

Reflection on the War In The Middle East:
Prayer for Peace - The Rev Ms. Denise D Tracy

In 1982 Bill and I were married. I had been granted a sabbatical and shortly after our wedding, we left on our honeymoon. We were to travel to Jordan, Israel, Egypt and Greece. There were parts of the trip that were magnificent. When we traveled into Israel from Jordan there was high security. Our passport stamp was put onto a separate piece of paper not in our passport, to allow us to travel into Egypt unimpeded. Our cameras were taken and checked to make sure they were not bombs. They were returned to us after they and we were cleared for entry into Israel, as we walked out of the border building.

As we entered Israel, we were told that Israel had begun bombing Lebanon and war had been declared. As we travelled into Jerusalem it was obvious that this was going to be a different tour than we had signed up for. That night around our hotel, hundreds and hundreds of Hassidim chanted, all night. As we tried to sleep, their voices soared into the sky. They were singing for the victory of their country over the Palestinian camps located just over the border in Lebanon. The whole time we were in Israel, the war echoed around us. On our bus, as we traveled to Capernaum and other Biblical sights, and on the road heading back into Jerusalem there were bombed out tanks and destroyed trucks, no longer usable, passing us on the road, heading south.

One night we stayed in a Kibbutz a few miles south of the border with Syria. The next morning we were informed that the night before we arrived, there had been a bomb that landed in the Kibbutz and everyone had slept in shelters. I asked why we were not told this when we arrived. My question was ignored. I never got an answer.

When we went to the B'nai Brith Hospital to see the Chagall windows, these windows are the companions to the windows at Chicago's Art Institute, we were in line to go through the metal detectors, when the man three people in front of us, was suddenly thrown to the ground. He was wearing a bomb vest. He was led off in hand cuffs. Later that day at a restaurant where we were to have lunch, we sat down and I reached around to put my purse on the back of my chair and by accident I touched a chair at the next table, and four machine guns that had been propped against the chair, clattered to the ground.

War was everywhere. The Israeli's seemed to not notice. I have a confession to make. I had dreamed of seeing Bethlehem, Nazareth, the familiar Biblical sights that I had read about my whole life ---and I was terrified the entire time. Israel is the one place in the world that I have travelled to that I would NEVER want to return to. Not EVER.

Bill and I were part of a tour group. As time went on, it became clear that we were the only non-Jewish travelers on the bus. And everyone else was some form of Zionist Jew. Our tour guide was Jewish and he began to tailor his talks to this Zionist

perspective. At one point he began to talk about the Palestinians and Bedouins, how dirty they were, how uncivilized, how the Israeli's were building a new country that was far better than what the original Palestine was.

When there was a rest stop, I asked to speak to the tour guide. I basically explained that I was not Jewish, that being American, I had heard racist speeches about African and Native Americans and as far as I could see his speech about Palestinians and Bedouins was racist. I asked him if this was going to be his speech for the rest of the tour? He seemed caught off guard. He said no he did not think he would talk any more about this. I thanked him.

This has been a terrible week. Anyone who has a heart cannot watch the news and not be saddened by what Hamas has done, is doing and will continue to do. I am further saddened that our country is going to add arms and support the continuation and expansion of the situation.

My first week in theological school I met the wife of a student, an Arabic woman from Lebanon. She and her husband did a presentation on the situation in Israel. They posed the problem. Palestine was an ancient country. On Nov 2, 1917 Britain's foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour wrote a 67 word letter addressed to Lionel Rothschild, head of the British Jewish community. This 67 word letter became known as the Balfour Declaration. In it the British promised to set up in Palestine a National home for the Jewish people. In essence a European power promised the Zionist movement a country where the population was 90% Arab Palestinians. Land and houses that had been in families for hundreds of years were going to be given to new Jewish immigrants. Palestinian citizens were displaced and put into camps. There were strikes and protests.

Between the 1920's and into the 1930's there were resistance movements and as more Jewish settlers arrived, 30,000 British troops were used to enforce this new country, established by Colonial rule. In the second half of 1939, 5,000 Palestinians were killed, 15,000-20,000 were wounded and 5,600 were imprisoned. By 1947 33 % of the population of Palestine was Jewish but they owned only 6 percent of the land. In 1947 the United Nations adopted a two-state plan which the Palestinians rejected because the UN gave 56% of the land to the Jewish state, including the most fertile and beautiful part of the land along the Mediterranean Sea. At this time the Palestinians owned 94% of historic Palestine and comprised 67% of its population. From 1947-49 more than 500 Palestinian villages were destroyed in what Palestinians now call the Nakba.

Today there are 6 million displaced Palestinians in 58 camps in Palestine and Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. Today there are 2 million people in Gaza, 1/2 are children under the age of 25 years old. There have been wars—The 6 Day war in 67, the Intifada from '87-93 to name two. The Clinton era Oslo accord was to help solve

the problems by forming a new Palestine in an independent state in Gaza and the West Bank but it never happened. Jordan gave land in the West bank for the purpose of establishing a Palestinian homeland. The people of Israel kept settling Kibbutzes on the land set aside for the new nation of Palestine.

I am not an expert on this. Over the years a majority of land that was promised to the Palestinians for them to have their own country, was overtaken by illegal Jewish settlements. Now over 700,000 Jews live in the West Bank, in an area that was reserved for a Palestinian country.

Hamas is part of the Muslim Brotherhood and their purpose is to annihilate all Jews as well as the Nation of Israel. They feel they have lost their land and the prospect of a Palestinian homeland. Today Palestinian children grow up poor with no options for meaningful work or lives. Part of the draw to join Hamas is that Hamas promises any young man who joins, money for the support of his family and in the case of his death, financial support for his family forever.

I do not support Hamas and the terrible murderous rampage they have conducted. I also am reminded that for over 100 years the Palestinians have not been listened to and their land, their country, the future of their children has been destroyed by colonial and imperialist governments who took what belonged to them and gave it to someone one else.

Israel has promised to annihilate Hamas. Hamas has promised to annihilate Israel. No one seems to understand that this stand-off will destroy innocent people as well as the hope of peace between two ancient peoples. The situation is dire.

So, I pray for peace. I do not think escalation will solve anything. I grieve the families who have lost loved ones. But as my friends asked us so long ago in 1971, if someone stole property that had been in your family for generations, how soon would you forget?

I reserve judgment. I pray that our government will look at the source of the issues in the middle east and work to help the innocent people who are caught in the crossfire of a situation begun 107 years ago by the same imperialism that founded our own country. There are many parallels between the establishment of this country treatment of Americas Native Americans from the 16- to the 1800's and the treatment of the Palestinians in the last 107 years.

This morning I Pray for Peace. This morning I Pray for understanding. This morning I pray that those in power will step back from destruction, both Hamas and Israel, take the risk to step toward living side by side... in peace.

Amen. Salam. Shalom. And Blessed Be.