

Church of the Crossroads
Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 10, 2007
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ON THE SIDE OF JUSTICE

1 Kings 17:8-24
Psalm 146
Luke 7:11-17

This weekend marks the anniversary of an event that continues to affect the lives of two peoples who share a common ancestry that goes back to Abraham. We know them as Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs. The event we recall took place forty years ago this weekend when the State of Israel fought the nations of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria during the Six Day War, and in the process occupied 22% of the Palestinian lands that remained after the creation of the State of Israel.

This event has had tragic consequences ever since for both Palestinians and Israelis. Palestinians have known nothing but oppression for the past forty years; Israelis have continued to live in fear. This oppression and this fear continue to feed off of each other. Israel's violence against Palestinians, arising from fear, and the policies of Israel that have oppressed this ancient people have sewn seeds of discontent, despair, and vengeance in them. Having no power, Palestinians have fought back. Our news media have informed us each time a suicide bomber has taken Israeli lives; it has been less than forthright when it comes to reporting Israeli violence against Palestinians and Israel's continued oppression and occupation of a people. Why? Simply because the United States over the course of the past forty years has sided with the State of Israel. This support has been encouraged by enormous amounts of money given by supporters of Israel (known as the "Israeli lobby") to American politicians. As a result, in terms of political and military power, Israel has become Goliath; Palestinians represent David.

And so we have it. Israelis continue to live in fear while Palestinians live in oppression. Israel will never live in peace, nor will there be any measure of peace in the Middle East, until Israel leaves the occupied territories and makes room for a true, autonomous Palestinian state to flourish. Thinking Israelis know this, but fear still reigns in their hearts. In

their best thinking, they know they must end the occupation, but their hearts tell them that unless they have the occupied lands beyond the strict borders of their nation, they will remain vulnerable. That may or may not be true, but the problem is that these overriding feelings of fear among Israelis overshadow any genuine attempts to make peace. Yet, ironically, it is this very Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and also the building of the infamous wall that continue to breed Palestinian violence against Israel, which in turn creates the fear.

Certainly, we know that the terrible reality of the lives of both Israelis and Palestinians is the experience of inexpressible loss. The Holocaust continues to shape the lives of Israelis; Palestinians were made refugees from their own homeland when Israel was created; they have encountered yet more loss as a result of the occupation. We cannot help but empathize with both peoples. Yet, we cannot and must not by our silence condone Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people. The occupation must end.

I would like to share with you the opening paragraph of Sabeel's *Statement on 40 years of the Israeli Occupation*, which I find tells the truth and expresses well the feelings of Palestinians on this anniversary.

. . . strife and contention are evident everywhere as we mark 40 years of the Israeli Occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. The brutal assault on Gaza continues unabated. Israel's army daily invades communities and kidnaps and kills Palestinians in the West Bank. The spreading violence is now destroying the stability of Lebanon. The breakdown in civil society in these besieged areas has reached a very dangerous level. Palestinian Christian and Muslims who have been working for many years to preserve and maintain a level of non-violent resistance have seen their work turn to ashes over and over again, and yet they courageously continue their efforts. However, the level of fatigue and discouragement is higher than ever.

The statement goes on to describe further Israel's assault on Palestinian institutions and the regulations, policies, and actions that rob Palestinians who are not at all related to militant groups of their dignity, their livelihood and their future. Yet, the statement is clear. Sabeel has

never and will not condone violence, even as it seeks to understand its causes.

Of course, what is needed is justice for the Palestinians, which in turn will result in peace for the Israelis. There are both Palestinians and Israelis who are working towards that end. However, as Reinhold Niebuhr reminded us so clearly in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, individual human beings can be honorable and just in their relationships, but collectively human beings are violent and destructive. Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible to extend the passion and commitments of a human being like Naim Ateek into the policies of the State of Israel.

Niebuhr also reminds us that what is needed in order for a measure of justice to be achieved is a *balance of power*. The reality is that Israel, bolstered by American military aid, holds all the power. There is no level playing field, and until there is, no justice can be achieved.

There is, of course, one way to end the Occupation. The United States could end it overnight, simply by saying to Israel that it is cutting off all military and economic aid until the Occupation ends. But the principle that Niebuhr articulated, that human beings can be moral but societies cannot, applies to the United States as well. We can work and pray for an end to the Occupation, but as yet we have had little success in persuading U. S. policy makers to change the policies of this nation as regards its unqualified support for Israel.

As Christians we need to know one thing, however. God is on the side of justice, and we must be on the side of justice as well. God seeks to bring life from death. God seeks to raise up the poor and distressed and the oppressed. In the Elijah cycle, a portion of which we heard this morning, it is clear that God has abandoned King Ahab and his wife Jezebel and now resides with Elijah, and in our story the widow of Zarephath and her little son. These are the objects of God's concern and compassion. In the Gospel reading, Jesus looks upon the widow of Nain in the same way. The raising of the widow's son is a sign that is ready to bring new life to the world. God seeks to establish justice and newness of life in the world. It is God

*who made heaven and earth, the sea,
and all that is in them,
who keeps faith forever.*

*who executes justice for the oppressed,
 who gives food to the hungry.
 God sets the prisoners free;
 God opens the eyes of those who cannot see.
 God lifts up those who are bowed down;
 God loves those who are righteous.
 God watches over the strangers, and upholds
 the orphan and the widow,
 but the way of the wicked God brings to ruin.*
 (Ps 146:6-9)

This is God's intention. Yet, human beings and societies have a will to resist these intentions on the part of God. Therein lies the problem. Human beings would rather put their trust in princes, says the Psalm, and we could add kings, presidents, and nations. In these there is no help because they are subject to mortality along with the rest of creation.

The Psalm infers that there will be no peace and justice in Zion until Zion begins to imitate that which God seeks to do in the world. How we wish that Jewish Zionists and their allies Christian Zionists would begin to understand just this. We are to be on the side of justice.

The situation seems bleak, and so what can we do? Let me suggest what Niebuhr would call *proximate goals*. We can surely continue to witness for an end to the Occupation. I hope that you will sign the petitions available today after worship, and also join us at 11:30 tomorrow morning at Harris United Methodist Church. From there we will march to the Federal Building where we will deliver our signed petitions to the congressional offices. Yes, we can continue to publicly witness publicly for justice.

We can also continue to educate for justice. We need to tell the truth of Palestine-Israel because we cannot rely on our news media to do so. Unless people are informed, they cannot act justly.

Thirdly, we can continue with our efforts to change U. S. policy towards Israel. Only through a change in U. S. policy will there be any balance of power in Palestine-Israel, and only through a balance of power will a measure of justice be achieved. We can also pose the right questions to all presidential candidates and expect forthright answers. Who knows what might ensue?

The lives of both Palestinians and Israelis are at stake. The Sabeel statement for this weekend ends with these words:

Although we are walking in the darkness of Occupation now, we know that the light of Christ will shine one day. We know that the truth will bring freedom and that one day Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, will walk hand in hand toward the light of God's justice. But now we ask that all our friends pray, work, and speak against the Occupation and the injustice that rule every aspect of our lives. Silence allows evil to prosper.

And so, my friends, we cannot be silent. With our voices, our witness, and our prayers, we must join the sovereign God who executes justice for the oppressed and take our stand on the side of justice. So be it. Amen.