

IPMN Tweets

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Opening Worship Sermon

IPMN Annual Meeting - October 19, 2010 - Chicago, IL

Rev. Craig Hunter

Jeremiah 6: 11-15

But I am full of the wrath of the Lord;

I am weary of holding it in.

Pour it out on the children in the street,

and on the gatherings of young men as well;

both husband and wife shall be taken,

the old folk and the very aged.

Their houses shall be turned over to others,

their fields and wives together; for I will stretch out my hand

against the inhabitants of the land,

says the Lord.

For from the least to the greatest of them,

everyone is greedy for unjust gain;

and from prophet to priest,

everyone deals falsely.

They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,

saying, 'Peace, peace',

when there is no peace.

They acted shamefully, they committed abomination;

yet they were not ashamed,

they did not know how to blush.

Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;

at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,

says the Lord.

God Is a Slow Learner

The hour is late and the sky is dark. Ominous clouds are gathering on the horizon. The air takes on a certain chill, and if you pause long enough to notice, you can feel the faint hint of an oncoming breeze. The wind of change is in the air. A storm is coming.

Not that you would know it by looking at the people, by listening to their conversations or by watching as they go about their day-to-day business. No, the hour is late and the sky is dark, but they go about their routines as if everything is normal. By and large, they seem to be totally oblivious. It's not that the signs of change aren't there, rather the people of Jerusalem are just too spiritually numb to read them.

The storm is real. The Babylonians are coming. The Babylonians are the superpower of the day, the successor Empire to the Assyrians, and Nebuchadnezzar has made the empire into a force to be reckoned with. The people of Jerusalem don't know it yet, but within a few years, Jerusalem will be destroyed, many of them will be deported, and their lives will be turned upside down. The nation of Judah will experience what Walter Brueggemann refers to as "the dominant and shaping event of the entire Old Testament." Meanwhile, however, it is business as usual.

Fast forward in time over 2500 years. The Jews of Jerusalem today, the Israeli government, and the American government are not all that different from the Jews of Jerusalem on the eve of the Babylonian invasion. They go about their day-to-day activities, relatively oblivious to the looming darkness. A certain normalcy has taken hold, maybe not entirely an ideal one, but a normalcy nonetheless. There is little to no sense of urgency, no sense that the hour is late or that the sky is dark.

But the Palestinians, by and large, know better. The hour is late, very late. It was late 18 years ago this month, when Dr. Haider Abdul-Shafi gave a landmark speech at the Madrid Peace Conference, declaring, "We the people of Palestine, stand before you in the fullness of our pain, our pride, and our anticipation, for we long harbored a yearning for peace and a dream of justice and freedom. For too long, the Palestinian people have gone unheeded, silenced and denied. Our identity negated by political expediency; our right for struggle against injustice maligned; and our present existence subdued by the tragedy of another people. For the greater part of this century we have been victimized by the myth of a land without a people and described with impunity as the invisible Palestinians. Before such willful blindness, we refuse to disappear or to accept a distorted identity. . . . It is time for us to narrate our own story, to stand witness as advocates of truth which has long lain buried in the consciousness and conscience of the world. . . . We seek neither an admission of guilt after the fact, nor vengeance for past inequities, but rather an act of will that would make a just peace a reality."

When those words were spoken eighteen years ago, the hour was already late, but it is later now. Merely in those last eighteen years, the Israeli settler population has doubled, over 12,000 Palestinian homes have been destroyed, and Gaza has been de-developed and impoverished. Palestinians have considerably less freedom of movement now than they did then, and in the past ten years alone, over 6000 Palestinians and 1000 Israelis have

died due to armed conflict. The hour is indeed very late, and the sky is growing darker. The threat may not come from foreign armies as in the days of Judah, but rather in the form of clouds of despair and in a destruction that is both physical and spiritual. As Israeli lawyer and activist Danny Seidemann told my group during our Israel/Palestine trip this summer, "if we don't have a just peace in the next year, Israeli society will go off a cliff." He refused to contemplate what that darkness might look like, but you can bet it will fall disproportionately on the weak. Meanwhile, however, for the main part of Israeli society, as well as its American sponsors, it is business as usual.

Out of the blue, when all hope seems lost, God calls Jeremiah and sends him to prophesy to the people of Judah, to challenge their complacency and force them to face their wicked and unjust ways. Now, sending a prophet like this at the eleventh hour strikes me as something a sensible god would not do. A sensible god would wash his or her hands of the people, a sensible god would calculate the odds of repentance and adjust the plan accordingly. A sensible god would do what the book of Deuteronomy calls men to do with an unfaithful wife -- they are "not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled" -- they are expressly forbidden from taking back unfaithful wives. But this God of Jeremiah, it seems, is not a sensible god. This God of Jeremiah doesn't know when to quit -- 'hopeless' is not a word in its vocabulary.

So this God sends Jeremiah to prophesy to the people. The problem, you see, is that, "For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely." Or at least, that is part of the problem. The other part of the problem is that the people seem to think that the presence of the temple assures them of security. They have, in other words, persuaded themselves that religious rituals divorced from the practice of justice which naturally belongs with them will nonetheless ensure their safety against the Babylonians or anyone else. They drew the wrong lessons from the Assyrian siege on Jerusalem almost a hundred and fifty years earlier, when the Assyrians encamped outside Jerusalem and threatened to destroy it, but were miraculously afflicted and dispersed, as if by God's direct hand. Forgetting King Hezekiah's repentance at the time, or their calling by God to justice as they way they should follow, they seem to think simply, "God saved us then, God will save us now," easily absolving themselves of any need for self-examination. They say "peace, peace," or, in an alternate translation of the Hebrew text, "Don't worry, be happy, there is no problem here, nothing to be concerned about. We've got God in our back yard, what can go wrong?"

What can go wrong does go wrong, which is another way of saying that God will not be treated that way, God will not be made into a fetish, God will not be distracted from the practice and pursuit of justice. Other gods, maybe, but not this God, not this God of Jeremiah.

The modern nation of Israel resembles the ancient nation of Judah, not only in the gathering darkness, but in the greed and injustice that has corrupted the people as a whole. That greed and injustice is a cancer at the very core of Zionism. It is the desire to have a nation free of Palestinians, for Jews alone, a Jewish state for me and mine, that fed the Zionist movement from the very beginning. Thus it was that Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, spoke of "spirit[ing] the penniless [Palestinian] population across the border", "denying" them "any employment in our own country." It is the same greed and injustice that were evident in Israel's confiscation of Palestinian lands, so that within Israel itself today, 93 percent of the land is for Jewish use only. It is the same greed and injustice that confiscates land on the other side of the green line and that restricts Palestinian use of their own water while using it liberally to supply settlement swimming pools. It is the same greed and injustice that spends 7 percent of Jerusalem's budget on Palestinian areas despite the fact that they make up over 35 percent of Jerusalem's population, the same cancer that provides bus and garbage service to Jewish East Jerusalem settlements while denying such service to Palestinian areas literally right next door.



Unlike the ancient nation of Judah, however, the modern nation of Israel does not rely on the presence of God's temple to provide security. Rather, Israel's heresy is more modern, they rely on military strength for their security. Indeed, this idolization of military power is arguably the fundamental spiritual problem of the state of Israel, and it has been that way from the beginning. Way back in 1922, Vladimir Jabotinsky wrote, "We must either suspend our settlement efforts or continue them without paying attention to the mood of the natives. Settlement can thus develop under the protection of a force that is not dependent on the local population, behind an iron wall which they will be powerless to break down." The theology of the Iron Wall has dominated Israel before and since. It involves achieving peace through domination.

What Morechai Gur, the chief of staff of the Israeli army once stated in reference to the War of Attrition between Egypt and Israel in 1969 and 1970 has been true of the conflict as a whole, namely that "This was the great political and strategic mistake -- the reliance on force as the almost exclusive factor in the formulation of policy." We've seen that more recently in the wars on Lebanon and Gaza, and the assault in international waters on the Gaza flotilla this summer. More than anything else, however, the theology of the Iron Wall is made evident and manifest in the 25 foot high concrete wall that snakes through Palestinian territory, confiscating and separating. That image more than any other, more than the church of the nativity or the church of the Holy Sepulchre, the image of the wall is what most stuck with the recent participants of my trip to the region, it is that image that haunts them.

The nation of Israel, by and large, like the nation of Judah, has learned the wrong lessons from its history. As one Israeli Jewish woman told me this summer, "What we learned from the Nazi Holocaust is that this kind of thing should never happen to us again. What we didn't learn is that it should never happen to anyone." In other words,

they have learned a lesson of power but not the lesson of justice. Their idolization of force has distracted them from the justice and peace on which true security, known in the Jewish tradition as shalom, is based.

In such a context, the modern 'peace process' is little more than an updated version of the ancient cry of "peace, peace," it treats the wounds of the people carelessly, in the words of our Biblical text, it seeks Palestinian acquiescence in Israeli domination, it functions now as then as a distraction from the hard work of justice that must be done.

One thing that hasn't changed is God. You may not have known this, and perhaps you will hear it here first, but God is a slow learner, arguably as slow as they come. For despite the over 2500 years that separate the kingdom of Judah from today's nation of Israel, God's vocabulary has still not expanded to include words like "hopeless" or "despair." God is still as hell-bent --- or rather, heaven-bent -- on the practice and pursuit of justice as God ever was. So even though the hour is late and the sky is dark and any sensible god would give up and walk away, the God of Jeremiah, being as crazy as gods can be, our God is still calling people at the eleventh hour, still sending different people to call the nation to repentance. God is calling people like Maya Wind, a young Israeli woman I met this summer who went to jail for several months for her refusal to serve in the Israeli army and who now works for the Israeli committee against house demolitions. God is still calling people like Sydney Levy, director of Jewish Voice for Peace, people like Hanan Ashrawi and Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb. Believe it or not, God is still calling people like us, the people in this room, and organizations like the Israel/Palestine Mission Network.

God calls Jews and Palestinians, Christians and Muslims, male and female, oppressed and free, Jew and Gentile, God doesn't seem to care about which side of the wall you are on, who you are or where you are does not seem to matter so much to God as whether or not you are breaking down the walls, to use the words of the Middle East Study Committee's report. It is not which side of the wall you are on, but whether you are building walls or breaking them down. That's what being a Christian is about, you see. It's about breaking down walls.

For you see, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," to use the words of Robert Frost's famous poem. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, That wants it down." As Christians, we believe that that something, that someone is God.

I close with what was for me one of the most powerful images of my recent trip to Israel/Palestine. I was walking along the wall in Bethlehem, where I used to live, where I used to live when there was no wall. That's when I saw it. I have a hard time remembering this image without getting emotional. It pierced my heart. There, written large and legibly on the wall was a quote in English from Ephesians 2:14. "For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.