

Steve Jungkeit
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Genesis 28: 10-12, 16-17
 April 4, 2022

Every Rung Goes Higher and Higher:
 Reflections on Palestine, Israel, and the Middle East

We begin, once again, with a song. “Jacob’s Ladder” is actually an old spiritual from the African American tradition. It’s based, of course, upon the story from Genesis that we just heard, a story shared by Christians, Jews, and Muslims. In it, Jacob, harried and troubled by all manner of things, lays down in a field to rest, using a stone for a pillow. He dreams of a ladder ascending to the heavens, and of angels ascending and descending upon that ladder. When he wakes, he’s certain that he’s encountered a holy place, a gateway between heaven and earth, and so he creates a kind of shrine there to mark the spot.

But I love what the African and African American hearers of that story did with it. They had the audacity to imagine that the ladder wasn’t only for the angels. They put human beings on the ladder too. They had the courage to believe that they, together with all of humanity, were able to ascend that ladder higher and higher, toward God. And they had the spiritual insight to understand that to climb up the rungs of Jacob’s ladder was to achieve an ever greater awareness of our responsibility toward one another as human beings. To ascend the ladder is to realize, with an ever greater awareness and intensity, that we are brothers and sisters all.

That’s one of the reasons I come to church. That’s one of the reasons I so believe in the work of this congregation. I need, we need, reminders that we’re climbing Jacob’s ladder together, rung by rung, higher and higher, as we seek that blessed reality in which we can finally exist as brothers and sisters, all. Amidst the wars and the violence, the enmity and the mistrust that have been sown around us, it can be painfully hard to remember that truth, and to live from out of that conviction. To all of our new members, if I could sum up what it is we try to do around here, it would be to remind ourselves of that basic truth - that we’re on that ladder, trying to ascend to a place that brings us closer not only to God, but to our fellow human beings. We’re doing our best to recall that there is higher ground, beyond all those forces that tear the human family apart, a higher ground found within our best wisdom traditions - Judaism; Christianity; Islam; and a good many other traditions as well.

An important way that we climb that ladder here is through a kind of spiritual diplomacy, sending small delegations to build relationships of trust and understanding, especially with those who have suffered the worst effects of settler colonialism. Last week we heard of a delegation that traveled to New Orleans for that purpose. Concurrently, another small group was in the Middle East, on our most recent Tree of Life trip. And I want all of us to hear from some members of that delegation today. Ghoufran Allababidi, our Tree of Life President, will share some remarks, as will another good friend of this congregation, Rev. Susan Switzer. But I’m pleased that two young people will share their perspectives as well. One you know: Alex Pinkowish has grown up in this congregation, and he represented us as our diplomat in Palestine and Israel. Norah ... is a new friend, a student at UConn whose ancestral home is in Palestine.

Welcome to all of you. We are brothers and sisters all.

(Rodney: “We are climbing Jacob’s Ladder...”)

Ghoufran Allababidi's Reflections

(Rodney: "We are climbing...")

Alex Pinkowish's Reflections

Rev. Susan Switzer's Reflections

It's been two years since TOL traveled to Palestine to be in solidarity with its Palestinian family and friends, but on the weekend of March 7 & 8 a small band of brave travelers, ages 11 to 75, boarded Turkish Air flights, wearing Covid masks bound for Tel Aviv.

Most were traveling to the region for the first time. A few were multi-year travelers, and one had not been there for ten years.

When we finally arrived at the Lutheran Guest house in Jerusalem, we hit the ground running and began meeting with friends of Tree of Life — relationships that have been cultivated over many many years.

We met with Jeff Halper from the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions and learned about Israel's matrix of control.

We met with Breaking the Silence, Israeli soldiers who speak and write about the violence and atrocities they've inflicted on Palestinians.

We met with George (Saddah) and Rami (Elhanan) from Parent's Circle, two parents — one Israeli and one Palestinian — who both lost a child killed in the occupation.

In Hebron, we met with workers from The Hebron Soup kitchen who feed 4,000 people a week.

We visited Shepherd Field's School in Bethlehem, a school that educates Muslim and Christian students and witnessed them learning, reciting, dancing, singing, and playing.

We visited our friend Amal (Abu Al Khom) and shopped from her organization, *Bedouin Women for Themselves*. We drank freshly roasted coffee from the fire, ate, danced and paraded down the street in native Palestinian dress.

In many ways it seemed that not much has changed in ten years as some of the exact same Palestinian men, near the Hebron mosque check-point were pressing tourists for money.

Community Peacekeepers are still accompanying children to school to keep them safe from the settlers.

The US still gives 30 billion dollars a year to Israel with a quid pro quo arrangement for Israel to use 75 percent of that money to re-invest it in US arms.¹

But the truth is, life on the ground is harder.

There are more outposts strategically placed on top of hills to stake out land and settler cities are expanding at an exponential pace.

Surrounding Arab countries are making side deals with Israel.²

¹ Jeff Halper, Jerusalem TOL Talk, March 2022

² Ibid.

And from the Palestinian perspective, the world has turned their eyes away from them as we now focus on the war in Ukraine.

The situation remains dire.

And YET, And YET, we experienced unfathomable commitment and joy from the people we met.

On the wall inside the West Bank are painted the words, *To Exist Is to Resist*. To stay alive — to simply exist — under a constant police state of surveillance and daily interrogation, is indeed an act of resistance.

But maybe, practicing and cultivating joy is a form of resistance too.

The Iranian founder of *Rumi with a View* and Musical Ambassador of Peace Collaborator, Ari Honarvar writes about the practice of cultivating joy as a radical act.³

She writes “The eight year Iran/Iraq war killed over a million people. Life was far from joyful. We became accustomed to daily funerals, food rations, political oppression, and an ongoing threat of bombs and missiles. Dancing and playing non-sanctioned music became illegal under the post-revolution laws.”⁴

But even with these external challenges, she observed “some people **had the ability to use all available resources for the essential task of nurturing joy, stability, and a sense of humor.**”⁵

Daoud Nassar creator of Tent of Nations, is one such guy. He uses everything he can to create life and joy.

He crafted a man-made cistern to collect rain water and reroute it to his olive trees.

He’s carved out more underground caves on his property for meeting space and living quarters for his children’s camp.

He replants trees, time and again, after they are ripped out by vandals.

And after having been physically attacked recently, he said, “*I have no room to be a victim. We are not victims. None of us, no matter where we live.*” And then with a smile he said, “*There’s simply too much good to do.*”

A student at Smart College in Hebron on the chef track, exhibited boundless joy too. He didn’t speak much English, but it didn’t matter. He had a smile on his face so big that couldn’t be contained or removed. It was pure joy — joy in showing us his school and joy in welcoming us too. And even as he played ping pong after dinner, a champion himself, he still seemed to be smiling.

What creates such joy in the face of such hardship?

Kahlil Al Amor was also the embodiment of JOY this visit. He showed us around his property in the unrecognized village of Al-Sira.

For years, Kahlil has been the glue for his town of 500 people. He provides wi-fi, electricity, and legal support for those trying to keep their homes and land.

On his property, he now houses a huge Bedouin tent with modern appliances, AC, fan, windows and curtains. He’s got more solar energy batteries, more chickens, a water collection system, and has built two new structures for visitors to stay in.

One structure is named Rachel Corrie and the other Rosa Parks.

³ gratefulness.org; When Savoring a Pleasant Moment Is a Radical Act, Ari Honarvar

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

He challenged us to guess the names of the structures, and whoever got it would get a free night staying there. He was delighted with his challenge and laughed when he said it. JOY oozes from Kahlil even in the face of his community's constant struggle to be recognized.

TOL showing up in Palestine after two years mattered this year.

It mattered for the TOL's partners, to be remembered, to be seen, and not be forgotten.

But it mattered to us too.

On the hardest days of the trip, joy or humor seemed to creep into the situation. Maybe not right in the moment, but later. (Like the time we arrived at the hotel and there was no electricity. We agreed this would be very funny later.)

Alex said it well, "I honestly don't know how we got so lucky, having the perfect sized group and having everyone be positive and funny and respectful and interesting."

It's true. There was something special about this self-selected group of risk takers.

We're fortunate to live in the United States and many of us are privileged beyond measure. We have more opportunities for joy than most.

And as people of faith, I believe we are called to cultivate that JOY.

Joy is a form of resistance, especially in the most difficult of times and circumstances. Our work is not done for justice in Palestine or for justice in these United States.

But maybe, just maybe, as Desmond Tutu writes: "**Discovering more joy will not, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak.**"⁶

Nor is it a pass for intolerable suffering...yet maybe "**...as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreaks without being broken.**"⁷

May it be so!

We are climbing Jacob's Ladder!

(Rodney: "Every rung, we go higher...")

I'll close with a brief reference to the second of our Scripture readings for the morning: we walk by faith, and not by sight. If we walked by sight alone, we would have become discouraged long ago. If we walked by sight alone, our vision would be clouded by all the ways the world seems to be reverting to a kind of civilized barbarism - of bombs and neo-fascist autocrats, of land grabs, of religious tribalism, and of a permanent flood of refugees. None of that started five weeks ago. It's been happening for a long time, and in the case of Palestine, unlike Ukraine, few people in the United States have found it worthy of their concern. It's barbarism alright - most often, it just happens to be perpetrated by those who consider themselves to be the arbiters of civilization. If we walked by sight alone, we might be tempted either toward despair, or resignation.

Instead, we walk by faith. We trust that even as much of the world seems to be regressing, it's still possible to find that higher ground, to climb higher and higher toward that blessed vision of God, where we achieve that common humanity that our greatest faith traditions promise. I believe that vision because it's practiced here. I believe it because we've seen it

⁶ goodread.com Desmond Tutu, quotes, quotable quotes.

⁷ Ibid.

emerging, here and there and now and then in all of the partnership that we do, when those moments of shared humanity are enacted. We walk by faith, and not by sight, for we are climbing the rungs of that ladder, higher and higher, until we can finally say, we are brothers and sisters all.