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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12; Luke 4: 17-21; The Quran 5: 8
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A Threefold Cord Is Not Quickly Broken

Several years ago, Reza, Shelly, and I had the opportunity to travel with one another to Israel and Palestine, a journey that forged a lasting bond that we share to this day. We each represent one of the three monotheistic traditions that find a home in that sacred and scarred land called Israel by some, and Palestine by others. While our traditions are different, and while our practices and theologies vary, we find ourselves united by a common thread connecting our traditions together. That common thread has to do with a vision of a just and peaceable world laid out in each of our three Scriptures, a vision that we believe has relevance for the world we inhabit today, and for the terrible violence now unfolding in the Middle East. Though our traditions are different, Reza, Shelly, and I stand together as an example of what the writer of Ecclesiastes laid out many years ago - a three-fold cord that cannot easily be broken. That's true of our friendship, but I think it's also true of the ways our traditions can cleave together in our common commitment to justice and human rights for all.

I should say at the outset that I know passions run high about everything taking place in Israel and Palestine at the moment. And I'm confident that not everyone in this room will land in the same place on these issues, still less in the place occupied by Reza, Shelly and me. But I hope you'll hear us out, and that you'll be thoughtful in your own response - we'll do the same with you.

As we were planning this service, we set ourselves the task of trying to articulate what each of our traditions have to say not only about justice in the abstract, but justice with regard to what is now taking place in Gaza. We were, of course, each horrified by the wholesale slaughter of civilian lives by Hamas. Those actions reproduced nightmares of antisemitic pogroms and persecutions among our Jewish neighbors that are extremely painful to imagine. But Israel's response to those killings, to say nothing of its response to Palestinians for 75 years now, has also been the occasion of unceasing nightmares. As the three of us have written in an op-ed published this past week in the Connecticut Mirror, context matters, and addressing the roots of this violence, found in a history of displacement, dispossession, and dehumanization, is the only way that we can imagine to forge a lasting peace.

And so what do our traditions say about justice in that regard? There are plenty of Scriptural stories and passages that could well be brought to bear on this matter, some of which we've heard this morning. But for my part, I found my thoughts moving toward an open letter written by a collection of Palestinian Christians several weeks ago, addressed to the Western Churches, by which they mean primarily churches in the United States. It is entitled "A Call for Repentance." Copies can be found by the doors if you would like to read what our sisters and brothers in Palestine have to say to us.

Before describing the contents of the letter, I should note that it belongs to a venerable tradition of theological writing, one that has been especially strong in the 20th and 21st centuries, as churches have been forced to confront the organized destruction of peoples and cultures by particular nations. Sometimes called a "declaration," at other times called a "confession," and at

other times still a “theological tract,” these forms of writing have served to quicken the conscience of people of faith, who might otherwise have been lulled into complacency.

In the Nazi era, Karl Barth wrote the “Barmen Declaration,” reminding Christians that their primary allegiance did not belong to the state, or to the church, for that matter, but to God. It’s worth recalling that most Christian churches in the Nazi era were perfectly willing to fall into lock step with the German government.

During the apartheid era in South Africa, Charles Villa-Vicencio, along with several others, wrote “The Kairos Document,” outlining the difference between state theology, church theology, and prophetic theology. It was a document that proved to be decisive in changing the attitudes of Christians here in the United States, and worldwide, toward the apartheid regime. That was certainly true for this congregation - “The Kairos Document” stirred this church into getting involved in the anti-apartheid movement. Later, Charles Villa-Vicencio himself spoke from this pulpit, ten years ago, warning about what is now coming to pass in the Middle East.

And then about a decade ago, another document was produced, “Kairos Palestine,” modeled after what had been written in South Africa three decades earlier, and written by some of the same Palestinian Christians who have written this most recent open letter. “Kairos Palestine” was also a decisive document for this congregation. It led us to become a lead organizer in the effort to persuade the United Church of Christ to take part in a process called BDS, or Boycott, Divestment and Sanction, demanding that Israel grant basic human rights to Palestinians.

Each of the aforementioned documents is grounded in a reading of Scripture. It is a reading that seeks to discern who and what God is calling the church to be at a crucial historical juncture.

That is certainly true of the current open letter. But the writers have a clear sense of who they are called to be as Christians in this moment. They’re not so sure that we, in the United States, have that same clarity. “We write to challenge western theologians and church leaders who have voiced uncritical support for Israel and to call them to repent and change,” those leaders write. “Sadly,” they continue, “the actions and double standards of some Christian leaders have gravely hurt their Christian witness and have severely distorted their moral judgment with regards to the situation in our land.”

That distorted moral judgment includes a double standard that can see Jewish or Israeli suffering, but that disregards the cries of Palestinians. It includes a reflexive and uncritical theology that leads many to assume that God has indeed played the role of real estate broker, granting land to some while forcing the displacement of others. And it includes the support among western churches for a just war theory, which Palestinians Christians overwhelmingly reject.

Here is how they put it: “Palestinian Christians are fully committed to the way of Jesus in creative nonviolent resistance, which uses “the logic of love and draw[s] on all energies to make peace.” Crucially, we reject all theologies and interpretations that legitimize the wars of the powerful. We strongly urge western Christians to come alongside us in this. We also remind ourselves and fellow Christians that God is the God of the downtrodden and the oppressed, and that Jesus rebuked the powerful and lifted up the marginalized. This is at the heart of God’s conception of justice.”

The statement concludes by urging western church leaders (and laypeople) to reexamine their positions and to change their direction. The writers sign off with what I take to be the essence of justice in the Christian tradition. They say, “We find courage in the solidarity we

receive from the crucified Christ, and we find hope in the empty tomb.” Then they continue: “We believe in God, good and just. We believe that God’s goodness will finally triumph over the evil of hate and of death that still persist in our land. We will see here ‘a new land’ and ‘a new human being,’ capable of rising up in the spirit to love each one of his or her brothers and sisters.”

It is that spirit, the solidarity of the crucified Christ, the hope of the empty tomb, and the promise of a new land and a new human being, rising in a spirit of love, that I wish to raise up before you today.

I’d now like to welcome Shelly Altman to the pulpit.

Shelly Altman:

Thanks so much for this opportunity to say a few words about the catastrophe we are all witnessing. I wish I was returning here under better circumstances.

Gaza is front and center in our minds 24x7. So are the daily murders by settlers of Palestinians in the West Bank. But we have seen the dehumanization of the Palestinian people for years, and it is that which has motivated the work that we at JVP have been doing for years.

JVP New Haven was born as a chapter of the national JVP in 2014, after some of us had traveled to Palestine, Jerusalem and Israel, and witnessed and learned first hand of the oppressive conditions of the Occupation. Our work these years could not be possible without the collaboration of so many organizations here in Connecticut. Each of us brings such different and valuable perspectives and skills to the table.

I have some hard words that need to be said: Judaism and Zionism are two very different things.

Rabbi Alissa Wise, a member of the JVP Rabbinical Council has said : "Judaism is a beautiful religion and culture, of which I am proudly a part, that has been around for thousands of years. Zionism is a 125-year-old political philosophy that has solidified into the idea that Jews need their own ethno-state."

That idea is borne of the generational trauma of virulent antisemitism in Europe, of the pogroms and the Holocaust, that led my grandparents to flee Russia with my young father. I carry it with me.

The uplifting of Jews from this darkness was urgently necessary but doing it by establishing a new oppressive political hierarchy in a distant land where other people lived was not.

In 1940, Yosef Weitz, head of Jewish Land Settlement and aide to Ben-Gurion: “There is no way but to transfer the Arabs from here to neighboring countries... Not one village, not one tribe must be left... Only after this transfer will the country be able to absorb millions of our brothers.”

David Ben Gurion: “I support compulsory transfer. I don’t see anything immoral in it.”

And as the Zionist movement faced the fact that not enough Jews were emigrating to Palestine, it adopted more and more violent means to ensure a Jewish majority, a position at the top of the political hierarchy, culminating in the Nakba in 1948, and carried forward with the crimes of apartheid that define today’s reality. Palestinians carry that trauma with them today. We have seen it repeated for years and we see it now.

I FIND MYSELF ASKING WHAT PEOPLE WILL BE SAYING ABOUT THIS PERIOD 50 YEARS FROM NOW? Will the history books say that tens of thousands of imprisoned people were slaughtered while the world silently watched? Will they say that some of the most powerful nations in the world ignored the desperate pleas of their outraged populations to stop the slaughter? Will the survivors of the genocidal attack be finally resettled in freedom with dignity? Or will people visit the memorials in the barren wasteland of Gaza? Or will they visit the seaside mega resorts built on top of the rubble of Palestinian homes with scant thought to the years of struggle and wanton slaughter that took place there

END WITH AURORA LEVINS MORALES - FEMINIST PUERTO RICAN JEWISH POET.

Excerpt from Red Sea

We cannot cross until we carry each other,
all of us refugees, all of us prophets.

No more taking turns on history’s wheel,
trying to collect old debts no-one can pay.

The sea will not open that way.

This time that country
is what we promise each other,
our rage pressed cheek to cheek
until tears flood the space between,
until there are no enemies left,
because this time no one will be left to drown
and all of us must be chosen.

This time it’s all of us or none.

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Reza Mansoor:

Assalaamu alaykum – God’s peace be with you all!

Good morning!

I begin in the Name of the One God, the Most Forgiving and Compassionate, the most merciful, the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad – May God’s peace be upon them all!

The land we are crying for today is the holy land of us all, where Abraham, the patriarch of us all, a messenger of God, a prophet of God and one of the greatest human beings to walk on earth, walked in and lies buried with his son and grandson in the occupied town of Hebron or Al-khalil (the friend of God). I pray he does not see us oppressing each other like this. But it is in this

same oppressed Palestinian town where Palestinians are not even allowed to walk on the main street Shuhada street where we were taken around by a conscientious objector to the occupation and a former Israeli army soldier who said to us “when we were being enslaved by Pharaoh and his people, God sent none other than Moses to save us! How can we do it to another people!” That is the beautiful religion of Judaism and its values and it is why our Jewish brothers and sisters, despite the backlash are standing up against this genocide saying, “not in my name” and getting arrested at the capital in DC and at Union station in NYC for protesting against the war crimes and collective punishment in Gaza.

This land is also where in lies a town where a little boy was born, a Palestinian little boy, born in what is present day occupied Palestine, persecuted and sentenced to death because he was not afraid to stand up to the oppression and injustice of his time. A rabbi who despite his persecution still said “blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God”. This is the Palestinian strength of character.

These are our role models not the ones that continue to say “revenge” in the self-righteous words “right to defend themselves”. We no longer can use the vocabulary we are used to, because if you espouse “freedom”, they say this means you want to ethnically cleanse them, while they do exactly that in Gaza, projecting on others the guilt that they bear. War crime upon war crime with not so much as a peep from our leaders who constantly tout “humanitarian values”. Where is the sanctity of life, where is the liberty for the Palestinians, where is the freedom for the Palestinians and where is the equality in this only democracy in the Middle East? These are the double standards that are so glaring that we decry.

Let us not forget, that the reason why the 3 of us got to know each other is because we went as witnesses to stand up against an oppressive occupation of one of the poorest people in the world in our holy land. For over 55 years they have endured a brutal occupation and they are now undergoing a genocide. A nation that has the 4th or 5th largest army in the world oppressing children throwing stones in this modern-day David and Goliath story. Yet they claim to be the victims – even now!

You cannot keep human beings in this type of prison condition without causing a reaction. We did whatever we could do to speak up against this, to prevent exactly this type of reaction but AIPAC and the ADL sugar coated everything Israel did – and we have what we have – another cycle of bloodshed. And when you do the same oppressive occupying tactics don’t expect a different result.

How are we led to choose the side of Goliath, giving them cover for all the oppression and even arming them, making us all complicit in the war crimes being committed in Gaza. Please – for the sake of our common values and God given freedoms say not in my name. We should never stand with the oppressors for we surely will be held responsible in a higher court for our complicity – if we don’t.

Prophet Muhammad said, “Help your brother whether he is oppressed or he is an oppressor”. His companions asked him “we know how to help the oppressed but how do we help the oppressor”. He replied – “tell him he is wrong to oppress!” We cannot be an ally of an oppressor and not tell

Israel it is wrong to oppress – that is the right thing to do, that is the moral and ethical thing to do – not to arm them. As Gideon Levy a journalist for Haaretz said – “Would you give your friend, a drug addict more drugs – what kind of a friend are you.”

When God created the universe, he announced “I have forbidden injustice for myself and I have forbidden it for you, so do not oppress one another”

When a child is killed, the angels bring the soul of the child to God and He asks them “Who did this to my child?” “Who took away the apple of their parents’ eye?” and then God enquires “and how did you find my servants undergoing this trial” (meaning their parents) and the angels respond “they say “enough is God as our protector, the best to protect and the best to help” and they say “praise is only for God” in a supreme act of patience and steadfastness that we cannot even imagine. God says to the angels construct for them a palace in heaven and call it the house of praise where they will live for eternity.

As for the child – take him/her to the highest heaven and give them everything they want and let them be with Al-Khalil – Abraham in my house!

God speaks about these very same conditions in pre-Islamic Arabia when little baby girls were buried alive in another time of extreme discrimination:

“When the souls and their bodies are paired once more
 And when the baby girls buried alive will be asked
 For what crime were you killed
 And when the record of deeds are laid open
on that day each soul will know what deeds it has sent forth.” Q8: 7-14

A warning for us all – be kind, be loving and be merciful to each other.

So; let us pray for Palestine:

Oh God – they are weak so be their source of strength,
 They are in fear so be their source of peace,
 They are hungry so be their source of sustenance,
 They are thirsty so be their source of relief,
 They are suffering so be their source of comfort,
 They are oppressed so be their source of liberation,
 They are hurt so be their source of healing,
 They are trapped so free them from their shackles,
 Aameen
 Thank you!

Steve:

I’d like to conclude these meditations with the words of a letter written by Chris Hedges to children living in Gaza. Hedges is a Presbyterian minister, a journalist, and the author of the book *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*. He wrote this letter on a night flight to Egypt, in order to report from the Gaza border. Here is just a little of what he says:

“Dear child. It is past midnight. I am flying at hundreds of miles an hour in the darkness, thousands of feet over the Atlantic Ocean. I am traveling to Egypt. I will go to the border of Gaza at Rafah. I go because of you.

All of us who have been to war hate war most of all because of what it does to children.

I tried to tell your story. I tried to tell the world that when you are cruel to people, week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade, when you deny people freedom and dignity, when you humiliate and trap them in an open-air prison, when you kill them as if they were beasts, they become very angry. They do to others what was done to them. I told it over and over. Few listened. And now this.

I hope one day we will meet. You will be an adult. I will be an old man, although to you I am already very old. In my dream for you I will find you free and safe and happy. No one will be trying to kill you. You will fly in airplanes filled with people, not bombs. You will not be trapped in a concentration camp. You will see the world. You will grow up and have children. You will become old. You will remember this suffering, but you will know it means you must help others who suffer. This is my hope. My prayer.”¹

Let that be our hope. Let it be our prayer. That we too shall remember this suffering, and know that it means we must help those who suffer. In the name of the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, in the name of the God made known in Jesus the Christ, and in the name of the one called Allah, the holy and the most good, by the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him...Amen.

¹ Chris Hedges, as printed on Substack: <https://chrishedges.substack.com/p/letter-to-the-children-of-gaza-read#details>