

Today's lesson shows two sides of Jesus. The first is Jesus with a brilliant understanding of the "systems of domination," which we talked about last week. Here is Herod "the fox" threatening Jesus, but Jesus knows how not to be "out-foxed," by either Herod or the Pharisees who likely were in cahoots with Herod. Jesus doesn't think much of Herod, and he will not be pushed around by him. Jesus knows the history of the powers in Jerusalem who killed the prophets. Any messenger of God's kingdom is not well received because that message flies in the face of those in power. Prophets were agents of change; they critiqued *what was* for the sake of *what should and could be*. So Jerusalem, the seat of power, had a habit of "shooting the messengers."

The other side of Jesus revealed here is that of a mother hen desperately trying to gather her chicks under the protection of her wings. Oh, how often God's messengers longed to gather Israel under the guidance and safety of mother God. But Israel would not.

Why was it that Jesus was so hard on Jerusalem? Like the prophets of old, who were close to the heart of God, who understood God's pathos at suffering, Jesus grasped the painfully obvious disconnect between God's kingdom and the religious/political institutions in Jerusalem. Six to eight percent of the inhabitants of Jerusalem controlled practically all the wealth, and they were determined to keep it that way. *How?* They would protect their wealth by keeping the poor and unfortunate in their places and at their service. Even the Jewish elite, the priests, were compromised by this system of domination. They knew what would happen to them if they opposed the powers of Rome. Josephus, the Jewish historian, describes what happened to prophetic voices. Josephus writes regarding King Manasseh, "He spared not even the prophets, some of whom he slaughtered daily, so that Jerusalem ran with blood."

Today, Jerusalem remains a center of power and conflict. A similar city, Tel Aviv, was where the prophetic leader Yitzhak Rabin was killed at a peace rally. Jerusalem and the surrounding small piece of real estate has had a huge impact on world affairs. How could this city of religious devotion, place where the prince of peace walked, be consumed with such turmoil?

If one looked for an example of how the "powers and systems of domination" get exponentially complicated, Jerusalem would be a perfect example. First, there's the 2000-year assault on and demonization of the Jews since the time of Christ. The Jews as a people did not kill Jesus: the powers and principalities did. Then there's the response of the United Nations after World War II when they took land away from Palestine to establish the state of Israel. What happened during WWII to the Jews was such an unspeakable evil that even today some people try to deny it ever happened. But it did. The Jews have experienced horrendous oppression for two millennia; their existence has been and continues to be threatened on every side. And now the Palestinians are victims, too, and are thus fighting for their own lost land and homes. They strike out in revenge, and Israel defends itself. Our conference minister, Jane Fidler Hoffman, visited Israel-Palestine last year and reports heart-breaking stories from both sides. Here are excerpts from her report:

A Palestinian mother's 15-year-old unarmed son was killed by sharpshooters while he was walking on a plot of land between a Palestinian refugee camp and an Israeli village on the

other side of a fence. Young people who are outside can be arrested without warning. Their safety and their fear imprisons them. What do they have to live for? Why not become a suicide terrorist?

But our conference minister also describes stories of hope. Jewish “Women In Black” have met on one Jerusalem corner on Fridays at noon for more than 20 years to protest the occupation. They persist even though they are verbally abused by their Jewish neighbors.

Another story came from the tiny village of al-Nu`aman where 200 people live in a sort of limbo. Israeli law says it is a Jerusalem municipality but they receive no services -- except demolition of their homes. The children here used to attend school in Jerusalem but now every day they must walk down a long hill, cross an Israeli checkpoint, walk up another hill to school in another village and then return at the end of the day. The people must bring in most of their food from Bethlehem, again passing through checkpoints, and may only, for instance, bring in two chickens at a time. They can't have propane delivered by truck or donkey from the outside. The residents believe this is all part of Israeli efforts to force them out and thus control all of Jerusalem and its surroundings so a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem will be impossible.

Another Jewish leader, Rabbi David Rosen, founder of Rabbis for Human Rights shared the insight that *everyone* in this region sees themselves as victims---Israelis, Palestinians, all. With that thinking, the problem is always and thus irresolvable about the other—it is a “zero sum mentality.” The work of his group is focused on seeking the welfare of all the people. 20,000 Palestinian homes have “demolition orders” which happen without sufficient warning. This keeps families in fear and controls dissent. Shockingly, even after a home is demolished, the family is billed for the cost of the demolition. A Jewish Israeli woman told us that these are part of an intentional “ethnic cleansing” (her words) of East Jerusalem, so there is no chance of it becoming the capital city of a two-state agreement.

But then there's a young Israeli woman named Maya. She works for the Israeli Committee Against House Demolition and for Rabbis for Human Rights, and showed us the security Wall in Jerusalem as well as demolitions that clearly have nothing to do with security but everything to do with claiming land and pushing Palestinians out. At one location she pointed out that the wall does not there separate Israelis from Palestinians but Palestinians from Palestinians, with the goal of simply disrupting their lives. Maya is nineteen years old but has already served time in prison for refusing to serve in the Israeli military. Her knowledge of the history of the Israeli-Palestine struggle was extensive and helpful. But perhaps most impressive was her own story of being raised in a conservative right-wing family where she heard only the traditional and limited versions of what is being done by Israel. She said her life began to change when she heard a 15-year-old Palestinian girl tell what Israeli soldiers did to her father. From then on, she learned all she could and came to “feel cheated by the lie” about the reason for the wall and more. So this and other organizations are trying to get the Palestinian story into school curricula.

As followers of Jesus who try to gather ALL people under the wings of God's love and protection, we help through our denomination through support of the following: The YWCA of Palestine (their work includes a Women's Cooperative and Kindergarten at a refugee camp), the Middle East Council of Churches, and Rawdat el Zuhur (the “Garden of Flowers School”), where more than 200 Palestinian children receive good education with the help of the UCC.

Please don't interpret my words today as anti-Jewish. I hope to have a son-in-law someday who is Jewish, and we adore Brad, but the complicated history of Israel and the current day conflict makes Jesus' words of pathos and compassion "Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I longed to gather you under my wings" very relevant today.

So... last Saturday night, Allison called me on my cell phone, but I was driving and didn't answer. About 30 seconds later, she called again. So I pulled to the side of the road thinking it must be important. She was baby-sitting a 6-month-old baby boy who had never been apart from his parents, and he wouldn't stop crying. No wet diaper, not hungry, she didn't know how to stop his tears. Mom, help! So, I told her to take the baby, put him like this so he could feel her heart beat, walk around gently bouncing him, and sing "bye oh, bye oh, bye oh baby, bye oh." And she did, and he stopped crying and fell asleep. Oh, that all suffering could be eased like this, or like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings of love and protection. May we spread our wings wide so that the hovering God of creation may may bring peace and harmony to this crying, chirping, broken world. AMEN.