

ISRAEL AND PALESTINE – (Migration, Immigration, Colonizing, Occupation). Rev Dr Roger Ray. Sermon for October 22, 2023

When my Korean born daughter was 13 years old, I offered to take her on a trip to South Korea to learn about her native culture and, if she wanted to, to try and locate her biological family. She didn't seriously consider the offer for even a minute. Having grown up on a steady diet of Disney movies with their none-too-subtle anglophile spin on everything, she asked if we could go to London instead.

Never one to turn down any excuse to go to London, I immediately signed on. She was the perfect age for that trip, it was just before her adolescent self became entirely embarrassed by everything I said or did and she was still under the impression that, as she once told her mother, "Daddy does so know everything."

We did fun tourist things, but I also worked in a couple of trips to the British Museum where I could show her some of the most amazing artifacts of the history of the world, all stolen in by British archaeologists and scientists in an earlier time when such theft was considered to be both research and preservation.

As we started our trip back to the United States, back in those days when international flights offered one movie screen and we all got to watch what the airline had chosen, the first thing on the screen was a brief newsreel about the second Intifada in Palestine. My daughter asked as we were taking off for our 7-hour flight back to Chicago, "Daddy, why do the Palestinians and Israelis hate each other so much?"

How do two distinct ethnic and religious groups end up with such a profound claim of ownership on the same piece of real estate? Where do you begin? Frankly, I made several false starts. You can't really start with the Holocaust and the modern creation of the State of Israel in 1947, and in the end, I managed to go back to the Hebrew Bible and the possibly fictitious accounts of Moses and the Egyptian Pharaoh, the Zionist belief in the Kingdom of David, and the Babylonian captivity, and the first century dispersion of the Jews from Judah by the Romans' attempt at the extermination of the Jews.

I don't know how much of it that she was awake for, but I do clearly remember that I was still talking when we began our final descent into Chicago. It took Valerie almost 20 years to work up the courage to ever ask me another question.

But serious, how would you answer that question? Why has there never been a workable solution that would allow Jews and Palestinians to live on this tiny postage stamp of global real estate with one another in peace? How could they both have arguably legitimate claims to the same place?

One of the ironies of the Jewish claim to Palestine comes from the Biblical narrative found in Exodus and yet, if you remember your Sunday School lessons regarding that bit of Jewish faith history, the Jews were not originally from that area and when they moved there, they found it inhabited and had to fight generations of wars with other inhabitants to control it. Of course, the Bible, written by Jews, for Jews, claims that God gave it to them but that isn't a title claim that could stand up in court. Of course, a book written by the Jews would say that they hold a divine title to the land they occupied but the Canaanites, Hittites, Jebusites, and Philistines, were never big fans of the Jewish Bible. Even if you take the Biblical accounts as having been based on history, it was still a story of occupation by conquest.

The question before us in the modern world is, when do national boundaries become sacred, legal, status quo, and when was migration, conquest, annexation, legitimate? How long does California have to be part of the United States before the claim that it was stolen from Mexico no longer have merit. Or, for that matter, when would the claims of Mexico trump the claims of the various Native American tribes who lived there before it was part of Mexico?

Why is the American claim on Arizona more legitimate than Russia's claim on the Ukraine? Or the claim of Palestinians on the land we now call Israel more legitimate than the claim of current Jewish residents?

This is the problem that I have with all of the popular DNA tests now that have people confidently claiming that they are 20% Irish and 30% German, and some other string of national names like they came with a label of ingredients like a can of dog food. Folks, we are all 100% from Africa. The human race evolved in Africa and over thousands of years, migrated all over the globe.

Your ancestors may have spent some time in Asia or Europe before they ended up where you live now, but unless you are living in Africa, it is very likely that your ancestors have lived in a lot of places over the centuries.

We have various terms to describe the movement of people around the globe. In prehistoric times, we talk about human tribes migrating from one continent to another, but we know from the dawn of time that there have been migrations that were more like conquest and occupation. Most of the shape of the modern world's map was based on a couple of centuries of colonization. Sadly, a few of those centuries of colonization involved the genocide of indigenous populations and the importation of slaves from other places.

As the anti-slavery movement grew in the early United States, there was an organization called the American Colonization Society, that acquired land in West Africa that they called "Liberia" which was to be the homeland of freed African slaves from America.

Their project was based on the misunderstanding that black slaves who were born in America, and maybe were the product of centuries of slaves who had lived in the Americas, would really be much happier if they were repatriated to Africa. More than half of the 40,000 newly freed slaves who went there died. They were black but it had been a long time since they were African.

Telling people to "go back where they are from" is typically seen as a racial insult, but there lingers some romantic sense that everyone could simply go back to wherever their ancestors lived before they came to where they are now.

You may recall the controversy created by the nearly 90-year-old White House correspondent, Helen Thomas, who, when asked for a comment about Israel in 2012, said that the Israelis should "get the hell out of Palestine." She was forced to apologize and resign her chair in the press corps because her comment was considered to be anti-Semitic. It was inartful, you can't deny that, but I have said for years that we never should have joined Britain in the decision to take part of Palestine in the 1940's to create a Jewish homeland. The Jews who had survived the

holocaust certainly deserved and needed a homeland, but the Holocaust had not been conducted by Palestinians. It was a horrible historic crime committed by European Christians against European Jews. The sacrifice of land to create a homeland certainly should have come out of European real estate and not Middle Eastern real estate.

Both Jews and Christians may have been overly affected by the Biblical narratives about what they called “the Holy Land,” at the end of WWII. The voices of the Palestinians who were being displaced were not heeded. This land theft by the victors of WWII created hostilities that immediately issued in violent attempts at driving the Jewish immigrants into the Mediterranean Sea.

You could say that Israel has been in a perpetual state of war with her neighbors ever since the modern state was founded in 1947. Technically, I think that Israel has 19 named wars in that 76 year history but the reason that we have heard so much about people hiding in their “safe rooms” during the recent Hamas invasion out of the Gaza Strip is that people are used to missiles falling on their neighborhoods, not a thousand at a time as has happened when this conflict started, but always a threat and a potential disaster.

I have met people in Israel who spent every night of their childhood in a bomb shelter. A possible attack is always in the back of people’s minds. The radical sentiment of pushing the Jews into the sea was pervasive in the early years but over time, as almost no one alive today can remember a time when Israel did not exist where it is, there are Palestinians who want to live in Peace with Israel but there is a minority that only pretends to talk about peace while always plotting to kill as many Jews as they can.

There are many Israelis who want peace with Palestine but there are others who feel that it is a hopeless situation, and their only chance of survival is to virtually wipe out the Palestinian population. Every skirmish, every police killing, every terrorist murder, and, especially, every instance of rape or violence against children, radicalizes people more and more.

When Israel was founded, they were attacked by all of their neighbors: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, and Transjordan, but now Israel is fighting against terrorist organizations, not nations. Hezbollah and Hamas fighters don’t wear uniforms. There is not a government of Hamas or a capitol of Hezbollah.

And who is to say how many people in the Gaza Strip would be considered to be members of Hamas, or Hamas sympathizers, or supporters? And, given the dynamic of the hardships of life in the Gaza Strip, the same person might be fighting for Hamas one day and fighting against them the next. Israel now threatens a war on an idea, not a country, not an army, but a sentiment of those who just don't want the Jews where they are.

But folks, the real offense of Helen Thomas' comment a few years ago is the simple fact that Israelis don't have anywhere to go back to. There are many ethnic minorities who do not have a homeland anymore but it was the unique circumstances of the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust that made Western powers believe that they should be given one, and I don't disagree with that, I just think it should have been in Europe.

But the recent attack my Hamas terrorists has forced me to focus on the present. Debating the establishment of the modern state of Israel is good for a history class but it doesn't address the fact that there is now a Jewish homeland in the Middle East surrounded by majority Muslim states that do not want to accept that what happened in 1947 cannot be undone in 2023. I adamantly remain convinced that it was a bad idea, but it wasn't the only bad idea made in the post-colonial world and now it is a nearly unsolvable problem that demands a solution.

500 of my closest friends received an essay from me a few days after the October 7 attack. I was still struggling with an innate desire to blame Benjamin Netanyahu and his administration's absurdly abusive policies towards the Gaza Strip for the violence but even then, I knew that I couldn't. Liberals have an ipso facto tendency to side with the underdogs, but I want to ask my people to slow down and think about the hard realities and to not fall into false equivalencies.

Two things can be true at once. I still believe that Netanyahu has been disingenuous and dishonest. No matter what happens now in Israel and the Gaza Strip, Netanyahu's political career should be over. He needs to spend his time and resources defending himself against multiple criminal charges and disappear from Israeli government. However, as egregious as his offenses have been, the offenses committed by Hamas are of an entirely different kind and level of disgusting depravity.

I don't often throw roses at American presidents. I have been an equal opportunity critic of every president we have had in my adult life, but credit where credit is due. I cannot fault Joe Biden in how he has handled this impossible situation with Israel trying to fight against a terrorist ideology. Netanyahu's instincts, and I fear many Israelis who now have family members being tortured as prisoners of Hamas and those who have had family members, from teenagers attending a music festival to children attacked in their schools, understandably would like to see the Israeli army wipe the Gaza Strip off of the map.

We came too close to doing the same when we attacked Afghanistan after 9-11. Since there was no army to attack, no government of Al Qaida, we killed thousands of civilians who simply had proximity to Al Qaida training camps, whether they had Al Qaida sympathies or not. President Biden has assured Netanyahu and the Israeli people that our support for them in the midst of this war should never be doubted, but at the same time he has publicly and privately insisted on restraint and care to avoid civilian casualties. He has coupled, more by implication than by contract, that our military aid is tied to humanitarian aid to the civilians of the Gaza Strip.

Yes, our president often sounds like a confused senior citizen who can't keep his bingo card straight at the Senior Center, but when it really matters, he seems to have admirable clarity of vision. In fact, who among us could have done better than what he has done? Hamas cannot rack up wins as a result of killing children, raping young women, taking hostages, and killing civilians who were running for safety in bomb shelters. They cannot be rewarded for these subhuman tactics.

However, we have to accept that we have talked this "two state" solution to death without making enough progress to justify all of the talking. Israel's existence, where it is, cannot rationally be debated in 2023. Israel's right to defend itself against terrorist attacks cannot be reasonably questioned. And the people of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip need to be given greater freedom and greater opportunity but not the freedom to keep fighting with Israel and not the opportunity to keep spending their resources on rockets and bombs rather than a decent future for their young people.

We fought the Germans and the Japanese in WWII and ten years after the war we were trading partners and allies. We have invaded Canada and annexed the

northern half of Mexico, and now we vacation in Mexico and import most of our comedians and hockey players from Canada. We began in a war with Great Britain and now we follow their royal family as if we were still subjects of the crown.

Heck, we have invaded Nicaragua four times in the last century and most of you didn't know that we ever had and when I have been there doing relief work, I have never detected a moment of hostility towards me because I am an American. Warring factions can learn to see that their best interests are served when they live in peace with their former enemies and cooperate in building a better future for everyone.

The purpose of terrorism is to instill terror in the people they hate. The only way to defeat terrorism is to refuse to be afraid. It is our fear that makes us want to fight a retaliatory war. I admit that there will be a military response to the terrorism of Hamas but I beg you to see that beyond the next month, the only real answers lie in the direction of diplomacy. The Jews will not be driven into the sea, and the Palestinians will not be annihilated.

The most difficult and the most necessary of all renunciations is resentment. The desire for revenge is powerful but as the old Chinese proverb says, "The fire you kindle against your enemies burns you." The best hope for peace in Israel is to create greater justice in Palestine.