

## **Everything Beautiful in Its Time: Reflections on World Peace**

I'm going to say this phrase just once: "In my essay." Because, if I keep quoting my essay, and introducing some quote, some story, some concept with "In my essay," I'm going to bore you to death, and bore me to death. So, here's the one time: "In my essay" I tell about being in Israel in 1978; and as a part of the trip, we met two high-ranking soldiers, probably about 60 years old, one Israeli, one Palestinian, both veterans of wars against each other, both proud of their battles and their nationalities. And both proud that their sons had followed them into military service, into war when necessary, fighting for their homelands and beliefs, fighting to regain a lost past and a brighter future. Two generations fully devoted to war, the reality of killing and being killed; and proud of their sacrifice. But, in May 1978, both told us, "No more." Both joined an Israeli/Palestinian peace movement. Both did not want their grandchildren, a third generation to consume their lives with war. Both had had enough. And that was 45 years ago. Two and a half generations more have gone to war against each other. Forty-five years more of terrorism, horror, war, poverty, oppression, lives bled out on a sidewalk, dreams dashed inside rubble, homes demolished, livelihoods and grandchildren lost. The Holy Land made unholy, the three religions of the Holy Land making a mockery of themselves whether by failed prayers, failed efforts, failed vision.

Part of Christianity is waiting for Jesus' return, his "Second coming," which is to take place in the Holy Land. Would we want Jesus to see his Holy Land today? Many of us are hosting loved ones for Thanksgiving and you know what that means: days of tidying up, cleaning, dusting, washing, so everything is just right when they show up. Would we want Jesus showing up in the Holy Land this week? All three religions anticipate a key religious figure showing up in the Holy Land: Mohammed. Jesus. The Hidden In-am. The Messiah. Would we want to take any of them on a tour of what's been done to the Holy Land? How did we get to this point?

The Bible is full of statements that are so profound sometimes they hit us over the head, sometimes they sneak up on us. “Thou shalt not kill,” that’s a blunt, drop-dead demand. Don’t Kill. “Turn the other cheek.” Noble, but not fun. I’ve done it a few times, and the results were poor. But here’s one for today, from Second Samuel, in the Old Testament: “In the Spring, when kings go forth to war...” (2 Samuel 11:1). Think about that. It’s Spring. Winter is done. Certain delights await. Warmer weather. More sunlight. Crocuses, daffodils. Dogwoods begin to blossom. AND, evidently, according to custom, as regular as clockwork, it’s true to “go forth to war.” It’s time to set aside that annoying 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment, “Don’t. Kill.” It’s time to find some exceptions. “Thou shalt not kill” except...for the that other guy; that other people, tribe, nation; those folks across the river; those folks who look different, talk different, think different.

That’s the history of the world since Cain killed Abel. We disagree. We fight. We kill. We take a break for winter. “But in in the Spring, the king and his minions, go forth to war.” Like it’s natural. The Bible was more right than it knew when it said “hey, it’s Spring, the weather’s fine, the sky is clear, the enemy is just over there a bit. Maybe they don’t know it’s Spring! And time for war.”

Listening and watching pro-Hamas and pro-Palestinian people either excuse or ignore the slaughters of October 7, they sound as if it’s natural, a natural response, a natural reaction to their plight. With the Israeli obliteration of so much of northern Gaza, people defend that revenge as natural. “War is hell,” we say, or “messy.” And now we’re reading about people embracing Osama bin Laden’s post 9/11 letter to America, embracing the slaughter of 3000 Americans, and Bin Laden’s threats against, you guessed it, the Jews and women and America. They’re reading Bin Laden and nodding their heads and smiling and echoing, as though it’s all just perfectly natural.

Our scriptures for today are those wonderful words of the old 1960’s folk/rock song, “Turn, Turn, Turn,” “for everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.” Then it lists all the opposites we all face in life: love/hate, birth/death, weeping/laughter, gathering things together/throwing

things away. And, of course, “a time for war, and a time for peace.” It’s all rather obvious. By the time any of us are old enough to vote, or join the army, or get married, we’ve figured that out. There are good days, and bad days all over the world, in every life.

I chose those verses especially for the verse that is my sermon title. After the list of “this and that” opposites, it says. “I’ve seen the business that God gives to us. For God has made everything beautiful in its time” (vs. 11). It’s almost saying that that’s God’s intention, “everything beautiful.” In the Creation of the Universe story in Genesis Chapter 1, God creates the world in six days, or six stages, and at each stopping point God steps back and looks at what’s been created, and God says, “It is good.” The earth, the seas, the sky, the animals, the trees – “it is good.” “I like it,” God is saying, “everything is beautiful.”

The rest of our religion follows suit. In the Song of Solomon, love is beautiful. In the Psalms, life is beautiful. In the Prophets, here’s how to make your nation beautiful. When Jesus comes along, he shows us a path toward “everything beautiful.” Then St. Paul’s letters create a church meant to be beautiful in mind, body, and spirit. Over the course of this past week, I encountered five people at our church entrance, some coming in, some exiting, some taking photos, some lighting a candle. All five said exactly the same thing: “This is so beautiful.”

In the Book of Revelation, the end of history, the end of the world culminates in “a new heaven, and a new earth,” with “no more tears,” and total “healing,” where, yes, of course with death defeated, sorrow defeated, injustice defeated, evil defeated, yes, “everything...beautiful.” I need to say that we need to hear that – while the bombs are dropping on Gaza, while the rockets are fired into Israel, while the hostages huddle in terror, while 20,000 parents and grandparents sob with grief, while vile hatred fills street protests. We need to remember God’s intention, “for God made everything beautiful in its time.” Friends, it’s time.

“In my essay,” (Oh no, I said it again, after promising not to!), but anyways, in my essay, I try to take you through the horror and bring you to the beauty, to hope, I can’t leave you, or myself in despair; or Israel, or Palestine. For me that would be dereliction of duty, that would be blasphemy. St. Paul once said, “woe to me if I preach not the Gospel.” And the Gospel means, literally, “Good News.” If there’s no Good News in me, or the essay or from this pulpit, I fail. So, I take you through this long, troubled story. How the Jews got to be Jews, and in Israel. How the Palestinians see things, why they call their world, their plight, “Nakba,” the “catastrophe.” I offer the only realistic, logical, possible solution. And I tell stories, small snippets of despair and hope.

I went for my haircut on Thursday, always special because my barber, or hairdresser, she is a most extraordinary woman. And very blunt. I sat down in the chair, and she said, “You look awful. I think the weight of the world is on you. You’re not sleeping, are you? What’s upsetting you?”

I had about 25 minutes to get out of my funk, to not drag her down with me, to leave us both with enough hope to finish the day strong, and to start the next day better. So, I bring you signs of hope. IT is said that every birth is proof that God hasn’t given up on us, yet. Among the over 200 hostages kidnapped by Hamas terrorists was a young woman deep into her pregnancy. Given the natural order of things, she has given birth. Somewhere in Gaza is the tiniest little thing, six or seven pounds, 18 or 20 inches, “wrapped in swaddling clothes,” as they said of Jesus at his birth, stolen from Israel.

Meanwhile, among all the scenes of tragedy grabbing us by the throat from Gaza, there have been the little newborn Palestinians, same size and weight as the hostage baby, similar swaddling clothes, lying side by side on cold floors, or waiting for incubators. Who knows? Maybe the baby hostage and the baby Palestinians are in the same maternity wing, waiting to be fed, held, lullabied, burped, changed, fed some more, changed some more.

A few years ago, I saw a French/Israeli film, "The Other Son." Two babies are born the same day in the same hospital in Israel: one to a Palestinian family, one to an Israeli family. That night, during a terrorist bomb attack, all the babies get rushed to a shelter, and in the darkened chaos they are mixed up, the Israeli baby goes home with the Palestinian family, the Palestinian baby goes home with the Israeli family. As the movie opens, the now Jewish Israeli boy is 18 years old, gets a blood test to join the Israeli Defense Force, the blood test reveals he's not Jewish, not Israeli. And across the border, a Palestinian Muslim boy is about to discover he wasn't supposed to be Palestinian or Muslim. Thus, the story begins as two families struggle to learn: What is life? What is love? What is family? What is important? What is beautiful?

Eighteen years from now, October of 2041, the hostage baby will turn 18, the Palestinian incubator babies will turn 18. My prayer is that one will look around Israel, and the other will look around Palestine and echo the words of God at creation: "It is good." And each one, on their October 2041 18<sup>th</sup> birthday will agree with Ecclesiastes, and say, "everything is beautiful."