

THE WILDERNESS BETWEEN JERUSALEM AND JORDAN

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 25; Mark 1:9-15

Israel's great poet Yehuda Amichai has written a poem about "Tourists" that can apply to not only those who visit Jerusalem, but all who have gone to another country, camera around the neck, white tennis shoes screaming American origins, standing amid the skeletal remains of Athen's Parthenon or Rome's Coliseum adjusting their f-stop.

Amichai writes:

So condolence visits is what they're here for,
Sitting around at the Holocaust Memorial, putting on a serious face
At the Wailing Wall,
Laughing behind heavy curtains in hotel rooms.
They get themselves photographed with the important dead
At Rachel's tomb and Herzl's tomb, and up on Ammunition Hill.
They weep at the prowess of our boys,
And lust after our tough girls
And hang up their underwear
To dry quickly
In cool blue bathrooms.

Once I was sitting on the steps near the gate at David's Citadel and I put down my two heavy baskets beside me. A group of tourists stood there around their guide, and I became their point of reference. "You see that man over there with the baskets? A little to the right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. A little to the right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving," I said to myself: Redemption will come only when they are told, "Do you see that arch over there from the Roman period? It doesn't matter, but near it, a little to the left and down a bit, there's a man who has just bought some fruit and vegetables for his family."¹

Amichai captures the essence of what twenty of us were doing last week, an equal number of Jewish and Christian leaders from New York meeting with Israelis and Palestinians in Israel.

We went not to see the ruins or do what most tourists do, take pictures at the tombs, but to visit *people*, and hear their stories, and talk with them, share Shabbat dinner with a family at home, worship in the synagogue, talk with makers of peace and makers of war, and victims of violence. We went to see what we could see and learn what we could learn about the prospects for peace in Israel and the Palestinian lands.

In a sense, we went to hear what God hears, to see what God sees, as much as we were able; even though we were limited by our earthly perspectives, our biases and prejudices and inclinations for the partisans in this conflict. We went to see and hear

what we could in the hope that we might move past what keeps us from seeing and hearing what is there.

And I think it's not inappropriate that I preach about this on this first Sunday of Lent when we remember how Jesus was driven into the wilderness, the wilderness of which Mark speaks as that place where Jesus was tempted by Satan, where the wild beasts were, and the angels waited upon him. He went there as we did to see what he could see and hear what he could hear, to be tempted and to look into the face of the Evil One.

And it's to the wilderness that I want to take you today, to show you not what Jesus saw in that barren wilderness of 2000 years ago, but what is there today, some 2000 years later. Maybe *there* we can still learn something about ourselves and our temptations and our wild beasts and angels. And maybe in going there, we may see together at least a glimpse of what I think God sees in that wilderness between Jerusalem and Jordan.

We stood on Mt. Scopus in the shadow of Hebrew University and looked out on the desert land laid before us, the wilderness you can see from there that in recent years has been dotted with neat suburbs and tidy settlements, populated by government workers, a wilderness land that we call the West Bank. It is a disputed wilderness tamed and claimed by Israel, and on which a twenty-seven foot high separation barrier is being built. Strange to think that that vast and sandy expanse that once was so dangerous for Jesus to enter, that place where Jesus was driven by the Spirit, still has its temptations, its wild beasts, and even an angel or two sometimes.

We went to Israel to see the faces of the people, and hear their voices, to hear their heart's fondest desire, which is always that their children, Palestinian and Israeli, may live in peace. They are the voices that God hears these days crying in the wilderness. But that is almost the only thing they cry in unison.

We heard the voices of Palestinians raised in anger decrying injustice. We heard the voices of Jews who have known too much of violence; victims of persecution, survivors of the Holocaust, children of immigrants seeking a land of their own, a land God promised long ago, a covenant that they would claim today is still un-rescinded.

Many Jewish Israelis have known what it is to be a victim, the victims of terrorist attacks, knee deep in blood at times when a wedding reception or a quiet evening in a coffee shop, or a Friday afternoon buying fruit and vegetables before sundown on the Sabbath has been shattered by the explosion of a terrorist's bomb or an assassin's bullet.

If there was anything we heard again and again from Israelis about Jerusalem it was that the city was safe once again because of the wall. And there was nothing in our experience last week that belied that. Not a single bombing, no suicide attacks, no terrorists blowing up storefronts or shopping malls. The separation barrier has given Israelis the confidence that they can impede, if not eliminate, the threat of suicide bombers inside Israel, at least for the time being.

We also heard and saw the price of that. You cannot park your car in a shopping center without having that car searched, your trunk opened, your hood unlatched. Every restaurant has an armed guard inspecting backpacks and looking under coats for

explosive belts or concealed weapons. We shopped in the Mahane Yehuda for fresh produce and saw why the terrorists were able to kill so many people packed into the green market. Nineteen year old soldiers with M-16's drawn, and young fathers pushing strollers with automatic rifles on their backs keep watch for anyone who looks suspicious. It is a country that is fully armed.

“Given the choice between the inconvenience of the wall and the life of my children, I will take the wall,” said every Israeli we met with nothing much else to say about the price it exacts on those who live on the other side of the barrier.

Every Palestinian we met said that the Israelis are creating a generation of Palestinian children who will hate them and that some day the hatred will boil over.

We heard that 95% of the violence against Israelis has stopped since the security barrier was built. And we heard that 100% of the violence, the fear and intimidation and humiliation that Palestinians describe continues unabated on the other side of the wall. We heard of Palestinian farmers unable to work their land because the wall divides their farm in two. We heard about young women from Bethlehem who are studying in Jerusalem and spending hours every day waiting to cross checkpoints to get into the city. Some days they get to their classes, some days the don't.

I spoke with an Arab teenager from Abu Ghosh who told me of his loneliness in being educated in an Israeli school, taught by Israeli teachers, learning Israeli history, writing his papers in Hebrew, and knowing nothing of his own Arab heritage, because, as he says, he lives in the “occupied zone.” “I don't know who I am,” he told me, nor do my friends on either side. “I'm not Israeli, and now I am not an Arab either. No one understands.”

We talked to a Palestinian Christian from Bethlehem one afternoon who showed us from the top of the building where we met how the fields owned by Bethlehem shepherds that have been in the same families for thousands of years are now outside the wall that cuts through the city, the *fields*, if you will, where shepherds abiding kept watch over their flocks by night.

Terry Boulata is a Palestinian Christian who lives in Abu Dis overlooking Jerusalem. Her family has lived there for 2000 years. “My family welcomed Jesus into this city when he came through Jaffa Gate,” she said. She is a teacher and her neighborhood has been cut in half by the separation barrier. She half shouted, half explained with her arms waving, her eyes raging what the wall has done to her life and her family. Her husband works on the Palestinian side of the wall, and her children's school is on that side as well. It divides the family in two. Some of the time, her children and husband stay with her mother overnight rather than travel the distance or spend the hours necessary to pass through the checkpoint.

As the crow flies, her children could cut across a neighborhood and be home after school in a matter of minutes each day, the way they used to be able to come home before the wall. Now she must drive hours to the nearest crossing, wait interminable lengths of time, meet her children and drive them home. A journey that should take a matter of minutes now takes the better part of a day.

She lashed out at some of the members of our group who asked questions and pushed back to challenge her view of Israeli policy. So it was surprising to us to hear her described as a “moderate” Palestinian voice, after seeing the vein in her neck rising and the color in her face flushing with anger.

Unemployment on the Palestinian side is upwards of 60% in some areas and higher in others. Bethany, where Jesus stayed at the home of Mary and Martha is cut off completely, and Bethlehem is near financial ruin. Drug use and alcoholism are a growing problem in some parts of the Palestinian territories. And economically their towns and villages struggle, as their future remains uncertain, hoping that the new Palestinian government is better than the last that they had.

Lest you think that this was all one sided, the Palestinian voices were not the only voices we heard. Often we saw the signs and heard the cry of suffering in Israel as well. The separation barrier was built because Israel had suffered an endless cycle of bloodshed, with Palestinian bombers blowing up public gatherings, launching sniper attacks against neighborhoods, killing people arbitrarily who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. University students have been killed, mothers and children died, soldiers lost in the wrong place have been kidnapped, tortured, and eviscerated. Synagogues have been bombed. Over 500 people in Jerusalem alone have been killed in the streets of the city by terrorists in the past five years.

We visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial one afternoon, and never have I understood so clearly the cloud of anguish that hangs over the Jewish community, nor comprehended so clearly the meaning of the affirmation, “Never again.” At countless critical times in history when Jews reached out to Christians, to Americans, to Europeans for help and security, the world turned its back on them. They have come to their unilateral approach to foreign policy not without cause. Many in Israel believe that they can count only on themselves.

Internally, Israel has its own modern day prophets, its own critics and human rights monitors, and we met with rabbis, clerics, Muslims, Jews, and Christians, Palestinians and Israelis who are working night and day for peace, doing all they can to move beyond the barrier that now stands both ideologically and physically between people who want to live in peace and who cannot yet find their way to it.

And so at the last we went to the wilderness between Jerusalem and Jordan to hear the voices of those crying in the wilderness.

What we heard was groaning, God’s people in travail, expressing the deepest of human longing the most heartfelt of human anguish. We heard the wailing of mothers who have lost their children; the angry shouts of those who are separated from loved ones, the prayers spoken five times a day in Arabic, and those chanted in Hebrew by a people whom God has chosen to be a light to the gentiles and a hope to the nations.

To listen to those voices and see those faces is to see a glimpse of what God sees, to hear something of what God hears: God... whose heart is the first of all our hearts to break when hearts are broken. And that is what I heard and that is what I saw, God’s heart broken!

I have come away from this wilderness experience in Israel sad at the anguish that lies at the core of what tears us all apart, the sin that lies so closely (to borrow a phrase from the Bible²) the good that we would do but cannot, the thing that we should not do, but do anyway (to borrow another³).

It is a sad thing to think that peace is kept these days only at the end of a barrel pointed at the heart of an enemy. But the world has come to that. And as we begin these Lenten days, perhaps as never before we see the sin laid bare in the world that we try to convince ourselves is not in us. Not personally anyway.

In Lent, we tend to focus on the personal sins, the private failures, the individual issues that we know disrupt our relationship with God. So our Lenten penance and spiritual discipline almost always begins with ourselves. We focus on what is wrong in *our* lives, the times we take the Lord's name in vein, the mean things we have said in anger to others, the cheating on taxes, the self-indulgence in sweets that betray our reliance on creature comforts to keep us happy. So we give up chocolate for Lent or fast on Fridays to remind us that we do not live by bread alone. And most of us give up on even that after a few days or so.

But this year the wilderness outside Jerusalem has reminded me of the larger trouble that our human lot is in.

We don't like to hear this kind of truth anymore, we think we are so beyond it, but the reality is that there is a tragic flaw in the human heart, a separation from God that is so deep and so pervasive that it is the only explanation as to why human beings who are capable of such good, such beautiful acts of kindness and love, can also inflict such suffering on one another.

It is the only explanation I can imagine as to why brothers and sisters take up arms against one another, and demonize each other, and blow up each other's houses of worship; the reason we are at war in Iraq, and Sunnis are fighting with Shiites. The reason that genocide is under way again in Darfur. The reason why the morning news is knee deep in blood.

And that truth is that for all the good in us individually, there is a great deal of evil in us corporately, so much evil that none but God alone can do anything substantial about it.

Which is where Jesus comes in and why we begin these Lenten days at this table. He who knew no sin, took the sin of the world upon him and gave his life as a sacrifice for us all.

Here at this table the voices of the suffering are heard, the cries of the forsaken are answered, the faces of the broken in spirit are seen, and the lives of those who hope for peace some day may glimpse it, if even from afar.

For here, the Son of God makes plain the love of God for all us. Here we take courage believing in that day foreseen by the prophet Isaiah, when the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

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¹ Yehuda Amichai, "Tourists."

² Hebrews 12:1

³ Romans 7:15