

"Four Inches From The Cliff"
Calvary Lenten Preaching Series 2009
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It was Maya Angelou who said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said and people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." I will never forget how Andy MacBeth and the entire Calvary Episcopal Church family have made me feel these past two days- and always make me feel each year. You have been so welcoming and embracing not only of me, but of the many members of my faith community here today and yesterday. One member of Temple Israel commented, "Rabbi, I see so many people from the Jewish community here, never mind Lent, you may want to ask about holding high holyday services this fall at Calvary. Another said, "This week, I've given up Temple for Lent." Thank you again. My aim in yesterday's sermon was to comfort and inspire. Today it is more to edify, enlighten and challenge. But first a story.

The story is told of a man who had been staggering through the hot desert for nearly two weeks. Just as he is about to collapse from heat exhaustion, he finds an oasis and the home of a missionary. Though nearly delirious from his ordeal, the man crawls up to the house and collapses on the doorstep. The missionary soon finds him, and, for the next several days, slowly nurses him back to health. When at last he recovers, the man thanks the missionary and proceeds to continue on his journey. On his way out the door, however, he suddenly notices a horse! He goes back to the house and asks the missionary, "My good man, could I possibly borrow your horse and leave it for you when I arrive in the next town?" "Why, of course," the missionary replies, "but there is something very special you need to know about this horse." "And what might that be?" asks the weary traveler. "You need to know," he explains, "that when you want the horse to go, you have to say, "Thank God," and when you want it to stop you have to say, "Amen." Well, that didn't seem to pose a serious problem, and so, feeling elated and not paying much attention, the man says, "That's fine, I understand."

So he gets on the horse and says very softly, "Thank God," and the horse begins to move very slowly. Then he says a little louder, "Thank God, Thank God," and the horse starts to trot. Now that he's feeling much more secure, the man actually shouts, "Thank God, Thank God, Thank God," and the horse takes off like a bullet. Pretty soon, the man sees a steep cliff coming up in front of him and can't slow the horse down. He's doing everything he can to make the horse stop. "Whoa," he shouts, "Stop, hold on," but the horse keeps going faster and faster. Finally, he remembers the right words and shouts "Amen," and miraculously, the horse stops on a dime, not four inches from the edge of the cliff. Then the man leans back in his saddle, wipes his brow and says, "Thank God!"

At the risk of abusing a transition from the ridiculous to the sublime, I could not help but think of this story in reflecting on the history of Jewish-Christian relations and especially in relation to ongoing events in the Middle East. The difference, of course, is that Jewish-Christian relations and the Middle East crisis are no joke. Time and again, we were - or are - four inches from the edge of the cliff.

Let me begin with the miracle of these two days and the firm ground on which we stand in Memphis. The closeness between Jewish and Christian leaders in this city is historic and uncommon when considering that the church – both Protestant and Catholic - played a major role in preparing the soil for the Holocaust in Christian Europe only 64 years ago. We tend to forget that the Holocaust was largely implemented by people who were baptized and taught in the church. One prominent Christian leader went so far as to say, "Because of the 2000-year church history of persecution, barbarism, forced conversion, killing and maiming of Jews which Christianity must answer for, repent for, make amends for and accept responsibility for...the only legitimate approach we Christians can make to the Jewish people today is...on our knees."

I, as a Jew, neither seek nor desire Christian apology. What I do hope for is deeper sensitivity and greater understanding among Christians and Jews. Because of the bigotry and persecution my faith – the faith of Jesus – has experienced, I just find it impossible to stand idly by when I witness outright discrimination and hatred toward *anyone*. Hence my bewilderment over the silence of Christians to the newest condemnation of Jews, the alarming rise of anti-Semitic incidents worldwide. Christians, especially those on the left, are becoming unwitting accomplices to Israel-bashing and Jew-bashing.

Demonstrations against Israel now feature signs and cries not only of “Down with Israel,” but “Kill Jews.” One anti-war protest in Amsterdam, admittedly on the street, but with a church in the background, recently witnessed chants of “Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the gas.” Where’s the outrage over that? Especially from centrists and people left of center who pride themselves on their vigilance against racism and discrimination? Whatever one’s perspective on the Gaza conflict, why does the world focus almost exclusively on the Jews’ response to Hamas - a terrorist group which was formed to liquidate Israel? Why does the United Nations meet in special session 90% of the time just to condemn the Jewish State? Have we lost our minds in forgetting and ignoring the simultaneous humanitarian crises that were going on before, during, and after the war in Gaza? You know, small things like genocide in Darfur, or the mass rape being used as a weapon of war in Congo in an unending civil conflict that has already claimed the lives of millions. Or what about the sexual violence and disastrous cholera epidemic afflicting tens of thousands in Zimbabwe? So we’ve got mass rape and genocide, plus anarchy reigning in Somalia, political prisoners being executed in Iran, no rights at all for women in Saudi Arabia, and the world is silent. But when it comes to Israel’s attempt to stop Hamas, the world screams.

I’m not unconditionally defending Israel’s action, I’m just asking why Israel is portrayed as the devil when she unilaterally halts fighting in the middle of the day to allow humanitarian supplies to flow to Palestinians and, perhaps most atypical of any army, warns civilians by dropping leaflets and by phone when attacks in their vicinity are coming!

Irwin Cotler, the International Human Rights lawyer, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada said it well. “One may critique Israel’s response to Hamas missile and rocket attacks, but it is outrageous to argue that the most militarily sophisticated state in the Middle East harbors genocidal ambitions against the Palestinians as Hamas has publicly stated regarding Israel and the Jews. It is almost embarrassing to have to point out that this accusation is utterly irreconcilable with the fact that Israel vacated Gaza four years ago by forcibly moving out thousands of Jewish settlers while leaving behind a greenhouse economy for the Palestinian population which was later looted and torched by Hamas gangs. And if you are listening to this with Christian ears, you might also wonder why Christians - who were once numerically significant when Israel was occupying the West Bank and Gaza - are now miniscule at best with Hamas and the Palestinian Authority in charge. I want Israel out of the West Bank and Gaza for good, but the fact is, if you want to experience interfaith relations like we have here, you have to go somewhere within Israel like Haifa or Tel Aviv. Once you leave Israel’s borders, there is no pluralism.

One of my close Israeli friends voted for a left wing party last month. He is in a special unit in the Israeli Defense Forces. He told me they know where the remaining Hamas commanders are and even where that kidnapped Israeli soldier is. “Where?” I asked. “Under the main hospital in Gaza City, in an elaborate bunker.” He said, “Micah, we can end this and root out Hamas tomorrow. After all, who do you think has been providing the suffering Palestinian people with electricity and drinking water? We can solve the problem in one action, but Hamas knows that we won’t bomb a hospital to get to them. Jews don’t do that. To the contrary,” he continued, “Our Jewish Hadassah Hospital takes in 10,000 Palestinians a year and treats all people equally regardless of race, color, or creed. Hamas knows that our plan isn’t to intentionally kill or harm civilians, so Hamas survives by hiding behind women and hiding under sick people in hospital beds in Gaza City.” Remember, friends, these words do not come from an Israeli hawk but from a supporter of the leftist party in Israel. “But what about the cases of civilians killed in the war?” I asked. He replied, “If any member of the army here taunts or - God forbid - kills a civilian when it could have been prevented, we court-martial, convict, and condemn that soldier to prison – and much faster than you are doing with Guantanamo.”

You see, I was in Israel three months ago when the Gaza War began. As part of my goal to bring 500 people from Temple to Israel within 10 years (we’re up to 219 in 4 years), and in my capacity as Chair of the Israel Committee for the Central Conference of American Rabbis, my feet have stood in Jerusalem in December, January, February, and earlier this month.

For the record, and contrary to some attacks on my writing, I do not believe nor have I ever argued that the State of Israel is perfect or that Jews have a monopoly on morality. The fact is, Christian ministers and Muslim Imams have more religious rights within Israel than I do. I can’t even perform weddings or funerals in Israel because I’m a Reform rabbi. Neither can Conservative rabbis because of the right-wing Orthodox monopoly on religious affairs, and that’s wrong, not just in the eyes of American Jewry, but in the eyes of most Israelis who want that changed!

So I don't believe Israel is perfect by any means. I also believe that anyone who denies the plight of the Palestinians is either blind or heartless. The misery of the Palestinians is not only undeniable, it's horrific.

The question is who is to blame. The Gaza Strip was not created by Israel. It was created by Arab nations who literally dumped Palestinians into refugee camps there. Jordan's population is over 60% Palestinian but they didn't stand a chance when a Palestinian uprising threatened the ruling kingdom in 1970. 20,000 Palestinians were massacred by the Jordan regime in what is known as Black September. The other newly created countries surrounding Israel – 20th century creations like Syria and Lebanon - also destroyed entire Palestinian populations like Hama to keep their 12% ruling class population in power.

I also don't blame my Christian brothers and sisters for not understanding Israel. If I took the trips to the Holy Land some of my good friends have taken, I'd harbor the same terrible feelings toward Israel that some groups have the way they tour America. If you go to Watts, Harlem, a suffering Indian reservation in New Mexico, or a crack house not far from here in Memphis, have you really seen the best of America?

In yesterday's sermon, I mentioned Obama's moving signature on his photo for the civil rights hero, Congressman John Lewis. Obama signed it, "Because of you, John. [This is all] because of you." What do we have because of Israel? Because of Israel, warts and all, we have the only democracy in the Middle East and the closest governmental system to America in the world, including a Supreme Court.

Because of Israel, there is a haven for Jews who were thrown out of Arab lands, survived the Holocaust in Christian lands, and were left to die in the deserts of African lands. Only in Israel can the remnant of Jews representing 103 different countries, races, and ethnicities live freely. Because of Israel, we have the cell phone, voice mail, and cures for cancer.

And what do we have because of Hamas, which was created, if you read its charter, for the express purpose of destroying the Jewish State? Because of Hamas we have terror, videos of beheading civilians, and the absence of the most basic human and civil rights, mixed with some great social services.

The absence of Palestinian moderate leaders and the calamity that Israel now faces at the edge of the cliff poses the most formidable threat to Israel's existence since her inception in 1948. And *because* Israel has no strong Palestinian peace partner to dance with, fear of the end within Israel is driving the internal politics of that nation the size of New Jersey to the right, not the center.

No matter what one's politics, Israelis see a glaring moral dissonance between Hamas' stated actions - willfully and proudly trying to kill as many Jews as possible – and the actions of Israel in trying to stop Hamas from killing Jewish civilians, even if inadvertently, unintentionally, and tragically killing Palestinian civilians used as human shields by Hamas. But no matter what one's faith, to equate the two is moral lunacy.

"Former President Jimmy Carter doesn't even see moral equivalence," writes Professor Alan Dershowitz. "He blames everything on Israel. In his **Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid**, Carter writes that it would have been 'suicidal' for Yasser Arafat to accept the generous offer made by President Clinton and Ehud Barak at Camp David, an offer that included independent statehood for the Palestinian people in 97% of the West Bank and all of Gaza, an end to all Jewish settlements, a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem and a \$35 billion refugee package. Think for a moment," Dershowitz asks, "of what Carter is saying when he warns that any Palestinian leader who might accept such an offer would be assassinated. What is he saying about the Palestinian people? That they will never accept peace without violence? That they will always kill their leaders who make peace with Israel, as the Muslim Brotherhood did in murdering Anwar Sadat of Egypt and as Muslim extremists did in killing the first King Abdullah of Jordan? Whether Carter advised Yasser Arafat before the fact to reject the Camp David offer or whether he is merely making the suggestion to future Palestinian leaders, this former President, great in other areas, has proven himself to be morally bankrupt and a barrier to peace on this issue."

But today I'm less interested in defending Israel than raising the question of Christian silence over the rising anti-Semitism that is not only linked to, but directly a result of, Israel-bashing. And not just in Europe, but in America too. Take the repeated emphasis on Bernie Madoff's Jewish identity in the news. Why the curious focus on Bernie

Madoff's ethnicity? No one has yet to describe Rod Blagojevich as the prominent "Serbo-Croatian Governor of Illinois." Did anybody ever describe Ken Lay as the prominent Protestant Christian leader of Enron?! So why the ongoing mention of Madoff and his Jewish identity? Is anti-Semitism and the long obsession with Jews bleeding through again?

This rise in global anti-Semitism isn't a Jewish problem any more than lynching or discrimination against blacks is an African-American problem. Victims of hate aren't to blame for hate. Perpetrators and bystanders are. The fact is, for nearly 2000 years, anti-Semitism has been the fatal flaw in Christianity's long and noble attempt to serve God. Jesus the Jew who was consigned to death by sadistic Rome and Pontius Pilate was suddenly morphed into Jesus the Christian murdered by "the Jews." Just last month, Pope Benedict *finally* re-thought why he would lift the church's excommunication of a Holocaust-denying Bishop, a Bishop who claimed in 2009 that no Jews were killed in Nazi gas chambers.

Churches like Calvary are the corrective to religious hatred. But standing idly by as the Jewish State is singled out among all the nations of the world makes well-intentioned Christians and other good people of faith unwitting abettors and enablers of Jew-haters.

So what's the closing word of comfort if there is no immediate light at the end of this long tunnel? Let's go back to the land of Israel. You will recall that in the book of Numbers, Chapter 13, Moses sends twelve spies to reconnoiter and scout out the land. Ten of the twelve reported that the prospects were poor. Those ten failed to see the good possibilities despite the fact that they brought back a cluster of grapes so large, it had to be carried on a pole over the shoulders of two men, hence the Manischewitz wine label soon to appear in Jewish homes when Passover begins two weeks from tomorrow.

Psalm 128 tells us, "The Lord bless you out of Zion so that you may see the GOOD of Jerusalem all the days of your life!" Some things in Israel – just like in America - are not so good. And when I see the itineraries of Christian trips to the Holy Land, that's the focus - the not so good. But King David's Psalm reminds us, "The Lord bless you out of Zion so that you may see the GOOD of Jerusalem all the days of your life." In other words, those who look for the good will find it.

Israel is not a fantasy. It's a modern miracle - the bustling city of Tel Aviv, the beauty of the farmlands, world-class scientific advances in one of the most backward parts of the planet, the existence of a democracy surrounded by dictatorial tyrannical regimes, is proof in itself that ANYTHING is possible. Israel is just like America, an imperfect union, not even 61 years old! Israel has poverty, crime, and failing schools just like America; only unlike America, it's borders are surrounded by terror, not Canada.

Perhaps the best way to close these two days with you, a hope for enduring these tough times - whether in the Middle East or right here in Memphis - is a quote from that famous writer of Western novels, Louis L'Amour. L'Amour said, "There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. *That* will be the beginning."

May this season of Lent signal that new beginning, for Palestinians and Israelis alike. For Americans who are hurting, may this year's Lenten season signal the beginning of the end of blood-curling Jew-bashing and the beginning of dignity for every child of God. And let us say: Amen.