

Middle East Mosaic: Seeking Understanding (1)
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Text: Genesis

The Children's Memorial at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, commemorates the lives of one million, five hundred thousand Jewish children under the age of 18 who were killed during the Nazi reign of terror. To enter the memorial, you descend down a sloping hallway of growing darkness into a room that appears to be illuminated only by a million stars, each tiny pinhole of light a silent tribute to a child. In the silence, you hear the names of the dead in English, Yiddish, and Hebrew, along with their age. It takes more than a year before any name is read twice.

Any discussion of peacemaking in the Middle East must include an acknowledgement of the Holocaust and its impact, both on Jews and for the rest of the world.

But the roots of the conflict lie much deeper than the twentieth century. They are as old as the biblical account of a man named Abraham, through whom God promises to produce a great nation. "In you," God declares, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Yet instead of blessing, through Abraham's offspring has come a seemingly endless heritage of violence and division. The morning texts from our shared Christian/Jewish religious tradition narrate the complicated story. Listen for God's Word in the readings from Genesis.

[GENESIS]

Like the multiple pieces of the mosaic art so prevalent in the Middle East, my picture of Israel/Palestine is composed of various voices and diverse perspectives. The Biblical narrative is there, with its Divine promises to both Isaac and Ishmael of nationhood, though with the covenant established through Isaac alone. So too is the long, sad history of Jewish persecution and diaspora—its people scattered to the ends of the earth. We must not forget the silence of most of the world while Jews were slaughtered by the trainload and the Christian Church's dismal record of anti-Semitism which has contributed to the problem as well. The patterns of my mosaic have been etched as well by the Presbyterian Church (USA) and its conviction that the Church in every time and place is called to seek peace and to pursue peacemaking wherever there is warfare, injustice, and oppression of any people. For as long as I can remember, the Church has urged its members and congregations to

become informed about social, political, and religious realities in the Middle East. The Church celebrated the establishment of the State of Israel, has decried any attempt to question its right to exist, and has supported peace plans and US financial assistance to bring them to fruition. The Presbyterian Church has always been on the leading edge of ecumenical and interfaith dialog. In the past 20 years, the Church—in response to Palestinian Christians who have described the dire conditions under which they live-- has called us to listen not only to Israeli voices but also to Palestinian ones, and to advocate for their rights. This led up to the 2004 vote of the General Assembly to consider selective, phased divestment of church funds in companies deemed to contribute to the suffering of Palestinians within the occupied territories. The Jewish world was stunned and deeply hurt, struggling to understand why Israel—of all the nations of the world—would be singled-out for human-rights violations and such action taken. I'm proud that locally, we Presbyterians and Jewish friends and colleagues began talking immediately. Working with the Community Relations Council of the Jewish Community Federation, and the Presbytery of the Western Reserve, we have spent almost 2 years now in focused dialog. The conversations have been frank, sometimes frustrating, always respectful, and very illuminating. Out of these talks came the idea for a jointly-sponsored, interfaith clergy visit to Israel/Palestine, which I was privileged to take part in, this past February.

The goal of our visit was modest: to gain understanding of the situation "on the ground," through conversations with people of diverse perspective and experience. In that spirit, we spoke with government officials, professors and academicians, social workers and educators, and religious leaders--- both Jewish and Palestinian citizens, and religious and secular Jews, Muslims, and Christians. We heard concerns for Palestinian rights and Israel security issues, the competing claims of being both a Jewish and democratic state, the practical and symbolic meanings of the security barrier or wall. The individual pieces of the mosaic sometimes appear to contradict each other, and the realities seem so complex that it's hard to imagine a unified picture. Rabbi Howard Ruben, senior rabbi of the Fairmount Temple, will join me in the pulpit on June 11 for further consideration of peacemaking prospects in this cherished and troubled region.

What IS clear is that people on all sides are living in fear. The suicide bombings have ratcheted up the intensity of daily life, and diminished hope that a peaceful outcome is in sight. Fear has largely been responsible for erecting the barrier wall most Israelis believe is necessary for their security. Most also agree it is not a permanent solution, but the lesser of two evils, noting that "this is a problem that is not yet ready for a solution." The fear is by no means unilateral.

Palestinians view the occupation as a humanitarian crisis that has utterly brutalized them. Unemployment in the occupied territories is at an all-time high—ranging from 50-75%. The elaborate system of security checkpoints, designed to keep potential violence contained, has isolated Arab communities, greatly increasing time needed to commute to work, and preventing access to some areas. The economic position of the ruling Palestinian Authority has been stretched to the breaking point, particularly following the elections in which Hamas came to power. Since then, Israel has withheld tax revenue owed to the Palestinian Authority (about 55 million dollars per month), and the United States and the European Union have followed suit by withholding some pledged aid.

The Hamas victory took everyone by surprise, though all agree it was a fair and democratic election in which over 85% of eligible voters cast a ballot. The Palestinians we spoke with suggested that the rise of Hamas was driven less by support for the Islamic group's political ideologies and more by desperation; in the words of Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi speaking at the City Club recently, "We have a captive population totally suffering, sending a message to Israel that extremism breeds extremism. Violence breeds violence." In fact, Hamas had stepped into the breach, becoming in some areas the sole providers of social services in the form of health care, education, basic food and shelter.

Our visit occurred prior to the Israeli elections in which a new party—"Kadima" which means "forward"-- established by Ariel Sharon claimed victory. So far, there's been little progress in the stalled peacemaking process. Hamas has refused to recognize Israel's right to exist; Israel has refused to resume peace talks with Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, a member of the Fatah party who is regarded as a moderate voice. This political stalemate—in the face of increased violence in Israel and worsening economic conditions in the Palestinian areas—has all but doomed the "road map" leading to a Palestinian state peacefully co-existing alongside Israel. Most people we spoke with were not optimistic about prospects for peace in the foreseeable future.

And yet. Most people want peace. They've buried too many of their children, seen hope flicker and fade. And amid the fear, the frustration, the competing needs that seem insoluble, we did see parts of the mosaic that seemed to offer an antidote to fear and reasons for hope. Perhaps not surprisingly, religion—that in its fundamentalist versions puts up more roadblocks to understanding—is also leading the way to a secure and lasting peace for both Palestinians and Israelis. The interfaith efforts of Christians, Jews, and Muslims are aimed at bringing people of these three great monotheistic religions together.

The goal is simply (simply!) to hear each other's "story" – the way each tells and believes it, NOT as a projection of the other's conception of it. Often this means arranging opportunities for personal encounters—guided conversations designed to help people overcome prejudice that reduces "the other" to a stereotype and allows each to see one another more clearly and with understanding of the common bonds uniting them.

We met with representatives of the Middle East Council of Churches, an ecumenical Christian group reflecting the 2% Christian population of Israel. They are hard at work on dialog groups that bring Jews and Muslims together, and then Jews and Christians together, then Muslims and Christians together, and then finally all of them together. They are also working with both the ministry of Education in Israel and the education ministry of the Palestinian Authority for public school curricula that will acknowledge diverse religious perspectives and promote mutual recognition of one another's rights.

We visited an organization called "Hand in Hand" which has actually established elementary and middle schools that educate Palestinian and Jewish children in both Arabic and Hebrew. Mutual understanding grows in an environment in which differences are respected and even celebrated, where you can be self-critical without destroying your particular identity, and where you learn that the other is finally more like you than different from you. A Jewish mother spoke of her initial misgivings in enrolling her son in a Hand in Hand school, but now she's convinced this is the way to peace. "Our children are learning to love one another." On some levels, it seems like so little. But transformation can occur when a little is applied consistently, when it is multiplied. An organization that began here in Cleveland—appropriately named after the two sons of Abraham from whom Judaism and Islam sprang—Isaac and Ishmael—invites both religions to work together on projects that address human need. In so doing we will be affirming an essential religious value that what is good for the other will be good for us; if it hurts the other, it will hurt us as well.

We asked everyone about the wisdom of applying economic pressure applied through divestment. Palestinians consistently questioned the efficacy of this strategy, and urged us rather to support INVESTMENT in programs, projects, and initiatives that would improve education, and help Palestinians develop economically and provide jobs. The dialog group within our presbytery developed an overture which we will send to the General Assembly meeting next month, promoting a peacemaking strategy of selective INVESTMENT of time, talent, and financial resources that support a just and lasting peace in the region.

One small step, perhaps that we can take, along with our prayers. A concluding story from the ancient desert mystics:
How can you tell when the night has ended and the day has begun?" the teacher asked his pupils. "Could it be," replied one of the students, "when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?" "No." Another suggested, "Perhaps it is when you can look at a tree and discern whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree." "No," again came the reply. "Then when is it?" the pupils demanded. And their teacher said, "When you look on the face of a human being and see that it is your sister or brother. Until you can do that, it is still night."

It is still night in the Middle East. The sibling rivalry is so deep, so profound, that daybreak will be impossible without the grace of God. But the God we worship and serve—the One they do too—is the God who makes a way when humanly speaking there is no way. God as the Father before whom all the families of the world are named, continues to work to transform weeping into joy, tears into laughter, so that every child may grow up without fear, and know abundant life. When I walked out of the Children's Memorial, I learned that what appeared to be the light of a million stars was actually only 5 single candles, reflected by mirrors so that their light was multiplied to illumine the darkest night. May we all join in that divine peacemaking.

AND GOD WILL WIPE AWAY EVERY TEAR FROM THEIR EYES AND DEATH SHALL BE NO MORE, NEITHER SHALL THERE BE MOURNING NOR CRYING NOR PAIN ANY MORE, FOR THE FORMER THINGS HAVE PASSED AWAY. AND THE ONE WHO SAT ON THE THRONE SAID, "BEHOLD I MAKE ALL THINGS NEW."

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