

Peace Needs Vigilance

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
December 6, 2020 – Advent 1
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

An appendix at the end of this message gives background information on the message.

Peace – Dr. Martin Luther King said of it: True peace is not merely the absence of tension it is the presence of justice.”¹

Jesus himself spoke about peace, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”² In John’s Gospel, the disciples were getting anxious and knew that their time with their teacher and Lord was coming to an end.

The word for “peace”, in Hebrew and Greek, in fact, appears in the Bible 429 times in 420 verses. *Shalom* is the Hebrew word we are likely most familiar with. It is not at all simply about a calm kind of peace, but aren’t those quiet moments of life wonderful? No, “shalom” encompasses overall health, a wholeness. The scope of God’s peace takes into consideration the whole picture – God’s “big picture” of health for the people of ancient Israel, and for our world today.

For Isaiah – actually, chapter 40 opens “Second Isaiah” – there is a remarkably different tone and perspective than the first 39 chapters. Israel had lost its collective spiritual compass, and the writer of chapters 1 to 39, “First Isaiah”, speaks of judgment – God delivering Israel into captivity of Babylon. You may or may not believe our Creator would intervene that way, but I think we all know that we can lose our way. The consequences of greed, of self-centred politics, can create great harm for nations that don’t see that their health and peace is interdependent with a collective, global peace, shalom.

Peace cannot come without justice, and humility; remembering to see the big picture. So I think we all want to see peace in the Middle East and most of us can agree that President Trump did not achieve it as he claimed.



In my time in Bethlehem, a news story broke about an incursion of Israeli military into Jericho. A person of great concern to Israel was held in a Palestinian jail in Jericho, Israel felt he was not secure. Israel sent troops with guns blazing. So a conquering country occupying another for decades, continually pummeling the already controlled nation. That sounds familiar – maybe even Biblical. What caught my attention was a short news story I read about how dozens of

¹ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom*. ©1958 Harper & Brothers.

² The Gospel of John, chapter 14, verse 27

busloads of Palestinian school children were prevented from leaving by Israeli forces.



I went to Jericho to find out more. I was amazed to find a jail utterly destroyed, visited the neighbouring school and heard stories from students about how Israeli military took over. When I went back to Bethlehem, I spoke to the director of education and ultimately to this wonderful principal of a school, named Mrs. Wafa. They spoke of their fear as administrators for the well being of dozens of buses filled with kids who were spending a fun day in the resort town of Jericho. But that day, administrators were in a communication blackout.



I heard from this student, Aziza, the feeling of terror as soldiers, quite agitated, entered the buses. I heard about the adult chaperones trying to calm the children. But the most troubling thing I heard is that these incidents are all too common for Palestinians. It is a land where a lack of shalom is *far too normal*. We can be certain that there will be no peace in Israel until there is peace and justice in Palestine – the shalom of these neighbouring nations is interdependent. Of course we must pray for peace in the cradle of Christianity, and of Judaism and Islam – the Middle East.

My friends, we need to pray also for peace in our own land. We must be vigilant, awake, to the spiritual dangers here; in our homes, in our neighbourhoods and in our western culture. On this anniversary of the tragedy in Montreal, the senseless killing of 14 bright, loving, women. That day in 1989 I was backpacking in Europe. I saw the news report on television in the hostel I was staying at, and I was stunned. I had never thought about gender-based violence. I certainly know about it, and must work to end it.

Can we try to see prosperity from God's perspective? A big picture of community wholeness, not just our own, but interdependent health and peace with one another. With those all-too-many homeless sisters and brothers in Sudbury? When we struggle to make healthy decisions this month, struggle to follow the rules our health unit have given us – it will be a different Christmas. The whole community must work together for everyone's wellbeing.

So, I invite you join me in an exercise this coming week. Each day, as we wake up, we thank our Creator for our blessings. But we pray also to seek peace, shalom – wholeness – today. As we move through each day, may we seek a bigger picture. How does my health and peace interconnect with everyone I see; especially the strangers, that seem at first glance, most different from me.

Seek peace... be awake, be vigilant. Amen.

“Far Too Normal” By David Le Grand

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March 15, 2006 was a normal day. Approximately 500 schoolgirls (Kindergarten to Grade 12) had arrived in beautiful Jericho, Palestine’s destination of choice for vacationers. Forty busloads of children from various parts of the West Bank were in Jericho that day, off for a day of laughter, swimming and playing. Despite newspaper stories of Israel’s occupation of Palestine, the building of a huge Wall, and all against the backdrop of political pundits spinning their analyses about Jewish settlements built on Palestinian land, the children yearned for a different normality this day. This journey, teachers and children alike hoped to find reprieve from the siege of instability and fear.

That same March 15 morning, EAs (“Ecumenical Accompaniers” who work in solidarity with Israelis and Palestinians seeking an end to the Occupation) were interviewing Mr. Abdalla Shakarna, Director of Education for Bethlehem, about the Palestinian education system. Mr. Shakarna was totally unaware that, as we spoke, 1000 Israeli soldiers were beginning a standoff in Jericho. During our interview, his attention was pulled away to his office television and a news bulletin in Arabic. He informed us that there had been an attack on a prison in Jericho, and that 10 school buses full of children from the Bethlehem area were trapped in the city. The Israeli military would not allow any vehicles out of Jericho. Our interview must end so he could try to get those buses back to Bethlehem.



As the buses arrived in Jericho the teachers supervising the children quickly recognized with horror what was unfolding nearby. The children were reacting to the sounds of gunfire. Iman, a teacher from Al Awdah school in Beit Sahur, tried to appease their concerns by suggesting that it was probably a “military training exercise.” Aziza, an 18 year old Grade 12 student at Al Awdah Girls School, didn’t worry until her parents called on her mobile telephone to tell her that they had been watching television and that “something dangerous is going on.” This call was part of a tidal wave of urgent mobile phone calls to other children from their parents, apprehensive about their children’s safety.

By this time Mr. Shakarna’s office was receiving its own flurry of phone calls. His staff members were liaising with the Ministry of Education office and seeking real facts on the

ground from the Palestinian DCO (District Coordination Office). The officials were trying to get a sense of when the buses would be released by the Israeli military. Diplomatic relations between Israel and Palestine are strained at the best of times, and on this day the Palestinian Authority tried desperately to protect the country's vulnerable children.

The morning of March 15 passed as Shakarna, the headmistresses from the affected schools, and teachers who were with the children continued to assess how to keep their children safe. At the same time Aziza's mother, Ibtsam, now was calling her relatives in Jericho to try to find out what was happening, then relaying the information to other parents and to the teacher on her daughter's bus. Ibtsam recalled later, "It was a day I will never forget." Qu'ran in her hand, she was "praying to God for help."



The ordeal continued through the day. Mrs. Wafa, headmistress at Al Awdah Girl's School, got word that the buses would be able to leave by 4:30 pm, a welcome relief. But the afternoon passed, and by 4:30 there was little indication of hope for the buses leaving. Mrs. Wafa began the tedious task of arranging a safe location for the children to sleep overnight in Jericho, if needed. Later she told us, "It was a very bad situation. I feel like I'm the mother of 150 students in my school. I felt fear, worried, responsible. I wished I had been there with them."

The convoy of buses had moved from the scene of the incursion to the military checkpoint south of Jericho, but faced a long lineup. Israeli soldiers boarded buses and examined belongings and attempted to interrogate the children, but the teachers watched protectively and cautioned the children not to talk to them. Another symbol of the "Occupation," standard issue M16 rifles, hung on soldiers' backs as they walked through the aisles of the bus, the weapons bumping the heads of the girls. By 8:00 pm, the mobile phones on the bus were dead. Days later Ibtsam described the feeling of helplessness among parents, and the emergence of rumours that this exhaustion could go on for days. Would the children return safely home? The images of scenes close to the children were on the television screen and were cause for alarm. What thoughts were going through the minds of the children? What feelings were they experiencing? What would be the long term impacts of this trauma on the children?

After two deaths and numerous injuries, the Israeli military left Jericho at 10 pm. Only then could the buses begin their journey back to Bethlehem along the dangerous road that night. Eventually the exhausted children arrived home, late that night, to their frantic and deeply thankful parents.

"It was an unbelievable day!" exclaimed Ibtsam in our follow up interview with the mother, her daughter Aziza and various teachers. The room burst into cathartic and nervous laughter as everyone agreed with the sentiment. Throughout our interview, Aziza kept her poise and answered questions matter-of-factly. For her, "every hour was a day."

I asked Ibtsam if her family has ever been traumatized like this before. Her reaction was immediate, "All the time." I asked for an example and she told of the terrifying day in April of 2002 when the Israeli military moved into Bethlehem to find "militants" who had sought refuge in the Church of the Nativity. "The soldiers attacked our house

twice”, she said. The Israeli military had confiscated her home because it was at a strategic location for them. She had been away from home that first time. The soldiers returned another day, but this time Ibtsam was home to gather her family together, feeling helpless and scared. Together they prayed for the nightmare to come to an end.

The EA team had a poignant follow-up interview with Mr. Shakarna a week after the Jericho incident. The Director of Education lives close to his Bethlehem office but, to get to work each day, he now must pass through several Israeli “checkpoints”, a far too normal and stark symbol of the “Occupation.” But his thoughts about the Jericho episode, despite all of his authority, were of the frantic parents and their children. With a sigh he said, “I felt so sorry and so sad that I could not give my children protection and keep them safe in their own country.”

Now, as a Canadian in Palestine, I muse. Rarely do we talk about the Palestinian children who regularly witness violence as a result of the conflict. Rarely do we consider what trauma Israeli children must feel, separated from their neighbours by an enormous concrete Wall and by barbed and electrified fences in other places. Rarely do we discuss the impact on children of the symbols of the conflict – the Wall and Jewish Settlements on Palestinian land. While the adults of the Middle East seem unable to negotiate peace and as the world debates the politics of this conflict, we miss the profound and traumatic seeds of fear and hatred that the witnessed violence plants in children on both sides of an ominous 30 foot high concrete Wall. The international community, knowing that the International Court of Justice has declared the Wall and “Occupation” illegal, keeps a safe distance in hopes that diplomacy – often little more than political rhetoric – will work. Meanwhile Palestinian children are feeling increasingly isolated, depressed and fearful. On March 15, those Palestinian children symbolize most vulnerable victims as Palestine yearns for justice, and while Israel longs for security.

Aziza, the 18-year-old schoolgirl, commented about how she feels about the Jericho day. “I am sad”, she says. “My parents paid a lot of money for this trip. Some parents had to borrow the money to send their children, just for the chance to get away and have some fun.”