

Second Sunday in Lent
March 4, 2007

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

When I was first working on my sermon for today, what struck me about the Gospel text wasn't what Jesus was doing, it was what he wasn't doing. Here he is, being warned about Herod's desire to kill him, and his response basically is, "So? I am going to keep doing what I've been doing." He didn't run away and hide. He didn't start gathering an army around himself to protect himself. He didn't change what he was doing to appease anyone. He just kept healing people, working for their wellbeing.

Then we were given an opportunity that I couldn't pass up. And today we have, as our Communion ware, a chalice and paten and made by artisans who are part of a program run by Christmas Lutheran Church, a church in Bethlehem, that would be Israel, the Holy Land. Christmas Lutheran Church is one of six Lutheran churches in Jordan and the Holy Land who make up the ELCJHL. The artists use their art to build bridges across cultural and ethnic lines.

This communion ware is one of 65 sets that were given to the ELCA, one to each synod. They have been being passed from congregation to congregation as a reminder to us of our connection to Christians everywhere. The hope was that they would give an opportunity and occasion for congregations to learn about and pray for the Christians in the Holy Land, as well as for their Jewish and Muslim neighbors. These vessels for communion remind each of us, or our baptismal call to work for peace and justice in all the world, including in the land of Israel.

And so, we have them today, the day in which our Old Testament text is about the covenant that God made with Abraham, to give him the land between the river of Egypt and the Euphrates. This covenant is the basis for the historic claim the Jews make to this land once called Palestine. It is also the day when the Gospel text is Jesus' lament over Jerusalem. His acknowledgement of the pattern of prophets being rejected or killed by the people of God. There is, I think, a bitter irony that Jerusalem means, literally, the city of peace. Jeru, for city, and salem, for peace.

The 2007 version of Jerusalem is anything but. Jerusalem is the focal point of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The site of terrorist attacks, and the primary sticking point in negotiations for peaceful terms.

Part of the problem is that the covenant that God made with Abraham was bigger than the land. God made a covenant with Abraham, to make of him a great nation, to bless him so that through him, the world would be blessed. Israel was called to be a nation who welcomed that alien in their land. A people for whom hospitality was the highest good. A people called to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

The communion ware project was begun as part of an effort to call the world's attention to a wall that is being built in the land where Jesus walked. This is a wall that purports to be for security. But it is effectively a wall that shuts out the foreigner, that deprives them

of food, and water. In many eyes, the Israelis are doing a grave injustice, in often unkind ways. Peoples homes are routinely bulldozed to the ground, leaving the families with nothing but the few possessions they can salvage from the rubble. They are doing all this with the self-righteous justification that this wall is a quest for security from acts of terrorism. They are seeking security through military strength, that to Palestinian eyes probably seems little more than state-sanctioned violence.

The problem lies in the fact that the quest for peace through violence doesn't work. Violence only begets more violence. More oppression will only bring more terrorism. Israelis and Palestinians are caught in this seemingly intractable stand-off where so much hurt has piled up on both sides that there seems to be no way forward. There is a group called something like "Bereaved for Peace" which is a group of Israeli people who have lost loved ones to acts of terrorism. One father speaks about how nothing can be accomplished if all they do is look to the past and pile up the hurting to try to show who has suffered the most. The only way forward is to look to the future. It seems to me these people are those who see that the seeds of peace are forgiveness, And peace will only grow in a just society. And the fruits of peace will be the well-being of all people, not just the privileged or powerful few.

Now, this conflict in the Holy Land is usually portrayed as a conflict between Jews and Muslims. But, in fact, there is still a small percentage of Christians in the Holy Land, the birthplace of Jesus. More than most, these followers of Jesus have a powerful, pivotal role to play in a ministry of reconciliation. They are being called to a special kind of faithfulness to what we often blithely refer to as the way of the cross. First of all, they will need to stay. Any of us would understand if they chose, instead, to run away, find a safer place to live and raise their families. But many, many of them are staying to work for peace. They are staying to be the prophetic voice that reminds Israel of their covenant to be a blessing to the world.

These followers of Jesus are also being called to refrain from participating in the worldly way of responding. They are seeking to live out nonviolent responses to violence. They are seeking to do those things that will bring them closer to peace, not further away.

And they are being called to keep being the church, to keep being the Body of Christ in a hurting world. When I was reading the list of ministries of the six Lutheran churches in Jordan and the West Bank, I was struck by the what might seem to be the mundaneness of their ministries. There is a hospital, some schools, a variety of programs for children and youth, Meals on Wheels and transportation for the elderly. These serve all people, especially the Palestinian refugees who can't get help anywhere else. These may seem to be foolish, even weak, in the face of all the guns and bombs. But that is how God works.

In another passage in the letter to the Corinthians, Paul talks about the cross, and how it is foolishness to the world. But how God's foolishness is wiser than the world's wisdom, and how God will use what is weak, lowly and despised, to bring down the powerful. That is what our brothers and sisters in these Lutheran churches are trying to do, to be the vessel through which God can be at work in that land.

These brothers and sisters need our help. They need us to do what we can do. We can advocate on their behalf, against the wall, and for peaceful resolutions. They need our prayers and support as they continue their work.

They need us to remember, as we share the bread and the wine, that we are all one in Christ. They need us to remember that there is no point in wondering whose side God is on. God weeps for all the fearful and hurting people. God still longs to gather and protect us all. God still longs for the day when Jerusalem will be the city of peace. May God use us to do what we can. May the seeds of peace be sown, and grow, and bear fruit for all people. Amen.