

LENT 2016: THE GREAT COMMANDMENT CHALLENGES US BOLDLY. IT ALSO HOLDS OUR HURTING HEARTS.

By Rev. Diane Dulin, United Church of Christ clergy

When Jesus was pressed to identify the greatest commandment, he said we are called to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength (Matthew 22:37-38). This means we must use our education, reason, intuition, creativity, physical stamina, spirituality, vows and commitments, and also the deepest feelings of our heart and soul. We need all of these to love God completely; we need all of these to love God's people, our neighbors (Matthew 22:39), as well.

Advocates for human rights are familiar with the heartbreak that accompanies loving people. You know about tears that well up when you watch a painful video showing daily life and suffering under occupation. You understand righteous anger when lies are repeated about people you love. Defamation of your own work may already have entered your experience, or it may come in the future. Disappointment with God is a deeply held experience that sometimes seems wrong to us, yet perhaps links us profoundly with those who suffer the most under the slow progress of justice.

During Lent this year, allow the lectionary gospel lessons to touch your own heart and your deepest longing. The following reflections arise from these readings. They are offered first and foremost to those who live under the yoke of violence and harassment in Palestine, but they are also dedicated to those who work tirelessly for justice and refuse to give up. May these Lenten meditations bring a dimension of healing and shared community among those who labor across denominational, interfaith, political, racial and ethnic or national divides. May we find unity in the universal longing for freedom that beats in every heart. In our prayers and preaching may we touch the boundless divine yearning for justice, woven into Creation and into humanity by the One who made us.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT: February 14

Luke 4:1-13

Rely on God's Word

Just doing a quick reading of Luke's account of the Temptation of Christ, it is difficult to appreciate the length of time and breadth of human experience that Jesus endured. Jesus was in the desert wilderness for *40 whole days*. He was really tempted. Doubtless his body grew weak, and his heart was somehow stretched between impulses, his will pushed to the limit, and his mind (at least for a time) confused.

Was he disoriented from being hungry and alone? Did sustained fear of wild animals confuse his thinking? Or was his greatest confusion the fact that the devil seemed to know scripture quite well but he was interpreting it in a threatening way?

How often have we been pummeled with "Bible bullets" that find a mark within us precisely because we respect scripture? Our desire and practice are not to diminish the power of scripture, even when we disagree strongly with its apparent, literal meaning. Yet, the Zionist interpretation of scripture truly has become a word of death for those who live in Palestine.

"Furthermore, we know that certain theologians in the West try to attach a biblical and theological legitimacy to the infringement of our rights. Thus, the promises, according to their interpretation, have

become a menace to our very existence. The ‘good news’ in the Gospel itself has become ‘a harbinger of death for us.’” (*Kairos Palestine* 2.3.3)

Follow Jesus in his journey through this wilderness testing. Like Jesus, hold close to your heart powerful words of scripture that give you life. For Jesus, clear commands from God allowed strength of will and intellect along with clarity of heart and soul that proved strong enough to overcome the devil. Jesus’ reliance on God’s word within him became Jesus’ anchor within the heart of God. What is your anchor? What strong word of God allows you clarity and provides you with courage?

In *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation*, Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek (retired Palestinian Anglican priest and former Executive Director of Sabeel) writes about the difference between Old Testament history and New Testament theology. As a profoundly thoughtful theologian, Ateek makes an obvious but sometimes forgotten point: Christians look to New Testament theology as a fulfillment that moves beyond the Old Testament—a New Creation, turned into something universal through Jesus Christ. Ateek writes, “Although some Jews might use the Hebrew scriptures to claim the land of Palestine as an eternal inheritance for them, Christians cannot accept this claim theologically. Anyone who accepts such a claim succumbs to a theology that reflects an incomplete development in the understanding of God and God’s relationship with the world.” (p 64-65)

Allow Lent to deepen your study of scripture. Allow your prayer and study to find completion in Jesus Christ. Walk through the confusion, fear or loneliness of your encounter with life-destroying theologies. Join Jesus with the same focus he discovered: focus on what God asks of us. This tells us who we are and what we must do.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT: February 21

Luke 13:31-35

Don’t Look Away

Somehow it seems this scene from the life of Jesus should include a detail that actually is not present in Luke’s words. It seems Jesus should be weeping as he laments the way in which Jerusalem is driven to violence. “Warned” by his antagonists, the Pharisees, to desist from his ministry out of fear of Herod, Jesus instead charts his plans clearly for the coming days so that Herod and everyone else might know exactly where to find him. Jesus’ worry is not for himself. Rather, he laments the headstrong rush to ruin that seems to be in Jerusalem’s DNA: killing the prophets, stoning those sent by God, destined to be the “forsaken house” (v 35) of bloodshed and injustice. (It is actually later in Luke’s gospel, Luke 19:41, on Palm Sunday, when Jesus is described weeping over Jerusalem.)

Jesus’ description of the violent nature of the city sounds every bit the current account of life in Occupied East Jerusalem. Today in real time, Palestinian homes are invaded, stolen, destroyed. Multiple deployments of military and police squadrons descend upon neighborhoods at all times of day and night. Surveillance is constant via land, sky, uniformed soldiers and undercover spies. Skunk water, tear gas, gunshots and human cries of pain fill the air. Targeted assassinations and summary executions seem unbearably gruesome until one learns of atrocities that are even worse: brutal beatings by settlers; merciless force feedings of political prisoners; children, teenagers and whole families set on fire.

In the face of compulsive violence and relentless suffering, Jesus compares himself to a mother hen longing to gather her babies to safety.

In *We Belong to the Land*, Melkite Catholic Retired Archbishop Elias Chacour describes the scene in which his family and other longtime residents of the village of Biram watched as Israeli bomber planes

destroyed their town in 1953. Israeli courts had twice ruled in favor of the right to return to their homes. However, the Israeli military overruled civil law, declared their town a closed military zone, and leveled the homes and orchards as a final solution to the villagers' determination. The scene Chacour describes could be transported to Occupied East Jerusalem 2016, as its destruction continues.

"The Biram villagers living in Jish gathered on a nearby hill, weeping as they watched explosives being put in place around their houses. Then Israeli Air Force planes roared over them and began bombing the village. In horror my family saw the houses explode and the trees catch fire. The screaming villagers ran to the edge of Biram and saw that bulldozers were already working to complete the destruction. Soldiers met the people and said, 'If you want to return now, you can go. The bulldozers will bury you under the rubble of the houses.'" (p 78-79)

Another forsaken village. Another scene of weeping. Tears of anguish watering the holy land. Any mother hen would have longed to encircle her babies in protection, as do we.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT: February 28

Luke 13:1-9

Repent and Be Fruitful

Jesus took no stock in the current view of his time: the idea that bad luck, suffering or untimely death demonstrates divine judgment while good fortune proves divine favor. The ones who suffer (such as the tragic victims of a collapsed tower) may be no worse than those who escape disaster. Those who seem to receive favor and blessing may be getting on God's very last nerve, and (like the unfruitful fig tree) slated for a rude awakening the very next year.

Those who live in Palestine and those around the world who work for Palestinian justice know well that bad fortune has little to do with God's selective blessings or curses. Day by day, we learn that injustice comes not from acts of God but rather from the action of human evil. Israel, AIPAC, Knesset leaders, complicit American politicians and the biased American media are strong forces in the current tragic reality of Palestine. Palestinian suffering comes from human sources, false narratives and violent enforcement. Palestinian suffering does not derive from divine judgment.

Yet the constant drumbeat of condemnation against Palestine becomes deafening at times. Our spiritual resilience is tested and sometimes found wanting. This is why the encouragement we offer Palestinians is so essential, and why we, too, need encouragement and solidarity as we continue our work. Any hint of good news in our efforts keeps us going forward. A denominational decision to engage in boycott or divestment brings hope in Palestine. It is a sign of solidarity and a reminder that Palestine is not invisible to the world. When false theologies of Zionism, militarism and financial greed start to wear us down, we go to our communities of worship and resistance in order to remember what we know: through our own repentance comes new life with God. In our worship and devotion comes renewal of heart, mind, soul and moral strength. We follow the example of Palestinian steadfastness by honoring the witness of *Kairos Palestine* and allowing this witness to give us courage:

"We say that our option as Christians in the face of the Israeli occupation is to resist. Resistance is a right and a duty for the Christian. But it is resistance with love as its logic. It is thus a creative resistance for it must find human ways that engage the humanity of the enemy." (*Kairos Palestine* 4.2.3)

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT: March 6 **Palestinian Family**

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Enter the Story of a

The Prodigal Son is certainly near the top of the Hit Parade of New Testament parables. Who hasn't heard a dozen sermons preached on all its angles? We have likely placed ourselves more than once in each of the imagined roles: heartbroken parent; rebellious but then repentant younger child; hard working, upstanding but coldly bitter older sibling.

Doubtless each character in the story shines with its own unique revelation in Palestine, where children grow up under military occupation, become angry or desperate, grow violent or depressed, exhibit rebellious bravado or traumatized anxiety; where the burdens of poverty, humiliation, hopelessness, and unremitting fear may be far beyond our imagining. Does the younger son leave home after becoming radicalized and the older son stay home (and keep a low profile) in order to protect the rest of the family? How does the father bear the sorrow of what each son has lost?

Some might say the real action in the Parable of the Prodigal Son comes in verse 18, when the younger son decides to return home and repent before his father. Or maybe the climax is in verse 29, when the older son discloses he has always felt like a slave on his own father's farm. Perhaps verse 32 is the lesson to underline and remember: "Son, we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

Palestinian community life knows well how to gather in mourning, celebration, protest and worship. Public parades through town for a funeral; open tents of honored welcome for political prisoners who return home from incarceration; joyful parties when a marriage or birth is celebrated; in-home visits to pay respect after a death; public protests that face danger for the sake of freedom—these are all essential celebrations, although not all of them are happy. Loving God with heart, mind, soul and strength takes places in community and in solidarity no matter how difficult.

Writing in *Faith in the Face of Empire*, Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb (Pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church, Bethlehem) notes, "On Pentecost it was the Spirit who enabled the disciples to overcome the notion of victimhood and to reach out as a people with a mission, as people who had something to say and something to contribute. Yes, they remained victims of the Empire, but that was not their sole identity." (p 114) The same Spirit of mission and message can be witnessed in current celebrations that honor death, life, covenant, freedom and justice.

The moral drama of the Prodigal Son shows a family living through real and true trauma. There is nothing easy about it. Yet life is pulled out of death. The Spirit continues to work. What is lost for a time is not lost forever.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT: March 13, 2016

John 12:1-8

Spend It All

The New Testament contains several stories of women honoring Jesus in ways that earn them criticism. Nothing new here: women freely offering extravagant care are powerful, and consequently they endure scorn. Such women (and also men!) prove threatening to people like Judas, who senses a freedom in Mary that he cannot understand. Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet with costly ointment is simply incomprehensible to Judas (and perhaps the others disciples as well). Mary's extravagance reveals her recognition that something ultimate is taking place in her home. Judas is confused, upset and probably angry; hence his self-righteous objection.

Palestinians are extravagant in their stubborn hope against all odds. We activists who labor for Palestinian justice are extravagant in our relentless determination, despite setbacks, derision or

criticism, to continue our work. We spend hope and determination as if the supply is endless ... which it is.

This extravagant expenditure of determination and effort troubles people who presume to know what will defeat us. They see that we don't give up. Ridicule of our efforts only makes us work harder and better, and our victories continue to increase. Who can forget Gandhi's famous promise: "First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they attack you, and then you win." Wherever we may place ourselves on Gandhi's continuum, we know we are engaged in a long-term effort that will prevail in the end. That other great moral leader, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., promised this when he wrote, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

Spending extravagant hope, effort and passion for justice without regard for their cost, we display deep awareness that our struggles for justice are holy work. We bend to the labor of that moral arc that works, hopes and believes extravagantly. It is not easy and we never thought it would be. Neither did Mary. Least of all did Jesus. The cost of discipleship is great. Yet what better way to spend ourselves than in answering God's call?

Ms. Jean Zaru is Presiding Clerk of the Friends Meeting House in Ramallah. Writing about her years teaching nonviolent peacemaking in Palestine, she notes, "The biggest obstacle to personal growth and to working for peace is feeling powerless or hopeless. The most important thing I could impart [as a teacher] in my classes ... was a sense of empowerment, a sense of competence to make decisions about how we want to live, and a sense of optimism about the future. While we do not know what the future holds, we do know that we hold the future in our hands." (*Occupied with Nonviolence*, p 9)

As Mary held in her hands the opportunity she embraced to care extravagantly, so, too, do we: in this Lenten season we renew our commitment to Resurrection hope and Pentecost power. Their supply is infinite.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF LENT: March 20 (Palm Sunday) Luke 19:28-40 Listen to the Living Stones—Then and Now

If we were to create a movie telling the story of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, we might spend time carefully selecting powerful music or designing significant visual details to foreshadow the mounting drama and approaching tragedy of the Crucifixion. We might attempt to suggest the foreboding that Christians feel even when joyfully watching children process down the aisles of the church, palms waving and jackets placed on the floor to commemorate the arrival of Jesus. Perhaps some churches include in their Palm Sunday pageants an off-stage gaggle of Pharisees pressuring Jesus to quiet the crowds. Certainly Jesus' famous line "If these [crowds] were silent, the stones would shout out" represents an unforgettable echo (as Jeremiah once proclaimed) that "God's Word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot." (Jeremiah 20:9) Neither could the people welcoming Jesus remain silent as he entered Jerusalem on a humble pony.

In 2009 the fire of God's Word that could not be held within the Christian community of Palestine flared into *Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth*. Each year since then, the powerful witness of this document has grown in its impact. Churches study it. Pilgrims to the Holy Land accept its invitation to "come and see." Through its words the world has heard the astute, theological and prophetic voice of the Christian community of Palestine.

With Jesus' strong words in our minds, we know that Palm Sunday is no time for reticence. Instead, it is a *kairos* time of powerful witness:

"Our vocation as a living church is to bear witness to the goodness of God and the dignity of human beings. We are called to pray and to make our voice heard when we announce a new society where human beings believe in their own dignity and the dignity of their adversaries." (*Kairos Palestine* 3.4.2)

Carry into this Holy Week the strong witness of the Christian community of Palestine. We are sisters and brothers to one another. Together, we are the Body of Christ, strengthened in our discipleship and guided in the work of justice. Speak boldly the Good News of God's love, for this is why Jesus came into the world, walked the way of life, entered Jerusalem with determination and faced the cross. The Living Stones still speak. May you find blessings in hearing what they say.