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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Jeremiah 8:8-12; Matthew 10:34-38; John 14:25-27
“Peace, Peace”

The focus of this year’s World Communion/Peace Offering sermon is Israel and Palestine. My response to the region is first as a pastor/theologian and second as a concerned citizen. I believe in the separation of Church and State and therefore my concerns are theological not ideological

US citizens are drawn into the region since millions of our tax dollars go to Israel every year. Christians, Jews and Muslims have major shrines in Israel and Palestine. People refer to the region as: One land, two peoples, three faiths. Israel is the primary region of the Bible and the birthplace of our faith. Therefore, Israel and Palestine are of utmost concern.

Suellen and I recently heard in person a leading British correspondent to the Middle East Robert Fisk speaking on the region. He’s pessimistic about the outcome of Israel/Palestine peace talks taking place in Washington. He said there will be one-State in the region – an Israeli State. He feels the Palestinians have lost too much land to give them a viable country.

Some rejoice in this prognosis. It’s depressing for others. Many disagree. There are Palestinians and Jews inside and outside the region who want separate Israeli and Palestinian States or one State where Palestinians and Israelis share one country.

Fisk spoke about the terminology that journalists live with in the Middle East and the rest of the world. The worst he said is “terrorism.” It’s an ill-defined word yet it defines everything. Mostly, he said, it’s about the terror of power and the power of terror.

He didn’t like the word “embedded” as in embedded journalist. Fisk has reported in the Middle East for 30 years and has not become an embedded journalist. He feels it compromises his work.

He had a particular dislike for the phrase “peace process.” It’s a buzz phrase used by people inside and outside the region especially when referring to recent discussions between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Fisk said that if there was a peace *process* (with emphasis on the word process) one would see the increase of peace. He sees none. If this were a *peace* process (with emphasis on the word peace) one would see peace which he does not see.

Even the broker of the talks, President Barack Obama, seemed to agree with Fisk when he said, like Presidents before him he vowed to do everything within his power in the next year to achieve a comprehensive agreement that has eluded negotiators since Israel was established.

In the middle of my note-taking as I listened to Fisk I wrote down Jeremiah's words: They say: 'Peace, peace', when there is no peace. Jeremiah is addressing Israel of old.

He addresses those who use "peace" as a cover to what is really going on. George Orwell in his book *1984* spoke of war as peace. The ruling government said they were at peace when in fact they were at war – always at war. Orwell was concerned about fascism and Communism. People see his concerns expressed in a variety of ways and contexts today.

Jeremiah writes: "...everyone is greedy for unjust gain; 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 at all ashamed, they did not know how to blush."

When we've lost our blush, we've lost it. So Jeremiah is concerned with how we use or misuse the word "peace."

There's one thing about "keeping the peace" such as having nothing to do with an abusive family member. That might be one's only protection. It is another to say there is peace in the household when there really is no peace. I agree with Fisk, Israel and Palestine have been in peace talks for as long as I remember but not much has been achieved.

They say "peace, peace" and meanwhile an Israeli bulldozer rolls over and kills an American peace worker in the Gaza Strip, Hamas rockets kill residents in Israel, the Israeli Defense Force bombs Gaza killing hundreds of men, women and children, Palestinian youth strap bombs to their waists and explode in Israeli neighborhoods, Israel builds a dividing wall in the West Bank and restricts the free movement of Palestinians, a humanitarian flotilla carrying supplies to Palestine is brutally intercepted, Israeli settlements go up after the parties to the peace talks agree to a freeze on new settlements.

Peace, peace when there is no peace. Jeremiah seems to be saying that we ought not to say there is peace when there really is no peace. He's calling for an opening of the wound for a truer facing of the situation and an honest dialogue about the ugliness found there. Jesus offers some guidance.

We know that Jesus is a peacemaker. He taught: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." He says in today's reading: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." His first words to his disciples in the resurrection are: "Peace be with you." He's the one who calms the storm with the words: "Peace, be still."

And yet, he also says: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

"Sword" for Jesus is a metaphor. It's a figure of speech. Some use it literally but that's violence. It is easy to be violent. It is hard to be a peacemaker especially when the peace we seek causes conflict. Jesus says this happens when one advocates his ways of peace, justice, healing, freedom and fairness.

Imagine challenging for the sake of peace an abusive member in one's household. You get flack. It's in this way that Jesus says: "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household." Peace comes but many times not until one walks through fire.

This same principle applies in all struggles for peace and justice in the world. One just has to look at the struggle against apartheid. I was in the middle of that with other concerned people, many of whom were Christians, and we (some worse than others) were harassed, interrogated, beaten and imprisoned. Look at the Civil Rights marches in this country. The marchers were fire-hosed and beaten.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword...” The sword is conflict that ensues when one fights evil and injustice.

Sword is also symbol of power. Jesus wants us to be powerful in our fight against injustice. A sword cuts... I developed an infection on my foot from hiking in South African mountains. Days later I was in London with an infected foot. It was cut open and drained in a nearby emergency room (at no cost I might add). Jesus' sword cuts in order to heal. Basically, Jesus is saying that his sword is more powerful than any earthly sword and it is a sword of honesty and healing.

Jesus' sword cuts through the phrase “peace, peace...when there is no peace” and exposes what's below the surface.

Jesus concludes his remarks with the words: “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” Carrying a cross is not a walk in the park. It's willingness to go through conflict, even to suffer for peace.

Through all the turmoil, pain and conflict Fisk, Jesus and Jeremiah really do want peace. That's why they are totally honest. They see things we do not see, they say things we do not say, and they live courageously and boldly for the sake of peace.

Help us O God to see, say and live like them. Amen.