

**A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS; IS. 9:1-4, 1 COR. 1:10-18, MATT. 12:12-23; 1.22.17;  
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“I belong to Paul.” “I belong to Apollos.” “I belong to Cephas.” Paul writes to the Corinthians because he has heard they have imploded into angry factions, each claiming to hold the truth. This morning’s text resonates with our Jewish Presbyterian geopolitical study tour to Israel from which we returned Thursday and allows me to share some initial reflections re the trip, comment on Friday’s inauguration amidst the factions in our own nation and consider what it is Jesus calls his disciples to do.

Our days in Israel were packed visiting holy sites that gave us insight into the cradle of ancient history from which our own faith traditions emerged, but we also met with many people voicing diverse narratives of modern Israel.

Israeli Jews, Palestinian Muslims and Christians, secular Israeli kibbutz members, a religious settler, a Benedictine monk, a Greek Orthodox priest, an IDF intelligence officer, scores of people from religious and non-religious NGOs many who made aliyah or “going up” to Eretz Yisrael – leaving their nation of origin to become citizens of Israel.

Add to that a complicated history: opposed claims of rights to the land by Jews and Arabs going as far back as Abraham 4,000 years ago into the 20<sup>th</sup> century Holocaust, a world war and UN intervention that redrew the map of the Middle East, ended British rule, and saw the rise of US influence. Did I mention Israel’s War of Independence in 1948, ignited when most Palestinian Arabs found the new UN boundaries unacceptable and started attacking Jews?

Since then there have been at least ten wars – depending on how you count them – most in Israel’s self defense after being attacked; some started by Israel to circumvent impending attacks. It is a war-torn past and present and appears likely to remain so well into the future.

What our trip did that neither of my previous two visits to Israel offered was to let us hear the ‘deep story’ of the many diverse Israelis we encountered – Jewish, Arab, Muslim, Christian, and secular.

“A deep story,” says Arlie Russell Hochschild in her book *Strangers In Their Own Land*, “is a *feels-as-if* story. It is the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel. Such a story permits those on both sides of the political spectrum to stand back and explore the subjective prism through which the party on the other side sees the world. And I don’t believe we understand anyone’s politics, right or left,” Hochschild writes, “until we understand our deep stories. We all have a deep story.”

This is why we made a decision early in planning the trip not to meet with politicians. We knew that the many, various political perspectives have a life of their own – driven, in part, by deep story but also by strategy and tactics that would have distracted us from our goal: to hear and seek to understand the every day reality of people with widely different experiences.

In ten days we did that, we heard some, by no means all, of the deep stories that make Israel such a fascinating, complicated, beautiful land.

No wonder so much of the bible is poetry. Israel is a land that inspires poetry. It's paradoxes and ambiguities, loves and hates, its contradictions and truths, its tangled history, its mysticism, the sheer range of its topography from snow-capped Mt. Hermon in the north to the sun-baked Dead Sea in the south, the lowest point on earth.

We started each day with a poem by the Israeli poet laureate the late Yehuda Amichai – who continues this poetic tradition of juxtaposing the old and the new, the biblical and the secular, war and longing for peace.

In the process, we learned that our own Rabbi Alex Lazarus-Klein is a poet and a big fan of Amichai and so Alex wrote several poems posted, along with the Amichai selections, on my ten day blog of our journey, found on the Westminster website.

Another poet who came to mind in Israel was Robert Frost who hailed from similarly rock-strewn, tightly-bounded, multi-cultured New England. I thought of his "Mending Wall" more than once, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that sends the frozen ground swell under it; and spills the upper boulders in the sun."

That theme was reiterated in the deep stories of those with whom we talked. Walls are not the solution, they said, to human strife and disagreement. Yet, Israel is crisscrossed with walls – the walls of the Old City, the fence and wall of "security" or "separation" depending on which side of it you live; the barbed wire boundary with Lebanon; the wall of the Golan Heights that separates Israel with Syria and Jordan.

Almost everyone we met with realized the 'walls' or boundaries imposed by the international community will not work. Rather, most said that trust must be developed from the ground up between Jews and Palestinians, only then can real solutions be imagined. Many in Israel believe the transition of power in Washington is an opportunity for new proposals to be offered between Israel and the Palestinians.

Yet, in the 'every day world' we heard repeatedly the conviction that the walls that separate Jews and Palestinians are unsustainable for those confined within them and for those who live outside them, i.e. Israelis, threaten the values of Israel's democracy which is the only democracy in the Middle East and therefore of immense importance to the United States and the West.

Our tour guide who lives in a community adjacent to a dangerous Arab Muslim community, said the only way she can live so close is by believing that there are Arab Muslim mothers in the Issaweeya neighborhood whose homes she can see from her kitchen window, who want the same thing for their children as she does for hers. The Christian family in the walled-in city of Bethlehem who hosted four of us for dinner said the same thing.

The Palestinian Muslim director of the Holy Land Trust an agency that brings together opposing voices and uses the techniques of non-violence; the executive director of Gavit Haviva near the West Bank – a work/study school for Jewish and Muslim children; the Muslim founder of an Arab/Jewish community center and after school youth empowerment program, all said walls are not the ultimate solution.

Of course, there are those who put their faith in walls – the IDF combat veteran Ayreh Yaakov at the Misgav Am kibbutz high in the mountains on the border with Lebanon – now ruled by Hezbollah – the terrorist group that seeks the eradication of Israel. Yaakov spoke to our group with a large handgun tucked under his belt; he told how their community has been attacked on several occasions by Hezbollah members attempting one time to kidnap children; we met with a Greek Orthodox priest who encourages his young men and women church members to enlist in the Israeli army to defend the land against an Arab Muslim Middle East that practices what he calls genocide against Christians; indeed the Christian population in the Middle East has plummeted to near extinction. A topic we ought to pursue.

The walls are so necessary to daily survival, yet so antithetical to what most people on both sides finally want. I said in my blog that Israel is unlike any other nation and yet it is like every family, community, and nation that struggles to find the way to live together in peace.

Turn with me to Paul's first letter to the divided church in Corinth, the same letter twelve chapters later, near the end, in which he writes one of the most sublime passages in all of scripture – the chapter on love. Love as an act of the will for the well being of the other, love that is not arrogant or boastful or rude, love that is long suffering is the key to any community from two people in the covenant of marriage to a church with diverse membership to a nation divided by race, privilege and politics. Yet, given the deep animosity, even hatred humans are capable of, love sounds like a tall order for circumstances in which opposing parties are ready to kill one another. But trust is the first step toward love. Trust can provide the platform for hearing and honoring one another's deep stories, hearing what it is like to be in the shoes of the other, the stranger, even the enemy.

This is the question the inauguration of the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States on Friday raises for Americans – how can we live together in peace? The recent campaign revealed a social chasm many chose not to acknowledge or take seriously.

There is much reason for concern among those who opposed Trump.

Programs that benefitted many of the people who voted for the president are now in the process of being dismantled. Climate change was removed from the White House website as a priority for American policy and replaced with Energy – meaning I take it the opening, or “carnage” to use a word, of once protected lands and seas for the drilling of oil and other minerals.

And yet, the deep story of many of those who voted for the president might go something like this: they have waited for decades in the long uphill line to the American Dream. They are weary. They have seen others cut in front of them sanctioned by liberal policies of accessibility, Some have given up their search for work. The line seems to be going backward rather than to the Dream they have believed in and sacrificed for. The deep story of marginalized whites is different from the deep story of educated, professionals most of whom have benefitted even in a struggling, then partially recovered, economy.

Our nation is torn with differences as deep, in their own way, as those between Jews and Arabs; or between the infighting of the various factions in the church at Corinth.

Into this volatile mix today's lectionary juxtaposes the readings from Isaiah who speaks of the light of God coming to the people of Israel after the gloom of exile; and Matthew telling how Jesus called his disciples, promising to teach them how to 'fish for people.'

What was so remarkable is that all the while in Israel, even when we heard an 83 year old Holocaust survivor, the sensation of impending light, a day when peace will emerge in that land fulfilling the hope for human community, shined through the testimonies we heard.

It was in the words and deep stories of the people – the combination of vigilance and restraint *that we must adopt for this uncertain moment in America*. Their courage to come to a fractious land, the resolve not to leave a dangerous neighborhood, the willingness to live with bomb shelters in their basements; their belief that teaching the children to listen to and respect one another will one glorious day pay off.

And so, many of us came back from our ten days inspired as much or more by the day to day courage and hope expressed in the keeping the routines of life – than by the alleged locations of the Sermon on the Mount or the place where Jesus was crucified and buried.

It is the difference between a museum faith and a living faith. For me, touring the holy sites was inspiring and educational but seeing modern Israelis live out their lives in the midst of overwhelming challenges and threats to their very existence was transforming.

We spent an afternoon in Capernaum, the place where Matthew says, in today's reading, Jesus made his home by the sea to fulfill what the prophet Isaiah said, "In the land of Zebulun and Naphtali the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has shined."

It was here that Jesus saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew casting their nets into the sea and said, "Follow me and I will teach you to fish for people." And as he went on from there he saw two other brothers, James and John, and invited them to follow him too. Then he went about Galilee teaching in synagogues (one of which we visited) proclaiming good news and healing every disease and sickness.

It begs the question what we, who claim to be followers of Jesus, understand it is we are called to do.

Jesus not only announces the advent of God's promised light and peace, he also invites people to step forward with courage and trust to build that kingdom of God.

It is what we saw in many Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. The call to discipleship is not an intellectual question of, Do you agree? It is the larger challenge of 'Will you join a movement that seeks the justice and peace of God?'

A church that stops inviting people to live into and work for that vision is not Jesus' church. It is good to be reminded with a new president and divided nation and world, what it is we are called to do. +