

War and guns – again
Rev. Michael R. Blackwood
United Church of Broomfield
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Isaiah 2:1-5

1 The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

2 In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. 3 Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

4 He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more. 5 O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Psalms 46

1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, 3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah 4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. 5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. 6 The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice; the earth melts.

7 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah 8 Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. 10 "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth." 11 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge Selah

Since the Israeli-Hamas war began (at least this conflict) on October 7th, I've felt at odds with what to think and sometimes what to feel. Yet another war! War over what? Israel? Jews? Gaza? Palestinians? Non-Jews?

The land, the people, the culture, and the politics of that region have a long, long history of discontent, turmoil and complexity. We need only look to the Hebrew scriptures to know that. Trying to understand all of the minutiae with Israel and Palestine can be rather confusing. This conflict is front and center on TV and social media, taking over for the war in Ukraine. It's upsetting.

Antisemitic incidents are on the rise, yet again. There are horrific anti-Muslim acts happening, as well. People I personally know have connections, direct connections, to what is happening in Israel.

America plays a very complicated role politically. And as a Christian, it can also be...challenging. Knowing *what* to say to Jewish and Muslims friends and colleagues is hard. Besides not knowing quite *what* to say, I wonder if I really *should* say anything at all. What *can* I say?

And then, as I'm working through all of that trying to contemplate this morning's sermon, there's a mass shooting in Maine. Yet another mass shooting!

Guns – whether in war or in America they generate so much evil and pain. It's getting worse, not better. What can I say that I haven't already said. I'm tired of it all. Aren't you? And yet here I am again – feeling obligated to preach about love against violence, about compassion instead of hurt. How many times do I have to preach this? How many times do you need to be subjected to it? You're not the ones who need to hear this message, but alas, you're the ones, like it or not, who are before me. So, I'm sorry. And I'm not sorry. Preaching love, kindness and compassion; denouncing hatred, violence and pain – I'll keep doing it for as long as I have to because I believe in it...and because it's clearly necessary. There needs to be more love in the world.

A rabbi friend of mine has been sharing with me and other colleagues several links to content and letters written by Jewish friends, colleagues and content creators, some who are living in Israel in response to our queries of "what can we say or do?" I've been reading a lot of commentaries and stories from many who are there – living and dying in the mayhem and chaos.

I'm also reading stories and reports on the massacre in Maine. Eighteen dead – a horrible loss of life and for what? The family and friends of the dead are living in their own tortured chaos.

As I read about the shooting in Maine and the war in Israel, I have many emotions. I empathize most of all, feeling heartbroken. The individual accounts help me to understand better, if not fully and I wanted to share with you some portions of what I've been reading.

An American Jew living in Israel, wrote the following on his Facebook page.

People both here and around the world have checked in to ask how I am. I appreciate this more than you can imagine. But it puts me in a bind as to how to respond, beyond to affirm my physical safety and that of my children.... Responding to this question is challenging.

Yes, it would be correct to say that I'm fine. Because in many senses I am. Especially if we contextualize this with how others are doing. And even in this situation, I try to remember that context, and I try to remember both the morality and usefulness of gratitude. But I don't always find the strength.

I'm angry.

This is of course to be expected. Joe Strummer...once wrote "let fury have the hour / anger can be power / you know that you can use it." He was talking about a rather simple situation of resistance. When anger is directed in one clear direction, and it's righteous, then outrage, literally directing one's rage outward, can be an antidote to despair and fear. And if directed effectively, can be a powerful force for change, or at least survival. But that's not where I am. I'm angry --- in so many directions I struggle to find a center on which to stand. In some senses, all of my angers are pulling me apart.

I'd like you to keep in mind the most important line in the Book of Job. After Job loses everything and is subjected to intense physical and emotional trauma, he cries out to God, demanding an explanation. Three

friends gather to discuss how he might continue to believe in a just and good God and the possibility of a just and good world. And they all mean well. The friend who speaks last, Eliphaz the Temani, holds the most correct position. He's really smart, even wise. He isn't simply an orthodox apologist for religious dogma demanding fidelity. He probes the problem deeply and calls for a complex subject position and view of God and the world. God then speaks to Job from out of the whirlwind, before pivoting to the friends, not addressing all three, but speaking directly to Eliphaz, ⁷ ... *Adonai* said to Elifaz the Teimani, "My anger is blazing against you and your two friends, because, unlike my servant Job, you have not spoken rightly about me" (Job 42:7).

God doesn't commend Eliphaz's powerful [vindication of God], one that has provided many later rabbinic theologians [like Maimonides] with great intellectual inspiration. He doesn't say 'yep, well done, you got it right my brilliant child and your [unenlightened] brother Job just needs to listen to you.' Rather, as [Maimonides] emphasizes, God rebukes him for being too invested in his own argument and correctness. The great Jewish historian Amos Funkenstein read Job as teaching that we don't always deserve answers, but we have the right, and even obligation, to demand a hearing. Especially in [an extremely difficult situation]. Even if we are wrong or lost or broken or . . . angry.

With that in mind, my answer to the question "how are you?", is that I'm angry ... I

I'm angry at Hamas about the vicious slaughter and widespread trauma they inflicted, gleefully, on so many people.

I'm angry at Israel's vaunted security and intelligence communities and institutions, whose often appalling moral decisions and violations of rights have been justified with recourse to the necessity for security, for nonetheless failing to keep us safe.

I'm angry at Hamas for undercutting the struggle for Palestinian rights and lending credence to the caricatures of Palestinians as bloodthirsty savages who just want to kill Jews, which is far from the truth. This will not only cost Palestinian lives in the immediate, but it will also set back their pursuit of justice and dignity by decades. They have alienated hard-won support in the international community. And they have made it harder to stand for their recognition, rights, and justice. Here, in Israel, it makes answering the refrain that 'they don't really want freedom, they just want us all dead and gone' exponentially more difficult. And they have reinforced the flawed attitude that any failure of brutality to subjugate others is evidence of the need for more brutality.

I'm angry at the harm that this will perpetuate for Israel and Israelis, now and in future generations, on so many levels. Dehumanizing themselves and us, dehumanizing us all, plunging us ever deeper into a morass of hatred and violence. There is no security and dignity for Israeli Jews if there is no security and dignity for Palestinian Arabs.

I'm angry at those on the right who are already waving this as vindication of their cruelty and hate-mongering.

I'm angry at those on the left who are celebrating this as valid resistance and a step in the direction of justice.

I'm angry at their glib equivocations that show zero compassion for individual lives. One cannot seek justice for peoples if one isn't seeking justice for people. Justice only comes when we provide safety and dignity for all.

I'm angry that someone next to whom I sat Shabbat after Shabbat for years in synagogue went to a music festival, had his arm blown off with a grenade, applied his own tourniquet, and now is a hostage in Gaza with no medical attention to his grave injury. And his parents and sisters, like so many others, are living a nightmare.

I'm angry at myself that this is the world and childhood I've given my three children.

I'm angry that thousands of Palestinian children will be killed and traumatized in the next days and weeks.

I'm angry that my own children's immediate welfare and that of my people, and the immediate welfare of another people and its children, are now seemingly mutually exclusive.

And I'm angry that, unlike Job, I don't have the kind of faith that gives me an address to demand a hearing and express my anger.¹

A Jewish writer and social activist shared his response to a religion colleague saying, ...

Thank you for your note....

You write, "I am someone who believes in both Israel's right to be a nation as well as the rights of the Palestinian people to have their own state." I do too. "I appreciate that you believe in "Israel's right to be a nation," but please consider what a paltry statement that is. Is that what you think this war is about? Seeking a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

[On October 7] at least 1,400 Jews were massacred; more Jews in a single day than at any other time since the Holocaust. Perhaps you saw the videos of the teenagers who were slaughtered at a desert music festival in Israel. Or the images of towns where most of the populations were murdered by terrorists who went house to house, executing everyone within.

Perhaps you have seen how the terrorists have posted videos to social media of beheadings, burnings alive, desecrated bodies, and humiliated hostages, with the same sort of twisted satanic joy that we saw on the faces of the perpetrators of the lynchings years ago in the American south.

Do you think this massacre of Jews is about the failure of the two-state solution? It is not. " Hamas " is not equivalent to "the Palestinian people." Speaking as someone who knows Palestinians, who has spent time in their homes and knows well their frustrations and true grievances and injustices they have suffered, I know that those of good faith are likewise held back by the Hamas—a fascist and repressive terrorist organization. What Israel is experiencing is the proportional equivalent of twenty 9/11's. The elimination of Hamas is not only just—it is rational and necessary for both Israelis and Palestinians in order to have any sort of livable future.

Do you think Hamas... [is] working for a two-state solution? They are working for the goal that is articulated in the Hamas charter: the annihilation of the Jewish state.

I appreciate that you believe in "Israel's right to be a nation," but please consider what a paltry statement that is. "We agree you have a right to exist." That's really not a very high or generous standard, is it? (Although there are plenty of monstrous people in the world who will not even grant that.)

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/ori.weisberg.1232>

Reverend, I want you to know about the conversation that is happening in every Jewish community in America right now:

First, we are grieving. Jewishness is first and foremost about being part of the Jewish people. Our history and our traditions emphasize that Jews are one interconnected family, a subset of our larger human family. So there is pain—an open, bleeding wound—in every Jewish community in the world right now. We are praying collectively for the hundreds who are being held hostage in terror cells. We are praying for those families that have been ripped apart. We are praying for the dead.

Second, we grieve for the suffering of innocents everywhere. Most every Jewish community grieves for the suffering of innocent Palestinians, and those who will inevitably suffer in this war. *Anyone who cannot feel compassion for all innocents who suffer has surely lost any figment of a moral compass.* I know that my community prays for all the victims of war and terror everywhere, and we pray for peace. But we also know that the Palestinian people suffer from Hamas’s fascism and cruelty.

Third, Jewish communities are asking today who our allies are. Every day, I’m hearing shock and dismay—and worse—from Jews who are experiencing the ugliest sort of old-school antisemitic hate, especially on social media. We see the pro-Hamas rallies in the streets of some cities, where the protestors seem positively euphoric about the deaths of Israeli Jews. We see demonstrations on college campuses from “progressive” faculty and students who point their fingers at us to say: It’s your fault. While we’re attending funerals, these people tell us that we are responsible for the rapes, beheadings, and abductions. ... Every synagogue and Jewish community center in America has amped up its security for protection in ways that we never imagined we would have to do in the 21st century. We are waiting to see who our allies are.

After Charlottesville—when white supremacists chanted “Jews will not replace us”—the President of the United States claimed he saw “good people on both sides.” He was appropriately excoriated for it. Hamas is the “good people on both sides” moment of 2023, especially for progressives. Anyone who cannot unequivocally say, “We stand with Israel in its fight against terrorism,” will fail the test.²

In Israel and in Gaza, there are thousands of men, women and children; parents, grandparents, religious and non-religious, political, a-political - dead and dying. The death toll in Israel remains around 1400 while in Gaza it has climbed to over 7300³ and will certainly climb as the war continues.

In Lewiston, Maine, the 18 victims were just everyday people, leading everyday lives, like you and I...like so many of the dead in Israel and Gaza. They were just having fun with friends and family, bowling and playing cornhole. Bill Young and his 14-year-old son, Aaron, were participating in a youth bowling league. Yes – a children’s bowling league was underway when the assassin began shooting. It’s miraculous that more children weren’t killed. At Schemengees bar, a weekly deaf cornhole tournament was happening.

There have been over 560 mass shootings in the US so far this year. Over 35,200 people have been killed by guns, and over 30,600 have been injured by them in 2023.... Over the past decade we have heard an increasing drumbeat of “thoughts and prayers” from politicians, a growing outcry on social media, and yet we continue to

² <https://www.atreewithroots.org/blog>

³ At the time of writing this (10/26/23) per

have more gun violence deaths and injuries than ever before, punctuated by periodic mass shootings that penetrate the public consciousness.⁴

I wish there wasn't war or mass shootings, but there are.

I wish I could do something about it, I mean *really* do something about it. I have thoughts and prayers too and that makes me feel guilty...but they are valid, they are powerful and necessary, and I will continue to pray...but I know it's not enough. I long to do something that will yield tangible effectiveness that stops war and gun massacres.

See, that's the rub.

We want to see immediate results, to KNOW that whatever it is we've said or done has had an effect, regardless of whether it's on war or gun violence.

To see change, an end to war, to gun violence, to poverty, homelessness, racism and oppression of all kinds is to talk, to listen, to share, to care to know about the lives and experiences of the individuals who are experiencing these "isms." We must become directly and personally concerned. We must expand our moral imaginations and truly believe that a different way is possible. Peace is possible.

Love your neighbor --- by advocating for ceasefires and fighting to ban assault weapons. It's not naïve or futile. Discourage others who only offer violence as the solution to violence. More guns will never bring peace to our communities. More war will never bring peace to Israel and Palestine.

As Isaiah says, "...come, let us walk in the light of the LORD."

For peace to come it means that we must introduce people to the Prince of Peace. There is darkness leading to war and a reliance on guns. There needs to be the light of Jesus Christ. Isaiah saw this in his vision.

Preaching against war and guns may have some limited effect, but when Jesus transforms lives, they know the peace of God in their life. Christ has come as Isaiah saw and has instituted his plan of peace.

It is a future day when we will realize this peace in its totality as in Isaiah's vision, but through love and compassion for our neighbors, it can happen now; all we need to do is walk in the light of God.

AMEN

⁴ <https://www.bu.edu/sph/news/articles/2023/again-and-again-mass-shootings-continue-unabated-in-the-united-states/>