

Lent 2 C
Genesis 12:1
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
February 17, 2008

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
Wimberley UMC
Notes not for publication

I am so grateful to be in your midst today, safely home after a wonderful trip to Israel and Palestine. We visited many holy sites, which I expected to be mostly touristy and not very meaningful. Tour guides often began with the disclaimer, “No one is really sure whether this is really the place where this happened or not.” I was surprised, though, to find them profoundly moving for me—the immensity of the Sea of Galilee, the Mount of the Beatitudes, the Western Wall in Jerusalem. I am so glad to have seen these places.

But our group did other things as well—we celebrated worship on Ash Wednesday in a Melkite (Greek Catholic) church, with the service all in Arabic. Our group spent the night in people’s homes, and I shared the table of a Muslim scholar and his wife. And finally, on our last night there, I was privileged to be a celebrant at Holy Communion in the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem itself. It was an amazing trip, one that is going to take some time to digest.

As so often happens, I found a clear connection between the lectionary texts for today and the circumstances of this trip. In Genesis 12, we read of God’s plan to make of Abraham a great nation. Two things will be necessary for that plan—land and offspring. Currently both are present in the Middle East, in the land known as Palestine until 1948 afterwards as Israel. But where God intended the descendents of Abraham in that land to be a blessing, some would say a curse has ruled instead. We hear on

the news about the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, all the times they've held peace talks and drafted peace plans, only to have something fall through and throw the place into conflict again. It's easy for us, where we sit, to write these people off as hopelessly violent, so entrenched in their animosity that peace will never come.

As I prepared for this trip by reading up on the history of the area, the more I learned, the more pessimistic I became. Because the two sides of this conflict are family, both descending from Abraham—Jews through his son Isaac, born of Sarah, and Palestinians, whether Muslims or Arabs, through his son Ishmael, born of Hagar, Sarah's slave girl. It's been a mess from the get-go, and you know that family fights are the worst. But I want to say to you that what I have seen convinces me that this struggle must have a solution, and in fact that I feel called, as a Christian and on behalf of the church, to help God bring that peace to life.

There is so much to tell you, so many stories and experiences to share. Our leaders warned us not to overwhelm our listeners with too much at once, as I cannot make you feel what I feel, merely by telling you about it. For today, though, I do want to share with you some things about the Palestinian people that you may not know from watching CNN or Fox News.

An essential fact to know is that Palestinians are not by definition terrorists. These two words are linked to one another in our media and have been for decades, so that when we hear the word Palestinian, we think, "terrorist," or perhaps, "Yasser Arafat." But I met many, many Palestinians on this trip—we stayed in places where most American and Christian tour groups won't go, saying it's too dangerous. And I

can tell you that I didn't meet any terrorists. There are some, of course, some who are so angry about their plight that they have unfortunately chosen guns and bombs as their solution.

But the majority of the Palestinian people want only peace. They are tired of struggle, tired of walls and checkpoints that divide their country, roads they're not allowed to use, areas they're not allowed to enter, 18 and 19 year-old Israeli soldiers with absolute authority, economies shut down, land confiscated, houses demolished, olive trees uprooted. They are tired of this life, and they want peace—a peace that respects their rights as human beings, alongside their Jewish brothers and sister. As I said on the blog on our church website, over and over speakers told us, "We don't want you to be pro-Palestinian if that makes you anti-Israeli. Instead of pro-Palestinian, be pro-peace and pro-justice."

So if Palestinians are not by definition terrorists, and generally all they want is peace, I'll go one step further and tell you that they are some of the most hospitable people you'll ever meet. I mentioned in my blog entry my fear that I would have no clothes to come home in—I thought I would have to buy one of those big, flow-y tents. This is because everywhere we went, whether to a home or an office or a school, we had either a meal or refreshments. Many different kinds of hummus and sauces, cheese, vegetables, rice, soup, olives, spices, lamb and chicken, fresh, hot pita bread, cookies, fruit and baklava, thick Arabic coffee and sweet hot tea with fresh mint—all the time, every day. And what was amazing to realize is that this has been the tradition of the people of this land from before anyone can remember. Even in our reading from

Genesis, just a few chapters past the passage we read, Abraham and Sarah receive a visit from three strangers traveling through, and they kill a calf and make cakes on the fire. Entertaining guests is part of the identity of the Palestinian people, and not having the opportunity to do so is just not right to them. Their tables and homes are always open—it's easy to see how this family characteristic was passed down to Jesus.

Finally I want to say that there is a special group of Palestinians you may not know about, and those are the Christians. We think of Palestinians as Muslims, and this was true of the majority of the people living in that region prior to the state of Israel. But in fact the Christian church has also existed in the land of Christ, since the days of Christ. That land—its trees, fruits and flowers, its lakes and rivers, rocks and mountains—were the setting for Jesus' ministry, his parables, teaching and healing. People of the church, which consists of several denominations, used to constitute 10% of the population of Palestine. That number today has dropped to 2%, as life has become more and more stressful and violent, and the normally better educated Christians flee, to find greater opportunities outside their country.

Just 2%, yet they are essential, I believe, to a peaceful resolution to the current situation. For we Christians are the third faith to claim Abraham as our ancestor, and in this day, the church is serving as salt and light, as Jesus taught us to do. They are not many, but just a little bit of salt seasons the whole pot of stew; just a tiny shaft of light breaks through the deepest darkness. Conversely, without salt or light, things can look grim indeed. For this reason, the survival of the Body of Christ in the land of Jesus is so important—they bring a faith perspective as a minority, as a non-player in the

political system, as people who have clear claim to a moral system of peace with justice.

I've only shared with you the tip of the iceberg today, and I look forward to more opportunities in the days to come. I do want to say, though, that while I've only spoken about Palestinians, I and the people we met with have the greatest compassion for the suffering of the Jewish people throughout history, and especially during World War II. This has never been debated. The question is, how can people whose religions all hold up love and peace as eternal values find a way to live together in this life, on the earth?

The church in Palestine has found itself squarely in the middle of the passage we read today from Romans. They are in a situation that is too big for them, but they know theirs is a God story. And they trust in the promise of our good God. They trust that God can, with a word, bring something out of nothing, make a way out of no way. They ask us to pray for them, and to allow our prayers to turn us to action on behalf of peace in their land.