

Genesis 45:1-5, 16-20
Genesis 22:1-21

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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BLOOD BROTHERS

Text: And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, :What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid: for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." *Genesis 21:17-18*

"I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand of the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of your enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." *Genesis 22:17-18.*

The Arab/Israeli conflict in Palestine may be the most critical conflict of our time. It's important to take a look at its roots, and to suggest a solution, perhaps the only solution.

When Abraham and his wife, Sarah, remained childless into old age, Sarah proposed to Abraham that he have a child by his slave woman, Hagar, whom they would then adopt as their own (Gen. 16:1-2). So Ishmael was born as Abraham's first son. Then, when Ishmael was a few years old, Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah, and Sarah, in a fit of pique, had Hagar and Ishmael banished from the camp, and off they trudged into the wilderness. In a scene that is a stunning likeness to Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac, Ishmael is rescued at the point of death by the intervention of an angel. The parallel is a way of declaring God's unanimity with both offspring. Indeed we are told how "God was with the boy" Ishmael (Gen. 21:20) as his protector as he grew up in the wilderness, even exceeding Isaac in becoming the father of twelve sons or "princes" of their desert tribes (Gen. 25:16). Like Isaac, Ishmael lives to a great age, if in obscurity from the biblical record, but he returns to the scene briefly at the death of his father to help Isaac bury Abraham. While the leadership of the family passes to the younger Isaac (oddly, oldest sons seldom seem to be prominent in Old Testament stories), it is clear that God cares for and protects Ishmael equally with Isaac. Both are valued sons of Abraham.

Throughout the world, all Arabs view themselves culturally as descended from Ishmael, while the Jews trace their lineage through Isaac's 12 grandsons, the heads of the traditional tribes of Israel. Ishmael and Isaac, Arab and Jew, are thus historically, "blood brothers," sons of Abraham.

For much of their history, Arabs and Jews have lived in relative peace and even friendship with each other, both in the land of Israel and elsewhere. Karen Armstrong, in her book, *Islam*, makes clear at a number of points how important these relationships were. Another good example is to read Elias Chacour's moving biography, *Blood Brothers*, whose title I here borrow, and whose early pages capture the often genial spirit of village life in Palestine between Arab and Jew before the eruption of civil war in 1947.

Yet while Arab and Jew often lived at peace with each other, that is not true of the land. Ancient Palestine is roughly contiguous with modern Israel, a tiny strip of real estate only about 140 miles long and between 30 and 70 miles wide. Even though over half of the land of Israel encompasses the Negev Desert to the south, the entire nation would fit easily 5 times into the state of Pennsylvania. And lodged like an arrowhead between landlocked Jordan and the great stretch of the Arabian Desert to the south and west, and the Mediterranean sea to the east, the land has been strategically crucial and for over three thousand years. The reason: it is the only direct, and very narrow, land bridge between three continents, Africa, Asia, and Europe.

This strategically vital land has been fought over intermittently and occupied interminably. First by the early Egyptians, then, when the Pharaohs became careless, by the Hyksos, marauding horsemen from the region of modern Turkey who established their own Egyptian dynasty. Emancipated Hebrew slaves under Joshua emerged from the wilderness of Sinai (south of the Negev) and captured the hill country of Palestine about 1200 BC, gradually expanding and carving up the land among their twelve tribes. In the early decades of the monarchy, about 150 years later, King David built on Saul's kingship of

just three tribes, united the twelve tribes and expanded Israel's territory to include much of what Israel is today. But the unity was short lived. After his son Solomon's death, the nation split into two, with separate lines of kings reigning in the kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Within 350 turbulent years both nations were gone, their respective leadership dragged into exile, and while many Jews were resettled in the land by the Persians, except for 100 years under the Maccabees, no nation of Israel ever existed again as an independent, free and self governing state until 1948. For 2,700 years imperial domination was unrelenting: first the Assyrians, then Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, then the Romans conquered and subjected the people of the land as had their predecessors. As a Roman province through Jesus' time, and as Roman power in the west gave way to Roman power in the east, Palestine next fell under the rule of Constantine in the 300s, then the Persians again, the Byzantine Romans, Muslims, Crusaders, the Mameluke Turks, and ultimately the Ottoman Turks until the First World War.

In the 1890's Zionism emerged as an increasingly vocal movement to create a nation state of Israel, a homeland to which the world's long exiled, and largely self-exiled Jews might return. While Zionism's principal interests on behalf of the Jews were not religious but cultural, the claim that God had given the land to the Biblical Hebrews, the ancestors of the Jews, nevertheless became a persuasive argument in international quarters. But the land was already occupied, in fact had always been occupied by the Palestinians, even before Israel overran its "promised land" 3,000 years before. This modern claim to the land was made, not on the basis that Israel had longstanding sovereignty over the land—Israel had known self-governing autonomy as a single nation in the land for only 180 out of the last 3,200 years, and none for over two millennia before 1947. Throughout these centuries, the land was effectively Palestine with an Arab Muslim population, the vast majority of Jewish people living dispersed throughout the world. In 1919 there were 600,000 Muslim Arabs living in Palestine (90% of the population) and 60,000 Jews (10%).

Because all the land was occupied, the idea of partitioning the land into two nations, Palestine and Israel, was fraught with problems. After World War 1 the British attempted to establish a shared habitat, but the problems seemed intractable. So the United Nations stepped in under pressure to compensate the Jewish people with a secure homeland following their terrible suffering during World War 2. The UN mandated a solution which partitioned Palestine. Israeli Jews would live in a long central swath of land after Palestinian families were forcibly cleared from their homes and villages, and under military escort, "relocated" to two areas. The largest was a kidney shaped central area bordering Jordan, known as the West Bank. The other, a tiny, impoverished parcel by the Mediterranean sea called the Gaza Strip, in which half a million Palestinians now live in jammed and ramshackle refugee camps. At the time of the 1948 partition of the land, the ratio of majority Muslim Arabs to Israeli Jews was about 2:1. Today there are 4½ million Arabs living in Israeli occupied land, and 6 million Israeli Jews, the latter the result of massive and often illegal immigration over the last fifty years. Almost 3 million Palestinian Arabs now live in United Nations run refugee camps and other refugee settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, and other exiled communities scattered among Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. While the West Bank and Gaza Strip were *intended* to be solely Palestinian Arab enclaves moving toward autonomy and self-rule, that never materialized. Now, to compound the problem, both of those Palestinian-intended areas have well over 100 Israeli settlements (Kibbutzim and villages) since the Israeli's occupied them militarily following the 1967 war.

The ghettoizing of Palestinians forced them to live in segregated cities like Bethlehem, or barbed wire surrounded refugee camps such as the massive camps in the soil poor Gaza Strip. This barbed wire motif on many Palestinian leaders' headgear, like the former Yasser Arafat, is a vivid and distressing symbol of the plight of Palestinians. Ironically, the Palestinian situation is reminiscent of the predicament of the Israelites living in slavery in ancient Egypt 3,500 years ago. And in a further dark irony, the policy of ghettoizing (segregating a race by law into inferior and cramped communities), is precisely what Christians did to Jews in the European cities of the Middle Ages; indeed, that is where the word comes from.

Much of the last 60 years has been the history of Palestinian resentment and their increasingly militant response to their plight as a landless, nationless people forced from their historic land, and economically subservient. The situation of the Palestinians is not unlike the plight of American Indians, displaced, relocated, and impoverished by the tide of massive immigration by an alien culture. Israelis, on the other hand, conscious of being a tiny Jewish enclave in a vast sea of Arab nations, have naturally fought back against every hostility. And whether or not the land was rightly or wisely acquired, it *has* been home now to many Israeli Jews for three or four generations.

Tragically, when a subject people, such as the Palestinians, reaches the point of utter despair, without land, nation status or civic rights, when life itself becomes emptied of meaning, many, often egged on by militant fundamentalism, consider the one resource left to be violence, even the self-obliterating violence of the suicide bomber. It is the statement of last resort.

Francis Ford Coppola's movie, "Godfather 2," has a telling scene in which Michael Corleone, in Cuba with a host of underworld backers for a potential hotel and casino development, is stopped in his chauffeured car in a narrow street in Havana. A bus, stopped to the side of the road, is forcibly being emptied by armed police, and the inhabitants questioned. The police are looking for communist rebel terrorists in from the hills (Castro's men). Suddenly, one man breaks from the line, runs across the street and dives into a police car. Seconds later there's an explosion as the rebel detonates a grenade, killing himself and a policeman.

Later, the underworld venture capitalists are on a hotel veranda high above Havana, and one of them asks Michael

Corleone if he's ready to commit money to the project. He declines. Why, they ask? He recalls the incident on the street earlier, predicting that the project is doomed because when men are driven to sacrifice their own lives for a cause, that cause is virtually unstoppable.

The violence, the killing has to end. But even three billion dollars of annual aid to Israel will not stop it. It has to stop with some incentive, so that a courageous, humane and just peace can be worked out for both sides. For my own part, I do not think that such a lasting peace can come about by the normal political processes where some new agenda is imposed from the top down—no matter who comes up with it—the League of Arab States, the United States, Israel, or the European nations. The agendas and fears, power bases, and economic self-interests are just too strong, not to mention years of anger, distrust and pain. If a movement for peace comes it will likely best come from the *people* themselves, the ordinary people of the street who publicly rally to say “Enough!” on both sides, but principally the people who own the resources and wield the power, the Israeli people, not their leaders. And the Palestinian people, the ordinary people, must pressure their own to end the violence.

I think of the Joseph story that ends the book of Genesis. How the pampered dreamer was sold into slavery by his own brothers, who then brandished his blood-stained, prized coat, tricking their father into believing that Joseph was dead. How, over many years, Joseph rose to become the virtual savior of the Egyptians in a time of extended famine, and indeed all the surrounding nations. How, when his brothers traveled from breadless Palestine, desperate to buy grain, he recognized them, and still seething with resentment after twenty years, toyed with them, tricked them, played psychological games with them, having his own silver chalice planted in their grain sacks, then dispatching his personal guard to hunt them down on the way home to Palestine, only to reveal the “stolen” chalice in their baggage. How he toyed with using their youngest brother as a hostage till their return. And finally, in an immensely moving scene, how his heart burst with its sequestered truth: “I am Joseph, your brother.” And he made peace with them and gave them the best of the land in Goshen, the immensely fertile delta of the Nile, to share in common with the Egyptians.

Real peace has to start with Israel because this is their story and the way of their God. Regardless of who has done what to whom, the God whom they claim gave them this land and expects a price in justice and grace. The same covenant that gave them the land and the promise of being a great people, culminates in a single purpose—so that they might “be a blessing” (Gen. 12:1-4). It has to start with Israel because they have the power, the resources, the means, and the divine mission to offer a just solution. The Palestinians do not, beyond ending the violence.

Blood brothers. The final peace must be an act of grace and reconciliation by the brother who has toward the brother who has not, and by the brother who has not coming in search of the brother who was lost from the land.

Amen.