

April 7, 2024

Mark 14:26-31; 66-72

John 20:19-31

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Forgive me for doing a bit of time travel this morning with our scripture reading, and returning to a pre-Easter moment in time. It's the moment when Jesus predicts his disciples will deny him. Then we jump ahead to the moment after his arrest when Peter does, in fact, deny him three times.

The actual lectionary text assigned to this morning is from John's Gospel, when Thomas encounters the risen Christ for the first time, after declaring "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." And after the encounter Jesus will say, "'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

I have several reflections from our delegation to Palestine framed by these texts.

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In the Old City of Jerusalem, the Muezzin sends out the call to prayer from Noble Sanctuary. *Allahu Akbar* echoes across the city and in the Muslim quarter the faithful lay out their rugs and prostrate themselves.

Nearby, along the Western Wall--a remnant of the second temple venerated by Jews--head-covered pray-ers whisper their laments and petitions while their foreheads lean against the stone wall. When they finish, they slowly back away rather than turn their backs on this sanctified wall of grief and hope.

A short walk away, the bells from Church of the Holy Sepulchre clang while priests robed in black, floor-length cassocks process into the

sanctuary. Inside pilgrims from the four corners of Earth kneel on the ground where the Crucified One is said to have breathed his last.

Here in this land called holy, the histories and destinies of billions are animated by countless prayers and stories.

To pull on any one thread is to find yourself entangled in a story too dense and too complicated to tell; too painful to bear and too beautiful to explain. I am not equipped to tell it. I confess some trepidation, fearing a misstep or missaying. For around every corner in this land, as with all lands, is a reminder that language matters and stories are sometimes matters of life and death.

But that is precisely why I've come. Along with twenty-three others, from across twelve denominations of the Church, we've come to hear a story and then tell it. *Come and See, Go and tell*. That is the refrain and invitation of our Palestinian hosts. They've invited us there to *Come and See* for ourselves.

And I confess, again, a certain unease with this invitation. Because, you see, in our Western imagination some stories are inherently suspect and unreliable.

It was the scholar Edward Said who coined the term "orientalism" to describe the way Westerners view the inhabitants of the Middle East as fundamentally *other*, as exotic and fanatic, irrational and violent. In particular Arab and Islamic cultures are used as a foil to highlight the ways the West is enlightened and progressive.

In practical terms, this means stories, like the ones Palestinian's tell, are easily dismissed. Their call for liberation from occupation, basic human rights, and statehood troubles the stability and consistency of Western superiority. It's incomprehensible to our imaginations that their suffering

and death could possibly be at the hands of an enlightened and liberal world order based on the rule of law. So, there must be something inherently wrong with them -- they are deviant.

And this conclusion helpfully eliminates Europe's and America's complicity in the ongoing slaughter in Gaza, their support for the deadly and decades long occupation of the West Bank, and even the anti-semitism that insisted Jews were threat to Europe and America and discarded them while propagating the lie that Palestine was a "land without a people, for a people without a land."

*Come and See.* The reason that Palestinian Christians have had to issue this call is rooted in the very fact that the Western Church has not trusted their testimonies, and has considered them unreliable narrators of their own lives, histories, and experiences.

And so we, twenty-three witnesses, went to see, as representatives of a Western Church, who like the disciple Thomas, has insisted--when we've been decent enough to even listen--on skepticism: 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

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At mid-morning, I duck through the "Door of Humility," the low entrance into the Church of the Nativity.

I'm alone, except for the low groan of the liturgy being chanted in the underground grotto, which lies just beneath the chancel at the head of the church. Tradition marks that spot as the birthplace of Jesus.

I wander around and look up at some paintings high on the wall. For several hundred years they had been plastered over and only recently were

rediscovered. Then it dawns on me. Except for the priests chanting the liturgy in the underground grotto, I am alone. This strikes me as unusual. *This is one of the most significant churches and holy sites in the world.*

I have been here before. Usually tour groups bustle through. Mostly they are Christian pilgrims whose buses pull up next to the church, they get out and hustle through the church and then hop back on the bus. Bethlehem isn't safe, so they've been told. Their Israeli tour guide will take them to a gift shop where they'll receive a generous cut of sales, and that's the one and only foray into the West Bank. A quick in and out, having completely missed any chance of encountering an actual Palestinian Christian, or any Palestinian at all for that matter. In any case, typically there are long lines to descend into the grotto. People pray before the spot where Jesus is said to have been born.

But I'm alone. Outside of the church, Manger square is lined with shops. They are all closed. There are no tourists. It is empty, like the church.

Since the war in October the economy in Bethlehem and the West Bank has collapsed.

I head back up toward the Lutheran Christmas Church where we are staying. There we meet with Rev. Munther Isaac. Perhaps over Christmas, you saw the viral photo of the baby Jesus amidst the rubble. Rev. Isaac did that. He explained that he placed the baby there as a pastoral act, to answer for his parishioners the question they have kept asking since the war on Gaza began, "Where is God in this catastrophe?" God is in the rubble, alongside the suffering and the dead.

He told us that story. He looked at us, and said, "I know where God is. God is with and alongside the dead and suffering in Gaza. But what I want to know is, where is the church?"

After the last supper with his disciples, Jesus predicted that they would deny him. But Peter insisted he would not.

Jesus knows his ministry and mission will be dismissed as fanatical and extremist. The occupier and colonial power of Rome will narrate his body as terrorist, worthy of a crucifixion.

I read Jesus's prediction about his disciples' denial, as both a warning and plea. *"Please do not forget me. Please do not forget to tell the story of what really happened. Do not let the Roman word be the last word. Tell our story. Continue the mission."*

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The drive to Ramallah is only 15 miles. I think it takes us over two hours. Navigating the ever changing checkpoints is a daily task. Some are open, then they close. Some are closed, then they open.

When we arrive, we meet with Military Court Watch, which is an organization made up of lawyers from Palestine, Israel, US, Europe and Australia focusing on children held in Israeli military detention.

1,100 testimonies of children have been collected by Military Court watch. Testimonies that include evidence of torture, ill treatment, denial of process, and unlawful transfer. Since the decades-long military occupation began, 32,000 children have been transferred from the West Bank, a clear and direct violation of international law. The Social cost is enormous. Children are coerced into confessions, told their friends have ratted them out, and in turn they rat their friends. Then they are sent back into the community as informants. But kids aren't good informers under the best circumstances. The point isn't information. It's to incite distrust in families and communities.

It's worth noting 98 percent of children detained live within several

kilometers of an illegal Israeli settlement. They are arrested primarily for things like throwing stones. Settlements are illegal, and settlements are expanding. Since October 7 numerous outposts have been constructed, settlements increased, and roads that divide up the west bank, constructed.

While the Palestinian's of the West Bank witness family, friends, compatriots in Gaza die, they also bear enormous economic, social, and cultural catastrophe. "It is a slow motion catastrophe," they say again and again. They are more and more isolated from each other and the world.

Shortly after Jesus' plea to his disciples to not forget him, in his moment of greatest need, as prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, he will be left alone. His disciples will fall asleep.

It's only when the soldiers arrive that they awake to the true significance of the moment.

Isn't it the case for us, as well, that it's only when we see the horrors on our televisions and computers that the violence begins to awaken us. But all along the structures of violence wreak havoc and death in subtle and invisible ways while the world has its eyes closed. This is what the Quaker Palestinian writer Jean Zaru observes, "The structures of violence are silent and people cannot take pictures of those." By contrast, "television captures only the direct violence."

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The Alrowwad cultural center lies at the heart of the Aida refugee camp, one of three refugee camps in Bethlehem. The camp was established in the 1950's by refugees from Jerusalem and Hebron. What were once tents are now buildings built atop buildings. There's nowhere to build but up. Generations have passed, but families hold onto the keys of the homes

from which they were evicted and forced, awaiting the fulfillment of their right to return.

At the Alrowwad cultural center children dance and sing. They are used to performing for groups like ours, but groups like ours haven't visited since October.

In the dancehall teenagers perform traditional Palestinian dances. I don't know much about dance, but I know they are impressive. I don't know much about dance, because there's a dozen jokes about why White Euro-American mennonites like me don't dance. And as I watch, I curse whatever history denied me the possibilities of dance.

They leap and bound, twist and twirl. The occupation, and violence in general, is about bodies, constricting them, forcing them into positions of submission and retreat, restricting their movement. Here, they are unwinding the occupation, loosening the restraints that constrict them.

Their movements are controlled because they are in control. And they are flowing and free, because bodies that are free flow into motion, into a rhythm that prophesizes the liberation that is to come. They dance the resistance.

As we begin to leave, a group of teenage girls gather around a woman in our group and ask her to take a selfie with her phone. They pose as teenage girls pose and the woman snaps the picture. She offers to take another one with one of their phones. Their laughter and giggles turn toward a serious and earnest response. They say "no, this picture is for you. Do not forget us." It reminded me of the poem I've heard read a dozen times since October by Refaat Alareer,

*If I must die,  
you must live*

*to tell my story  
to sell my things  
to buy a piece of cloth  
and some strings,  
(make it white with a long tail)  
so that a child, somewhere in Gaza  
while looking heaven in the eye  
awaiting his dad who left in a blaze —  
and bid no one farewell  
not even to his flesh  
not even to himself —  
sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above,  
and thinks for a moment an angel is there  
bringing back love.  
If I must die  
let it bring hope,  
let it be a story.*

They need to be remembered, to be storied...

At the heart of the Palestinian struggle is a struggle to be trusted, to have their story count, to narrate their lives on their own terms, and to not be denied. And the Church has time and again said, *"I do not know these people... I do not know these people... I do not know these people..."*

Indeed, the theologian Mitri Raheb has written about the way Western theology has been constructed in a way that renders Palestinians invisible: *"Palestinian Christians, the native people of the land, were not visible in this western christian theology [the anglo-saxon theology that supported Israel]. Just as Israel erased Christian demography and geography from Palestine so western theologians erased Palestinian Christians from their theology as if they had never existed, as if they did not belong to Palestine, and as if they were aliens in the Holy*



*Land."*

But they are there, in the land called holy. I have seen it with my own eyes.

*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*