence with the existing inhabitants of the land.

What do we do with these radically different stories? And what does non-biblical history tell us?

Historically, the Hebrew people were never very numerous or very powerful and always existed alongside other societies. Jewish people had their own religion, and culture, and language, and foods, and many other things. Jews are "a people". But historically Jews - or even the Hebrews - never had complete dominance over any significant piece of land. They always co-existed with and within other kingdoms alongside other cultural groups.

Jewish people historically lived in Palestine. But historically they never controlled that land. They co-existed with other people like the Canaanites. And generally, people co-existed in peace. In fact, until fairly recently, Palestine was a place where Muslims, Christians, and Jews all lived with a great deal of peace.

And then, in 1897, a secular, nationalistic movement called "zionism" was born.

The principle idea was that Jewish people should have their own homeland, and that homeland should be created in Palestine.

In 1917 the British Government created the Balfour Declaration, which supported the Zionist objective. However, they added two conditions:

- “it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”
- “or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country”

So the British agreed in principle to the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine - but only if it did not disadvantage the existing inhabitants. That's a completely contradictory idea. How can you eject Palestinians from their homeland without violating their rights? The Balfour Declaration was self-contradictory on the face of it. But of course that logic was no match for what is often called “British Arrogance”. And Britain has never really had any issue with the idea of colonizing other people. Especially if those people who are not white.

After World War 1, in 1918 Palestine came under control of the British (the British Mandate for Palestine). Zionists and Jews started moving into Palestine in large numbers. And the British did not fulfil their obligation to protect the indigenous Palestinians. This was a violent period on both sides. Incidentally, Britain did not support this as a way to protect Jews. The British wanted a homeland for Jews so that Jews could move there and not have to stay in Britain any longer. Britain had found a practical way to get Jews off British soil.

Because of the violence, this became a huge mess. After World War 2, in 1947 Britain turned the mess they had created over to the UN.

The UN in their wisdom decided that the conflict can be solved by having non-resident powers draw arbitrary lines on a map and created BOTH an Arab state and a Jewish state in 1948. The Jewish state was given 55% of Palestine, and the Arab state was left with a very fragmented 45% of Palestine. This was a convenient way to compensate for the Jewish holocaust of World War 2. But it was an insane idea from day 1. 750,000 Palestinians were forced off their homeland where they had lived for generations because of the sins of Germany. This is what Palestinians call the “Nakba”. Which is Arabic for

“catastrophe”. Many of those 750,000 Palestinians have been living in refugee camps ever since.

It is very hard to summarize the history after 1948. But since Gaza is pivotal now, we can discuss Gaza. In 1967 Israel occupied Gaza. In 2005 Israel claims that they left Gaza, but they kept in place every element of an occupation. Gaza has been living since 2005 under a siege. Israel controls many aspects of life in Gaza including freedom of movement, how much food, water, electricity, medical supplies, energy, internet get into Gaza. Since 2005 Gaza has been what can only be described as an open air prison. But the comparison is unfair. Because the inhabitants of Gaza are not criminals. They are human beings. The vast vast majority of them are innocent civilians. Nearly half of the population of Gaza were children - prior to Oct 7.

Hamas was created in Gaza in 1987. It is the official government of Gaza so it manages - as far as Israel allows it to - school, hospitals, and other infrastructure. Hamas includes military elements which are a resistance to the occupation.

And what has been going on in the past 5 months? Here is a short summary. On Oct 7, 2023, Hamas performed a military strike that killed 1,200 Israelis. Israel has been retaliating with vastly disproportionate force. The current civilian death count in Palestine is 31,300 civilians, which includes over 10,000 children. And worse, now that Israel has cut off almost all food and aid going into Gaza, something like 1.5 million human beings are at extreme risk of death by intentional starvation.

Now to be clear. I do not support the Hamas attack on Israel on Oct 7. But as the UN said, that attack did not come out of nowhere. The attack on Oct 7 was just a logical consequence of suppressing Palestinians for the last 75 years. When people are oppressed for long enough, they will push back.

And here is where the story gets very strange. Because western powers including Canada have been supporting Israel and helping it colonize Palestine. For 75 years.

It is strange. When Russia decided to use military force to acquire lands in Ukraine, it took 5 days for Canada and other nations to put sanctions on Russia and to take many other actions. But when Israel uses military force to acquire lands in Palestine, Canada simply gives more money and weapons to Israel. And Canada uses whatever

muscle it has at the UN to make sure that Israel is never held accountable. Canada is on the wrong side of history here.

South Africa took Israel to the International Criminal Court, and the court decided that it is plausible that Israel is committing genocide - which was the strongest statement that they could make at that time. And they ordered Israel to allow aid into Gaza. The very next day Canada, the US, and other countries cut their aid to Gaza simply because Israel wanted us to do that. Israel manufactured a story about aid workers supporting the Hamas attack which has long been debunked.

Clearly - no matter how much double-speak our government uses - our foreign policies are NOT based on human rights, or morality, or any other metric that they are willing to name publicly.

By the way, I don't know what you already know. If you only watch CBC and CNN, you have only heard a very sanitized version of the horror that is Gaza today. Our media is very biased towards supporting Israel and failing to let Palestinian voices be heard.

This week I interviewed a Palestinian for my podcast. Because I want to hear the voices of Palestinians. Actually, I want to hear many different voices from many people that have been silenced. But right now, Palestinian voices are particularly important.

One point he made was that he - and he said most Palestinian - do not hate Jews. They just hate being occupied. A brief summary of our entire interview is that he just wants to go home. He wants to be allowed to return to his homeland. He loves his homeland and his homeland is being colonized. It is that simple.

He also explained a generational different to me. People older than me tend to connect the creation of the state of Israel to the Jewish holocaust of World War 2. But people younger than me tend to see the creation of the state of Israel in Palestine as a simple colonization project. Displacing, murdering, abusing and discounting indigenous people while people of a different culture take over the land. That is a story familiar to all Canadians. It is a story that we apologize for here in Turtle Island. But it is a story that we as Canadians support when it happens in Palestine.

In the media they always say that the situation in Palestine / Israel is complicated.

But It's NOT complicated. Colonization is wrong. If it's wrong in North America and Ukraine, it's wrong in Palestine. It is that simple.

We in the west are hypocrites when it comes to human rights. We (rightfully) condemn Putin for his invasion of Ukraine. While we celebrate and subsidize the same actions when Israel does them. We are hypocrites. And it breaks my heart.

Most Canadians do not know that much about the situation. Partly because the CBC gives us such an anemic view of reality. And that is very frustrating for many reasons. But for one thing this sanitized version of reality leads to increased antisemitism. That breaks my heart too.

The reality is that we should not be anti-jewish. I am not anti-Jewish. But we need to stand against zionism. Many Jews today no longer support Israel and stand with Palestine against zionism. Zionism is actually fundamentally antisemitic.

Palestine is an old and historic culture and people. They are "a people" just as much as Jews are. Palestine applied for UN status, and most of the world agreed. Canada and the US did not. Why? Why do we not see Palestinians as human beings equal to ourselves? Why do we not demand that our Prime Minister sees Palestinians as human beings?

If you've been following the CBC, they blast away at Hamas for it's attack. And rightly so. But Hamas only exists because of the Occupation of Palestine. If you think Hamas is evil, then we must force Israel to end the Occupation. To force Israel to follow international law. If Palestinian people were not treated like animals, Hamas would lose much of it's power. The root cause of the current crisis is the Occupation of Palestine which has been going on for decades.

Israel - and Palestine - deserve to live in security. But security does not come from having more weapons than your enemy. Security does not come from killing your enemy. Security comes from peace. And peace comes from Justice. And justice comes from respecting human rights. Human rights for all people. Not just white people.

The biggest threat to Israel today is not Hamas. The biggest threat to Israel today is Israel's gross mis-treatment of the Palestinians who have been enduring the occupation for decades. The occupation must end or Israel will crumble from within. Because the

underlying racism inherent in zionism is on display for all to see today. In living colour. In dying colour. Palestinians are losing their lives. And Israel is losing it's soul. Nobody is winning here.

Peace is something we have to work for.

[image: cabin]

Introduction

- You want to come home to yourself, whatever that means for you.
- Perhaps you are looking for peace, joy, happiness that does not fade.

Setup

- I tell you I know a short exercise that may help you.
- It only takes a moment, but you have to come into my cabin to do it.

Self-Preparation

- Before you enter the cabin, please leave your mind behind.
- By “mind” I mean all your ideas about life, what life is or what life should be, and all the ideas you have about yourself.
- We live with many ideas about ourselves, but they change all the time. Leave all of this before you come inside.
- Leave behind any desires for the future, for yourself or others.
- The exercise will only take a moment, and you are free to pick up your mind later when you leave the cabin. Nobody will steal it while you are inside the cabin.

Arrival

- When you feel you have left your mind, come into the cabin and close the door.
- I won't be giving you any new ideas. Nothing new here.
- You may be feeling, “now what?”. There is no “now what”.
- Just as it is. You are only here.

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- You are here. Your senses are here. Your power to perceive is here. Your ability to experience is here.
 - Experience being here as your self, stripped away from expectations. No projections here. No judgments. No stories. You are only here.
 - Are you at peace? What day is it? What time is it? What religion does this experience belong to? Do you even care about these questions?

Give up your expectations, and you just might find peace. Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” Amen.

Amen.