

“Reflections from a Pilgrim Returned”

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Genesis 15:1-6

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 21:9-20

Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ... The angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” ... God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.

Count the stars. Your descendants will be numbered like that. Abram is worried. But God says his fear is unfounded. It will all work out. And though the “how” is a mystery, Abram believes. Skipping ahead a few pages in the book of Genesis, we find that Abram – now Abraham – is no longer worried. He has children. He has an heir.

Can we step back from the text enough to admit some of what’s wrong with it? Abraham is apparently content yet he’s swayed by the small-mindedness of his wife Sara who refuses to accept the humanity of her husband’s first child. She insists that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away, into the desert – which is equivalent to a death sentence.

Abraham, who is credited with being righteous, who is our ancient example of faithfulness, goes along with this. And the Genesis writer has God saying, it’s okay, I’ll take care of them. Don’t misunderstand me; it’s good and right that God takes care of them. But do we really believe that the God of love that Jesus came to teach us about, the God that calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves, is really fine with this? Can we truly accept that God encourages Abraham to behave in such an inhumane fashion?

I chose today’s lessons knowing that we would not be looking deeply at them. Instead these texts lay the background for the reflections I’ll share about the last two weeks. Still, we cannot read them without looking at them through the lens of our Christian faith.

As a faithful Jew, Jesus would have seen himself as part of the line of Abraham. But we might wonder how would he have interpreted his ancestors’ treatment of Hagar and Ishmael?

The Jewish people trace their roots to Abraham. His willingness to follow God, no matter what, is their, and our, example of righteousness. As Christians, we are grafted onto that same family tree. Not only Jews and Christians, but also Muslims look to Abraham as their father in faith.

These three Abrahamic religions are some of the paths to God being looked at during our Wednesday evening *Christianity & World Religions* study this month and next. These three were also on my mind as I visited Palestine these last two weeks.

I thought this talk would be more free-form – I’ve been too tired to think since arriving back in Wausau Thursday evening – but jetlag woke me at 12:30 so down I put some thoughts. What did I learn on this trip? On a lighter note, I learned that cucumbers and hummus make an excellent breakfast. Who knew? I learned that I need a new cellphone. I learned that *anyone* can float in the Dead Sea. And, I learned that while I bounce back from a 5-hour time difference relatively easily, 8-hours is hard!

On a more serious note, I also learned how big the gaps in my understanding are. I learned that much of what I thought I knew was wrong. Maybe – like me – you grew up hearing about Palestinians only as radicals – kidnappers and hijackers. Maybe – like me – you believed the media coverage that not only was Israel our friend in the U.S. but that they were the “good guys.”

It is so much easier to believe we know exactly what is true and what is not. But in life, few

things are truly black or white, all good or all bad. If you still believe what you have heard about Israel and Palestine, I encourage you to hold onto this idea as I continue.

On the last day of our pilgrimage, seventeen of us sat in a circle near the chancel at the Church of the Sermon on the Mount. We talked about what we would say to people when we came home and how we'd say it. We talked about how some people would accuse us of being anti-Semitic.

Am I anti-Semitic if I say that the Israeli government is oppressing the people of the West Bank? Is it anti-Semitic to say that the Christians and Muslims in Israel are treated like second-class citizens?

Nobody wants to be called anti-Semitic. We all know the terrible things that happened to European Jew eighty years ago. Terrible things. I do not fault them, or their children or grandchildren, for saying, "Never again." Never again should *any* people be in a situation where they face annihilation. Never should *any* people have to go through such oppression as they went through.

Having said that, the people and communities of Palestine have suffered since welcoming the Jews in 1948, and are suffering now, as a result of Israel's policies.

As a word of explanation, Living Stones – as in Living Stones Pilgrimage – refers to those people who are "leaders of organizations on both sides of the Green Line that seek a nonviolent path to a just peace."

I was never interested in a Holy Lands "tour." Never had an interest in visiting all the dead stones. That wasn't for me. Yet making time to learn from people who are working to build peace in one of the most un-peaceful places of the world was worth all the inconvenience.

If you believe that our government's historic treatment of native peoples in confining them to reservations is appropriate; if you grieved when the Berlin wall came down 28 years ago; if you find apartheid, that is, systemic, institutionalized segregation and discrimination, to be acceptable, you might find that you agree with Israel's ways. For Israel employs all three means to break the Palestinian people.

And yet... A word kept coming up in our lectures and conversations... again and again. Hope. Hope for a just peace. Hope for Israelis and Palestinians to live as neighbors. Hope that one day Jew and Muslim and Christian could live together in community.

I say again because before Israel began its push to create a Jewish homeland, Jews, Christians and Muslims *did* live together peacefully, neighbors in shared communities.

Our tour planner and guide shared story after story, both about the Palestinian plight and about hope for a just peace. He's Christian, born and raised in Bethlehem. The Church of the Nativity is his home church where he was baptized, married and his children were baptized. How cool is that?! Could you hear past the history of such a name if I told you his name is Usama?

The pain was clear in Usama's voice late in the week when he told us about his 8-year-old asking him about the wall that is being erected around and through Bethlehem. "Is this security?" the child asked.

What makes you cry? How about driving into a refugee camp? Aida Refugee Camp is located in Bethlehem, though there are many others. I seldom cry yet having just heard at the Wi'am Center about the socio-economic-political situation and prospects for peace, having walked part of the wall, I teared up as we drove into that camp.

But people who have been driven from their homes don't need our tears. Children living in Aida and other such places need to have as much childhood as they can. They may have teargas flung into the one park where they're able to run around and play. We may not be able to stop that. Not today. But when we're in front of them, we can smile. We can act like life is good.

Another evening, two men came to speak to us after dinner, one from Israel, one from Palestine. They're part of a group that longs for the day when their membership will dwindle, when children are no longer killed by the violence around them and there are no more grieving parents to invite into their circle.

They took turns sharing their stories of lives changed in an instant. Occupations no longer mattered. They spoke of months spent waiting for life to take on meaning. And of the meaning they found when someone approached them about joining the Parents Circle. Now they share their stories with pilgrims and at schools, to whomever will listen. Not everyone will hear what they say. But they have learned in the most painful of ways that peace is all that matters.

Some of the pilgrims in our group wondered as we listened to one story after another, day after day, how can people be hopeful? How can they cling to hope? One woman – in Nazareth, I think – late in our time explained it this way: She does not have the privilege not to hope. She doesn't have the privilege to turn aside from what faces her.

We don't have the time, and I don't have the stamina today, to unpack that thought. But knowing that we here, in Wisconsin, in the U.S., face challenges that seem overwhelming. It is so easy for us to throw up our hands. Maybe we have that privilege. But maybe we need to ignore it so that we can face what needs to be faced, if not for ourselves, then for those around us.

Emily Dickinson wrote: "Hope" is the thing with feathers - That perches in the soul - And sings the tune without the words - And never stops - at all ...

There is a farm in the West Bank called Tent of Nations where people are doing amazing things in spite of the pressure put on them by the Israeli government. No water? They build cisterns. No building permits? They live in caves. No electricity? You get the idea.

One day an Israeli woman from a nearby settlement was out walking and stumbled on their property. "What's this? We were told there were no Palestinians here!" A member of the family gave her a tour. She was impressed enough that she later brought her husband over to see the place. Now their son volunteers there.

Hope.