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*A Sermon preached by Pilar Millhollen, May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

*Readings: "Are We Still of Any Use?" (Galen Guengerich), Isaiah 6:1-10*

*Just a week and a few days ago, the U.S. opened its new embassy in Jerusalem, which it had recently declared to recognize as the new capitol of Israel. This was, for all intents and purposes, a move that was bound to cause outrage that will manifest in more innocent blood shed. It was a symbolic shift that would have concrete repercussions in an already dubious foreign policy by the U.S. that claims to support a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine – though its actions speak otherwise. This holy city of Jerusalem, the site of so many events in our own religious history, is a crucible for conflict since it is considered the holiest place for three major world religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Ironically, though these three faiths are deeply interrelated as the latter two stemmed from monotheistic Judaism, they also have a history of some of the bloodiest conflict in religious battles, which continues today between Palestinians and Israelis, who both claim rights to live on this tiny tract of earth which holds such significance for both groups. What isn't always fully interrogated, however, is how the Palestine-Israel conflict runs much deeper than religious difference or political ambition. For both sides, though Islam became a world religion through proselytization, the religious identity is only part of the picture. When a people's identity is both religious and ethnic, borne out of a common people with common blood, the ties that bind them become much stronger, while those outside of the fold can understand less and less what it means to be identified so distinctly. It is such that one-note narratives begin to form, narratives that deny the complexity in the conflicts and fuel prejudices that masquerade as political stances or political agendas that masquerade as religious piety. What may be most dangerous for progressive people of faith in this climate is an inability to distinguish prejudice from politics, with the grave result being a failure to address human rights violations – no matter what "side" one aligns oneself with.*

*Rev. Galen Guengerich, a Unitarian Universalist theologian and minister, points this out in no uncertain terms in a recent article in Reuters published after a brief trip to Gaza right before the U.S. Embassy opened in Jerusalem. His horror at the ongoing conditions under which innocent people in Gaza are living, conditions which arguably began 70 years ago with the creation of the state of Israel but which have been exacerbated since 2006, prompted him to ask the question "are we of any use?" The question is valid, and here's why: when a nation such as ours, with the amount of wealth and the ability to act as the world's police, which for better or worse we do, chooses to withhold relief to suffering human beings based on political ideology, we are in a moral blackout.*

*The situation in Gaza, as Guengerich writes, is such that there is only about 5 hours worth of electricity every day; lack of food and medicine; no access to MRI and radiation machines or CT scanners; high unemployment; and an almost completely polluted water supply. Because of border crossing restrictions, workers cannot go back and forth between Gaza and Israel, growing the cultural separation between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims as alienation prevents interpersonal relationships and militarism runs rampant. In such an ongoing crisis, it is understandable that religious and ethnic hatred between the two groups continue to foment – how could it not when the only knowledge a Palestinian child has of her Israeli neighbors are tanks and machine guns pointed at her city, while the young Israeli child only hears of his neighbors in Palestine being terrorists? But: it is immoral for a government who participates in the United Nations to knowingly and purposefully withhold funding for issues that are humanitarian in nature because it favors the state that it helped to establish decades ago.*

*A few days ago, an article caught my eye in the Washington Post – I don't ordinarily love op-eds, as I have come in this era of alternative facts to cling desperately to fact-based news without folks offering their two cents, but Rabbi Jill Jacobs wrote a nuanced and difficult analysis of the current situation that challenges us to interrogate our assumptions and unconscious biases. Rabbi Jacobs is the Executive Director of T'ruah, an organization that mobilizes 2,000 rabbis and their congregations to protect human rights in America, Israel and the occupied territories of Palestine. In her article, she warns that we must be vigilant as Americans, Jewish or non-Jewish, to recognize where criticism of Israel becomes conflated with prejudice, particularly in this context anti-semitism. Since the current administration has arguably added to a growing fundamentalist attitude on both the left and the right, Rabbi Jacobs wants to be careful to identify where anti-semitism actually drives political arguments, and where it is being used as a tool to silence accusations of legitimate human rights abuses. She cites the first state law, recently passed in South Carolina, which verbally defines anti-semitism and requires public universities to consider the definition when hearing charges of bias. At first glance, this seems a positive thing in a climate where American anti-semitism has been on the rise since 2016 – in 2017, for instance, the Anti-Defamation League tracked a 57% increase in anti-semitic incidents. The complication is, though, that the Carolina law is so broad that university professors are concerned that any criticism of the Israeli government could fall under its definition, since there is a new trope that decries criticism of Israel as anti-semitic. Professor Joshua Cooper of the University of South Carolina, who is a member of the Academic Advisory Council for Jewish Voice for Peace, or JVP, warns against the conflation of the Israeli government with Jewish identity: "As a Jew," he says, "I don't want to be associated with Israel's human rights abuses." Rabbi Jacobs concurs, "of course it is possible to criticize Israel without being anti-semitic. I do it every day." A movement motivated by deep concern for human rights, which they and other Jewish communities lead because of their religious convictions, requires, as she says, "caring about the dignity, well-being, concerns and self-determination of all people." The same goes for pro-Palestinian organizations that refuse to use the word "terrorist" to describe Arab attacks against Israelis, or any other type of apologist arguments that would hold Hamas to a different standard than the government of Israel.*

*So as peace in the Middle East seems no closer than it was in Isaiah's time, what are we to make of our scripture from one of our greatest Jewish prophets? As one of the most influential voices in prophetic literature, the original prophecy attributed to this voice was the 8<sup>th</sup>-century preacher who advised the kings of Judah, during a period of precarious power struggles between the Judean kingdom and nearby empires desiring to occupy the land. Invasion and occupation are nothing new, as we recount in the prophetic histories played out in the Old Testament. But what's special about the Isaiah prophecies – compiled over time based on the actual prophet himself but later in the spirit of his teachings – is that there is both a strong message of Zionism, and a high moral call that identifies the rights of all human beings to live free from poverty, terror, and warmongering. When I use the word Zionism, which has many implications and multiple meanings now, in this context primarily meant belief that the God of Israel, Yahweh, resided in the city of Jerusalem, also called Zion. Such a belief involved the desire for God's people to be able to live peaceably in the city of God, with an eschatological vision for all people to live peaceably together without using violence – the main marker of empire – to get to this peace. Our passage for this morning interests me in that the lectionary chooses to only read up until verse 8 – Isaiah is called by God, he is wildly reluctant as he feels he is ensconced in sin, amidst a people also unready to realize God's vision, until a seraphim – an angel of God – touches his lips, proclaims him ready, and he suddenly is prepared to answer the call: "Here I am! Send me!" he answers when God wonders aloud who might be up to the task. This would*

really cool if it were the end of the passage. But it's not. In the Hebrew, God immediately replies, "Go and tell this people: you will be ever hearing, but never understanding; you will be ever seeing, but never perceiving. This people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes." It's a powerful qualification to the enthusiasm that Isaiah has; it's a warning that not only will people not necessarily like the vision God speaks through Isaiah, they may hear the message entirely differently. It's a warning that the road ahead will be filled with complexity in the midst of a problem with no simple solution, and the end goal being a peace that must have seemed impossible even to Isaiah. It's a prophecy that feels all too resonant today, when over 2,500 years later, that vision is just as far off as it was for Judah and Assyria and Ephraim so long ago. The prophecies in Isaiah and across the Hebrew Bible have been interpreted by some groups as a call to push all others out of the Holy Land, by whatever means possible, believing that the God of Israel is a God *only* for Israel. And it is understandable that this would be the message they might read, at least upon the surface. But God can't possibly be that limited. Or that petty. The call to be a people who are *more* than a people, as Rabbi Heschel has described, is a call that looks beyond the boundaries of ethnic difference and religious particularities. It does not erase history, nor does it rewrite it. But it is a call that honors God's expansive nature as the One who made all of creation, and then identified a certain people who might take on the difficult task of enacting divine justice, a morality beyond human morality, on earth, in hopes that it might effect a shift in the relationships of all people to each other. It is a call to recognition – a recognition that one's Palestinian or Jewish neighbor, or Samaritan, or Greek, or Syrian, and so on and so on – has the same needs as any person born on the same earth that God created, and with the same rights. To compartmentalize God's justice as only applying to one group of people is not only misguided, it is immoral.

As Rev. Guengerich, and Rabbi Jacobs, and so many others have the courage to point out, our only pathway in answering the call is to be able to separate the political issues from the humanitarian ones. It is not prejudice talking when we demand that all children, not just one side or another, receive adequate food, medicine, and the education they deserve. That is a moral demand no matter what the governing forces are doing. It is not anti-semitism to decry the use of violence against peaceful protesters who desire to cross a border that crossed them. That is fulfilling the divine law that asks us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God no matter what political party one affiliates with. By the same token, it is not racism or Islamophobia to support a state of Israel alongside a nation of Palestine, and to call the government of Hamas exactly what it is: an extremist organization functioning through acts of terror. The God who calls us out is the God that requires we stand up and speak out to cry, "Here we are – send us – send us to try, in our flawed and failing ways, to refute the lie that there is only one nation who deserves mercy, only one people who merit justice; send us, even when we are weary and confused and doubtful that your vision may ever become a reality. Send us when we become hopeless, even when we declare like King Solomon, "all is vanity!" Send us anyway. Because if we don't answer the call to say, every precious Palestinian child deserves what every precious Jewish child deserves, and every precious North Korean child, and every Chinese child and Rohingya child and Senegalese child and every child on our soil or cross our borders north and south, then we certainly won't ever see God's vision realized. Because we will have left it to be destroyed by those who would enforce their own vision of morality, and I think we've seen plenty of that already. So go forth and answer the call, beloved community. Pray, and protest, and write, and call those who have the power to enact justice. As our dear brother John Lewis says, if not us, then who? If not now, then when?