The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 23—Year A
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Psalm 19
Philippians 3:4b-14
Matthew 21:33-46

This has been one of the hardest sermons I've ever tried to write—in fact, it's taken several attempts—that's pretty unusual for me—and I am still quite unsure about what I am about to say, but we have to try to speak about the events unfolding in Israel and Gaza; we have to wrestle with all of this and pray our way through it.

I have moved between having *no words* and *far too many*.

How do you wrap words around a brutal, brutal massacre of innocents and the taking of hostages? How do wrap words around relentless bombing that is laying waste to entire neighborhoods and families, killing and wounding innocent civilians, many of whom are children?

And, *conversely*, how can you possibly begin to address the complexity of this situation without lots and lots of words because one thread leads to another and another and another?

Maybe the place we all need to begin is from a place of humility. We are far removed from the rocket attacks, and brutal killing of innocents, and taking of hostages. We can't imagine what it is like to hear the sirens go and head for shelter from bombs. We can't imagine the fear of stepping on a bus, when suicide bombers blow them up. We can't imagine the hunger for security that Israeli Jews have, a hunger born in the horror of the Holocaust—*will we ever be safe???* We need to recognize the unbelievable **trauma** that the Holocaust was, and is, for the Jewish people—**a trauma that is generational and worldwide**.

And, we are far removed from the bombings in Gaza, and the bulldozers that destroy homes in the West Bank, and the unbelievable suffering that comes when you can't get your basic needs met and the capacity to live daily life is severely restricted. The Palestinians also carry **generational trauma** in their bodies and in their psyches.

We don't stand in the shoes of the Israeli Jews *or* in the shoes of the Palestinians, and so we start by *admitting that* and *understanding that*.

And so, *we* must begin with the **deepest listening** possible. If you have Jewish friends, listen to their pain and anguish about what is happening, and be especially mindful that all of this is happening amidst a time in *our* country when we are seeing a rise in antisemitism and acts of hate directed at Jews. The issues of safety and security touch every Jewish person in deep, deep places. I reached out to Rabbi Alty this week just to say that I, and the St. Luke's community, are thinking about him and our neighbors at *The Temple of the High Country*. I am grateful to Maggie Sparks who was able to make the vigil that they held last Monday night. Showing up and being present matters.

And I am grateful that, amidst the suffering in that community, Rabbi Alty had the presence, and moral clarity, to remind his community of the story from the Talmud that the rabbis tell after the Exodus, and that we tell at our Easter Vigil. On seeing the drowning Egyptians, the angels were about to break into song when God silenced them declaring, *"The works of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you would utter song in My presence!"*[i] Rabbi Alty went on to say that everyone is a creation of God. The witness of

people of faith who can stand in a different place and remind us of our common humanity is so important right now.

If you know Palestinians, listen to their pain and anguish about what is happening. Their stories don't often reach our ears, and they long for us to know the conditions in which they live. And for Palestinians and other Arabs who practice Islam, or for Arab Christians who are simply assumed to be Muslim, be especially mindful that these events take place in a world where Islamophobia is very real, and any terroristic action by a Muslim is attributed to *all* Muslims and Arabs. It is a scary time for our Muslim and Arab neighbors. Showing up and being present matters.

The news, whether in mainstream media or on social media, has been hard to navigate with social media being especially problematic. Images have gone viral that aren't even images from this conflict. War is now waged digitally as well as on the ground, and misinformation is a weapon of choice. We have to excavate the news we're getting. Keep digging and corroborate what you are seeing and hearing from several sources.

Beyond that, the news paints this in stark, dualistic terms. There is good and there is evil, and you have to take sides. One of you sent me an essay Friday by **Charles Eisenstein** entitled *"Hamas, Israel, and the Devil on my Shoulder."*[ii] He makes the point that once you declare the other side as evil, all of your actions are automatically justified as good and necessary. It's a slippery slope.

That essay led me to a post on X, formerly known as Twitter, by **Isaac Saul**.[iii] He's a reporter and the founder of Tangle, an independent, ad-free, non-partisan politics newsletter that summarizes the best arguments from the left and the right on the news of the day. He's also a Jew who has lived in Israel, and he has been in touch with Israelis, Jews, Muslims, and Palestinians. His post lays out the deep context with which we have to grapple. As he notes, there are 5,000 years of history—this isn't just about the last few decades. And he is unbelievably balanced in sorting through the competing claims, the political failures, the untenable and inhumane living conditions in Gaza and the West Bank, and the cycle of violence that is locked in and self-perpetuates, because both sides see a score to settle. His post challenged me and pushed me to go deeper in my thinking and broader in my perspective.

Instead of *tuning into* the narrative of absolute good and absolute evil, or *tuning out* because it is overwhelming and we feel so powerless and this is so out of our control, we need to stay curious and keep seeking out perspectives that will take us deeper and wider.

Eisenstein argues for cultivating *bewilderment*. I want to quote him at length—not because I agree with everything he writes because I don't, but because I think he is on to something that is fruitful for us to contemplate. And, not hearing wisdom in the voice of someone with whom we might not agree on everything is part of the problem—that attitude just keeps us siloed in our carefully cultivated echo chambers.

He writes: *[Isaac] Saul details passionately the conditions that have given rise to the outbreak of vengeance. The more one understands about the history of the region going back not just to the 1948 Nakba [Nakba is the Arabic word for "catastrophe" and refers to the massive displacement and dispossession of Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war*[iv]*], [the more one understands about the history going back not just to 1948] but through thousands of years of dislocation and genocide of the Jewish people, the less satisfying the psuedo-explanation of "evil" becomes. Apprehending the magnitude and complexity of the situation, one's first and most fruitful response is* ***bewilderment****. That is the*

realization that I do not know what to do. The familiar patterns of response collapse alongside the entrenched storylines they are based on, such as terrorists murdering innocent Jews in a relentless campaign to wipe Israel off the face of the earth, or colonizing settlers presiding over a brutal apartheid society that treats Arabs as second-class citizens. Good and evil. Victim, perpetrator, and rescuer. It is not that these storylines have nothing to offer. They each reveal something. But what they leave out is far more significant.

***Bewilderment** is fruitful,* he writes, *because it is a step away from reflexive adherence to the dramas that have plunged human beings into hell again and again and again.*

Eisenstein continues: *The devil on the shoulder, not just of every oppressed Palestinian [and I would add Israeli Jew], but of every human being who has suffered injustice, whether political or in a marriage, job, or other relationship, speaks all the more persuasively the deeper the grievances. I've got one on my shoulder too, though he speaks in whispers as my grievances are light. Not so for the people of the Holy Land. Few places on earth have given this devil as much fuel for his tirades. The name of this devil is Vengeance. His abode is Self-righteousness. And his nemesis is Forgiveness. (pause)*

Eisenstein goes on to quote another writer's description of the horrific conditions in Gaza for the last 16 years who wonders how, given that level of suffering, the world community *did not* expect a violent response.

Eisenstein makes the point that this is *not a justification* but an *explanation*. I find that helpful. Can we try to understand *explanations* for these actions without going down the road of *justifying* them?

He then goes on to say this:
It is not a justification. It is, however, a piece of information indispensable to understanding why the devil on the shoulder of the Hamas terrorists was so persuasive.

The same devil now shouts into the ears of Israelis. Just as the Hamas terrorists committed acts that achieved nothing toward peace or liberation but only vengeance, so also does Israel face a choice in its response. Will it seek security? Or will it seek revenge?

Circling back to our passage from **Exodus** this morning, do we make **vengeance** into a **golden calf** that we think will make us **secure**? That question is for all of us.

Eisenstein notes that the goals of security and revenge actually oppose each other because *revenge creates endless new crops of enemies and casts you permanently onto a "security" footing that is never truly secure…*

He goes on: *Cycles of vengeance are directly related to the paradigm of good versus evil. Each violent act of one's own side is "justified" within the narrative it maintains, and each violent act of the other side is "unjustified." A justified act is a good act. An unjustified act is an evil act. The other side performs an endless series of evil acts. It must be evil…*

Once the identity of one's own side as good, and the other side as evil, is entrenched, then any act becomes justified because, after all, it is a blow that good strikes against evil...

This is so important because we fall into this trap all the time.

Eisenstein continues: *The philosopher Rene Girard identified cycles of vengeance as the original social crisis. It is older than history. It is self-sustaining, as each act of retribution gives cause for further retribution. It is self-escalating, as each atrocity loosens further the bonds of restraint. Girard described two possible outcomes. One was the shattering of society. The second…channels the rage and bloodlust of retributive violence onto a scapegoat or a dehumanized victim subclass without the means to take vengeance.*

There is a third possibility, however. Either party can break the escalating cycle of vengeance simply by refusing to participate in it. This is what is meant by ***forgiveness****—it means* ***the release of the desire and intent*** *for those who have wronged you* ***to suffer****. The dilute form of forgiveness is* ***restraint****. You do a little less harm than the devil on your shoulder urges. Restraint keeps the violence to a manageable level. Restraint is also self-reinforcing, since a restrained response starves the other side's narrative that your side is purely evil, which is the narrative that would license unfettered violence.*

Forgiveness *is more powerful still.* Eisenstein concludes: *Imagine the reverberations if Israel said, "Our desire for vengeance is strong, but stronger still is our desire to halt the cycle of violence in the Holy Land." And then they advocated a plan…[starting with] the immediate cessation of all military operations by all sides…*

In listening to the **gospel** this morning, it hit me how much *vengeance* is in that passage, and I wonder if the **wedding robe** we're supposed to put on is the **robe of forgiveness**, and when we don't, we live in that land of **outer darkness**. Truly, **many are called**, and **few get there**.

This, I think, is where the real work lies—understanding the *power* and *cycle of vengeance*, and doing the *hard, hard work of forgiveness*, which is the only way forward into a true and lasting peace. This forgiveness is not cheap, nor is it quick and easy. It took South Africa the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to get there. When it comes to Israel and Palestine, both sides can point to atrocities committed by the other; both sides have suffered so very much.

Naim Ateek is a Palestinian Anglican priest, former Dean of the Cathedral in Jerusalem, and an Israeli citizen—just all of the identities he holds in his being bend our minds—and he is an amazing theologian who articulated a Palestinian theology of liberation[v] 33 years ago. I got to met him 30 years ago when I spent a summer in Israel and Palestine.

The theology of liberation he puts forward is powerful and generous, courageous in its truth-telling, and relentless in seeking to do the hard work of peacemaking based in nonviolence and in justice that seeks the conversion of *the oppressor* and *the oppressed* alike. Ateek also speaks of the necessity of forgiveness, so very costly, and often only forged in those who have truly suffered—again, this isn't a cheap and easy forgiveness at all. He argues powerfully that if you don't seek the *transformation of the oppressed*, as well as the *oppressor*, the oppressed *will become* the oppressor. We see this played out over and over and over.

Everyone involved in these horrific traumatic generational conflicts will have to relinquish something to move into a shared future free of this cycle of vengeance and violence. And that relinquishment will be costly, but what other way is there??? Maybe it starts with refusing to cede away the humanity of the other, and looking deeper than the devil on the shoulder that haunts us all.

One of the most powerful pieces I heard this week was an interview with Imam Herbert and Rabbi Brous.[vi] They serve in this country, but they, and both of their communities, have connections to those suffering right now in Israel and Gaza. The Rabbi quoted a Bedouin doctor from Soroka Hospital in the south, Dr.

Yasmeen Abu-Fraiha. [That doctor said that] she's been treating many of the people who came in from the massacre site. And she said, *"The real dividing line is not between Israelis and Palestinians but between those who believe violence is the answer* ***and*** *those who believe there is another way."* The Rabbi said, *"And I believe there's another way. And Imam Herbert believes there's another way. And most of us believe that there's another way. So together, we have to reject the very reductive idea that Jews and Palestinians must be enemies eternally and instead create a different way of finding one another in relationship and lifting up and affirming our own humanity and one another's."*

As those who follow the way of Jesus, the only place to stand in this moment is at the foot of the cross, joining our Lord in stretching out our arms with his to hold all of these conflicts and tensions and paradoxes, not fixing them, not resolving them, not taking sides, but just holding space amidst it all with love and compassion, and a refusal to see any human being as expendable.

We gaze upon the cross and join the Rabbi and Imam in affirming our common humanity.

We gaze upon the cross and refuse to answer the violence done with more violence.

We do our best to stand where few will be able to stand—we will need Jesus' help to stand in that place, but maybe if enough of us stand there, if enough us *break the cycle of vengeance in our own lives*, maybe that small shift will shift something in this land that is sacred and holy to us all.

May our bewilderment carry us to the place where we can relinquish our stories of good-vs-evil, lay down our vengeful desires, and commit ourselves to the hard work of peacemaking that is humble, truthful, and so very costly in what it will ask of us all. Amen.

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[i] *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* edited by Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky. Translated by William G. Braude. © 1992 by Schocken Books Inc. 73:86.
[ii] Hamas, Israel, and the Devil on my Shoulder--Charles Eisenstein--10/13/23
[iii] Post by Isaac Saul--10/10/23
[iv] United Nations--The Question of Palestine
[v] *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* by Naim Stifan Ateek.
[vi] A rabbi and imam on how they're counseling their communities--NPR--10/13/23