

This Is My Song
Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington
October 20, 2019
Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley

Prayer

Mahmoud Darwish

If this autumn is the final autumn, let us apologize
for the ebb and flow of the sea and the memories... and
for what we have done
...we wounded many creatures
with weapons made of our brothers' skeletons....

And if this autumn is the final autumn, let us unite through clouds
so we can rain for the foliage that hangs over our songs.
Let us rain over the tree trunks of myth ... and over the
mothers who stood
at the beginning of life to retrieve our story from the
storytellers
who made the chapters of departure linger.

....

And we polished our stones to
soften them — soften
them in houses brightened by oranges and light, we used
to
hang our days in keys of cypress wood. We used to live
gently, living had the taste of small differences among the
seasons

....

We have what is ours. Everything is ours: the words of
farewell

....

We have what is ours. Everything there is ours...our
yesterday
prepares our dreams, image by image, refines the manner
of our days,

....

We have in autumn a poem of love...a short poem of
love.
We revolve with the wind, O love, and fall prisoners near
the lake.

We tend to the ailing air, and shake the branches to hear
the pulse of air.

We relax the rituals of worship, and leave some gods on
either shore

for other nations, then carry the smallest gods and our
provisions for the road.

We carry this road...and walk

....

Those are our voices
and their voices, they intersect over the hills as an echo to echo.

And the flute mingles with flute, ...

As if our songs in autumn are their songs in autumn
as if the land dictates to us what we say...

....

Salaam on Canaan's land,
land of the gazelle,
the
purple land

Sermon

Let me begin with a brief story about my family. My ancestors on my mother's side of the family were Wendish — a small Germanic sect among the many that populated the valleys of the Germanic countries. They had their own language and they were die-hard Lutherans — Lutherans surrounded by Catholics that persecuted them in the endless religious wars that waged for centuries in middle Europe. My ancestors told stories about seeing their relatives hanged from their front porch, an early model of lynching.

Finally in the mid-18th century they had had enough and decided to immigrate to the new frontiers. They were one Lutheran congregation, but they were too large a group to fit into one boat, so one group came to America and another went to Australia - both claiming the free "land grants" that were being offered by the new countries. Land of course that was not our country's to give, having been stolen from the native Americans but I doubt that realization even entered my ancestors consciousness.

They settled in central Texas, in a town called Giddings that already had a German Lutheran church and settlement. You would think that that would make them feel comfortable and among their own people. But no, they were the *wrong* kind of Lutherans. And they were the *wrong* kind of Germans. They built their own Lutheran church *directly across the street* from the existing Lutheran church. And to this day the two congregations rarely mix.

I tell this story to show that there is something deeply human that seems often to happen when people flee persecution. If they are lucky enough to find someplace where they can feel free, they create a bubble around themselves where they can feel safe among their own kind. Even decades, indeed centuries, later most of my family lives in that bubble in central Texas, worshipping in the same Lutheran churches, few of them looking up to see the suffering that exists in the other people surrounding them.

I thought about this a lot when I was in Israel. As I saw how meaningful, how important, how liberating it was for the Jewish people, after centuries of persecution, to find a land and homes where they could feel free and safe, I saw some of them, like my family, created a bubble around them in which they only wish to be with their own kind, and have no opening to see the

suffering of others. I understand that. Again, there is something deeply human in this response to trauma, even in generation after generation removed from the actual trauma.

I wanted to go to Israel and Palestine to try to witness and understand just this: what traumatized people do to traumatized people. This dynamic acts out in its purest form there, in what many see as the most intractable conflict that exists in the world. I wanted to see what I could learn about conflict. I wanted to try to understand the relationship of religion to that conflict. As Thoreau said, the question is not what you look at, but what you see. I wanted to try to see.

I went with some ambivalence. We have conflicts of our own in this country: conflicts which demand our attention and our action and our compassion. Did I need to fly half-way across the world to see others? This congregation has many causes that we already struggle to support. Did we need to add one more to an already long list? And on a deeper level, I had to ask myself whether I was willing to walk that tight-rope of how to talk about Israel honestly without immediately being branded an anti-semiter, which is all too likely a possibility.

I went despite all this ambivalence, inspired in part by those in this congregation who have been dedicated to understanding the Middle East for years. I am eternally grateful to those who spurred me on, for it was one of the most profound experiences of my life. The reflections in this sermon will hardly do it justice, as there is certainly more to process and reflect upon. And my reflections are not the only ones you can hear, as the entire group of the 23 that went from this congregation are ready and willing to share their take on the experience with you. There will be some formal opportunities coming up soon for that conversation.

So let me say this at the outset: I do not blame the Jewish people for the conflicts in Israel. I do not hold the religion of Judaism responsible for the infliction of pain. I do not blame the Muslim people. I do not hold the religion of Islam responsible for terrorism. Just as with Christianity, and indeed every world religion there are people who will bend and distort and pervert the noble sentiments of their religion to justify their oppression and dehumanization of others.

I also don't want to paint a wide brush of assuming that people within each group are the same. There are brutal Israeli soldiers, and there are kind Israeli soldiers who reflect deeply

upon what they are required to do. There are brave and non-violent Palestinian freedom fighters, and there are Palestinians who have done horrifically violent things to innocent people. There are Jewish Israelis who abhor what is happening in their name and there are complacent and fearful Palestinians who will do only what is necessary to live their own lives.

Just as here and everywhere the systems of injustice are complicated and intertwined with greed and corruption and obliviousness and fear. I could not possibly in the course of this sermon untangle all this for you, nor do I wish to.

What I would like to do is give you just some glimpses of what we witnessed. And as I do so I can hear the echo in my head of the demand of one of the activists who spoke with us, Bassem Tamimi, who said over and over again: *do not come here to feel sorry for us. We do not need your pity. We do not need your support. We do not need you to save us. We need you to understand the nature of injustice. We need you to see that we are all a part of the same system which keeps all of us from being free.*

Bassem Tamimi lives in a village called Nabi Saleh in the West Bank outside of Ramallah where his family has resided for over 400 years. He says proudly that some of his ancestors are Jewish. Everyone in his small town is related to him in some way. Their town grew up around a precious spring, because sources of water in the desert are the primary source of life. Decades ago the occupation came and took over the spring and diverted it for the use of a settlement that built up in the next hill from the village. This settlement has already taken 40% of their land and continues to try to force the Tamimis off of their land entirely. As we visited in Bassem's house there was a bulldozer strategically placed just mere yards from his doorstep.

In 2009 Bassem organized a simple protest. He and his family and any who wished to join them would march down to the spring. The spring which had been the source of life for their family for centuries. They did not wish to fight, but simply to show that they had the right to farm their own land. They were met with armed settlers and then Israeli soldiers who lobbed stones, tear gas, shot rubber bullets and sometimes live rounds into the small group of men and women and children. Twenty five of the villagers were injured. But they were not deterred. Every Friday they came, and every Friday since then they continue to come. Joined over time by international observers and advocates, including Jewish activists, they continue to march.

Bassem has been held in jail 12 times, for a total of four years of his life, almost none of that time has he been formally charged with a crime. He has been beaten so badly his brain came loose in his skull and he was in a coma for 10 days. When he came out of his coma he learned his sister had been killed by a mob of settlers because she was standing outside of a jail yelling to reclaim her 14 year old son who had been arrested. His wife, Nariman, is every bit the activist that he is, having been beaten and tortured and jailed. Nariman watched her brother die right in front of her from a round of live ammunition. Her brother had not been there to join a protest. He had simply come to visit his sister and heard a commotion and went outside to try to help, and he was shot in the back as he went.

Bassem's home, just as every home in the village, has been invaded by soldiers hundreds of times. Every one of their children has been gassed, shot with rubber bullets, beaten and restrained. His youngest son is named Shalem, a name which means peace. When he was little he hated his name and begged for it to be changed, because all he kept hearing is that his people would never gain peace. Their daughter, Ahed, had a stun grenade tossed in her face when she was 11. Despite this she has become one of the fiercest and most well-known faces of the resisters, having been filmed many times refusing to back down from soldiers, biting and kicking as she has been dragged away, and, arrested and jailed, of course. The Israeli government has accused the Tamimis of setting her up as an imposter, because she happens to be blonde and green-eyed and doesn't everyone know that Palestinians are dark-skinned.

I could go on and on with their story. Or you could read more about them in Ben Ehrenreich's book, *The Way to the Spring: Life and Death in Palestine*. Despite all this horror, the Tamimi house that we visited was full of joy and laughter. The children were just children, playing video games and complaining about having to help set out the dinner. People from the village came in and out, always greeted with hugs and kisses, greeting us strangers and interlopers with hospitality and open arms.

And yet, of course, under the surface lurked the burning and ever-present trauma. "How would you raise your children in this?" asked another: Mamal Tamimi, a village leader: How would you raise your children to believe love is the most important thing rather than hate,

when hatred is rained down upon them every day? We all sat, stunned with contemplating the question. How would we? How would you?

And yet, again, they vociferously demanded that we not pity them. Mamal told the old story of someone coming across an elephant and his trainer. The trainer was leading the elephant by a simple rope tied only around one leg. How do you do that? He asked. Why doesn't the elephant simply run from you? The trainer replies that from its infancy, that rope has been around the elephants foot. When it was young it could not escape it. And despite the fact that as it grew it could have easily thrown the rope, it still thought it was held fast, because it always had been.

That, said Mamal, is how we all are: We all have ropes around us that hold us in place in our willing submission to structures that oppress us, even as we are capable of throwing them off. *What are your ropes*, he demanded we ask of ourselves. *Attend to your ropes and we will attend to ours and together someday we may all be free.*

I could tell you more stories than that of the Tamimi family. All of them illustrating some common themes: That resistance equals life, even when resistance brings physical death. Because resistance is the only choice that leaves one with self-respect. Every one of the freedom fighters we met were clear that they did not blame Judaism. They blamed an oppressive government. They fight for their land because it is the only land they have ever known, even if it is only a few square yards of dirt. They fight because they don't want to join the millions of refugees who have been forced away, decade after decade, to live in degradation in strange lands.

The people I grew to know, the stories I heard, the injustices and oppression that I witnessed first-hand, will live in my heart forever, and not just by virtue of the pain it causes. As Ben Ehrenreich wrote, "Palestine has a way of enchanting people. ...Perhaps it is the intoxicating proximity there of grief to joy and love to fury, the scale and the awful clarity of the injustice, people's resilience in the face of it."

Many of us kept asking for signs of hope, because clearly there are no easy answers to these conflicts. And everywhere we asked that, we heard the same answer: *we hope because we have to*. Because not to hope is to die. We heard this from the Jewish father whose 14 year

old daughter was killed in a suicide bombing. Rather than choose to hate, this man took his grief and pain and joined an organization of Jews and Palestinians united by their common grief of having suffered a grievous loss and determined to find a new way of peace. The people in that organization, Jewish or Palestinian, now feel that they have a new family: one another.

We visited a farm and family that have been tenuously holding on to their land despite a decades-long attempt to bulldoze them out, who boldly put a rock at their entrance with the slogan: “we refuse to be enemies” painted upon it. They have turned their oppression into a calling to commit themselves to environmental sustainability and invite people from all over the world to what they call, “The Tent of All Nations.”

I finally realized that, in looking for signs of hope in them, we were looking for hope within ourselves. And I realized that it was not up to *them* to give us hope. It is up to us to find it, fight for it, build it, in ourselves, in the world that surrounds us. Everywhere we went we saw parallels to the injustices that exist right here, in our communities. From the slaughter and displacement of Native Americans to the forced apartheid in which people of color suffer simply because of the color of their skin, we continue to recognize that none of us are innocent. As I said in the beginning, the terrorized turn around and become the terrorizers. The powerful seek to retain their power and privilege at all costs. High ideals are turned into righteousness, and the dehumanized learn how to dehumanize others. It is ever thus.

AND, it is ever thus that oppressed people rise up and claim their humanity. Good people stand up against their own families and governments and demand change. People reach out across divisions and see humanity in one another’s eyes. Again from Ben Ehrenreich: “I am optimistic because even in their despair, with no reason to hope, people continue to resist. I cannot think of many other reasons to be proud of being human, but that one is enough.”

We met an extraordinary priest named Father Chacour who, against all odds, built a school that welcomes Muslims and Christians Jews, a rare feat in the West Bank. He said to us “The land does not belong to the Israelis. The land does not belong to the Palestinians. The land belongs to God. And both the Jews and the Palestinians have to humble themselves before God and try to share their existence on the same land.”

A profound lesson to us all: we do not own our land, we are not owed anything. Our ultimate calling is to loosen our grip on the righteousness we hold tight to and to find a way to live together in peace.

I am and will forever be grateful to the extraordinary people who shared their stories with us and who opened my eyes to what I have been blind to for so long. I pray for the courage to keep them open: to dare to see the injustice that exists all around us and act with the fearlessness of the oppressed. How can I do otherwise, when I have them as a shining example?

Benediction

Mahmoud Darwish

We are the ones who forge the sky's copper, the sky that will carve roads after us and make amends with our names above the distant cloud slopes...

And we will etch on the final rocks, "Long live life, long live life," and fall into ourselves. And after us there will be a horizon for the new birds.