
Sermon
The Promised Land

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant
Hope Unitarian Church
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First Reading: Genesis 15:12-21

¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. ¹³Then the Lord said to Abram, 'Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; ¹⁴but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.'

¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.'

Second Reading: Genesis 28:10-15

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'

Sermon

I'm glad to see you have all survived the blizzard and the snow and the ice and the cold and once again made it up the hill. The best comment I've heard about the last few days was the person who said words something like this: "I can do without a White Christmas, thank you. If I want to see snow I'm perfectly happy to look at pictures." That sounds blasphemous. It flies in the face of Irving Berlin's song, *White Christmas*, that Bring Crosby made famous. We are supposed to want a White Christmas and to

be delighted when we get one. The same is also true of Christmas presents. We are supposed to want our presents and to delight in them. But that's not always true. Oftentimes we are not happy when it snows and not happy with presents received. People line up after Christmas to return presents for a variety of reasons. Some presents aren't easily returned, especially those people tend to give themselves, such as animals. The burden of caring for dogs and cats – and sometimes alligators and snakes – is too much and too costly for some people with resulting urban legends about alligators and crocodiles in the sewers of large cities and the reality of genuine problems caused by the release of several types of exotic snakes and fish into our swamps and lakes. The lesson to be learned from all this is that we are sometimes better off without some of the gifts we receive.

I was thinking about this before Christmas and it led me to reflect on one of the most difficult international challenges we have faced for several decades – which is the product of religion. It is the problem of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It all started with a gift. According to the bible God gave the land we call Israel today to the Hebrew people. God said it, they believed it, and people have been fighting and dying for it ever since. The modern state of Israel was established in 1948. The movement to re-establish an independent country of Israel – which had not existed for over two thousand years – began with the emergence of political Zionism in 1897. The intersection of the Zionist movement with the world's angst over the Holocaust made modern Israel inevitable. On an emotional basis it is difficult to argue against what happened. Sixteen hundred years of anti-Semitism culminating in the Holocaust left a moral stain on Western Civilization.

If the land that is Israel today had been vacant all those years the invention of Modern Israel would have posed few problems. But the land was not vacant and the world had not stood still. Over the centuries the vast majority of Jews left the ancient borders of Israel and settled elsewhere. It is also possible – some say likely – that most of today's Jews are not descended from the Jews of biblical times. In their stead a plethora of peoples came and went, especially the Arabs. A new religion arose – Islam – that claimed a connection with Judaism and saw parts of Israel – especially parts of Jerusalem – to be just as holy to Islam as they were to Judaism. God, it seems, had made a gift of the land of Israel to the Jews and the Muslims. I cannot help but wonder if the world in general and Jews and Muslims in particular would not be better off if God had been less generous. The perception of both sides that they are the recipients of a gift from God, the recipients and owners of a Holy land that infidels should not despoil, has cost countless lives and expense beyond counting. And like it or not, the existence of Modern Israel is part of the reason for Islamic extremism today. Having said that I want to be certain that you understand what I mean. I do not suggest that the existence of Israel and America's friendship with Israel justifies Islamic terrorism. That is absurd. I merely recognize that there is a casual relationship between the two, not a moral justification.

I don't think what I've said is news to any of you and it is not what catches my attention this morning. I am concerned with the religious reasoning about metaphors that underlies the conflict that confronts us today. The metaphor of the Promised Land has great power. The night before he was murdered Dr. King invoked it. He said that

he – as Moses before him – had seen the promised land. He would not cross into it, but those who heard him would. Some have suggested that Barack Obama's election was the fulfillment of what Dr. King spoke. Countless others have used that same metaphor including those of opposite political affiliation. To speak – as many have – of manifest destiny and of America as the new Israel is to invoke that same metaphor. For African Americans it is a metaphor of great power and beauty – but not for America's indigenous Indian population. And therein, I think, lies the problem. Metaphors are powerful, but they are not reality. Trouble arises when one reifies metaphors and treats them as something concrete and material.

I think it is impossible to think about almost anything unless you use metaphors – especially religion and morality. As George Lakoff has argued the basis for morality is experience. We begin with our concrete experience of the world and expand that experience through the power of metaphors. We know from experience that it is better to be knowledgeable than ignorant, rich than poor, strong than weak and healthy than sick. Because of this, says Lakoff, we tend to create moral metaphors about money, strength and health. We speak of the strength of our moral convictions. We say knowledge is worth the price. We say a man has a healthy respect for the rights of others and that people have moral obligations using the same words we use to describe financial obligations. We seldom think about such metaphors, but in the moral world they are ubiquitous. I don't believe we can think about morality without them. The same is true of religion. Our experience tells us as a general rule that it is better to have a father and a mother than not. We then think about religion in those metaphorical terms, imagining God as father or mother. But here's the problem. Too often we begin to think of these metaphors in literal terms. If it is better to be rich than poor we begin to think that being rich makes us better than people who have less money. If it's better to be healthy than sick, then those who are healthy are inherently better than those who are sick. If it is better to be strong than weak, then those who are strong must be morally superior to those who have less strength. The law of the jungle becomes the basis for morality. To care for the weak or the suffering becomes aid to those who are immoral. Such literalistic thinking, if I follow Lakoff's argument correctly, is why so many people oppose healthcare reform on the grounds that it is immoral. In the case of the Promised Land, it takes the idea of having a home – which is better than not having a home – and transforming it into a literal manifestation of God. If one wants to be right with God – or believe one is right with God – then one will seek metaphors that suggest God gives one strength and health and wealth --- and a home.

Theology is language about God. God can be thought of in many ways. It can be a literal being among beings who thinks and acts like you and me, a literal father or mother. Or God could be a metaphor, a symbol that stands for that which has the highest value or that which is most powerful. The later, I think is why so many people have argued that God is – literally – an all powerful and all knowing father who gives out presents. When transformed into such literal forms, the literal God becomes the grantor of a literal deed to property.

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²⁰the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.’

And because this is a literal God, the recipient has the right to take the land no matter how many thousands of years they have been gone. And when two different sets of people make the same kind of divine claim to the same parcel of land the logical result is a religious war for control – a war that can never end.

One solution is to deny the whole business. Personally, I find the idea of a literal father God – or a literal mother God – to be absurd. I don’t believe God is a being among beings. One can literalize such thinking into an absolutist atheism. But to do so is – I think – to make the same mistake as those who would transform the parent metaphor into a literal God. Doing so throws away the metaphor which is wrong because the metaphor is worth keeping.

The promised land is a metaphor. It is not the land of Israel and America is not the new Israel. The idea of God’s ‘chosen people’ is a metaphor. It is neither the Jews, the Arabs nor the followers of Pat Robertson. God the father – or mother – is a metaphor. God is not anyone’s parent to the exclusion of others. That’s the problem with transforming such metaphors into the literal world. Wealth and power become the basis of morality and title to the Promised Land becomes justification for the death and destruction of all who would dare trespass. Such a use of the language makes a mockery of what morality and religion ought to be. The real Promised Land is a metaphor that belongs to all people. It represents the idea that all people should have a place to call home, the moral principle that no one should be oppressed. As a literal place it is basis for saying one group is in, another must keep out. As a metaphor it says the disposed refugees of Africa and the residents of Tulsa’s homeless shelter are all deserving of a place to call home – not just those living in one of Tulsa’s gated communities. God as a literal parent says he will take care of me, you are on your own. God as a metaphorical parent is a reminder that each person is deserving of a parent who will nurture and support.

The news from the Middle East is not encouraging. Both Israelis and Arabs seem intent on taking their religious metaphors literally. They speak of a God that is a literal being who is all powerful and all knowing and who – oh, so conveniently – favors their group over the other. Such a literal God is nothing more than an idol, a tribal deity. There’s nothing grand about such a God and I believe it is a God unworthy of being called God. This is not a new idea. You can find it in the bible in the story of Jonah. Most people think the Jonah story is about the big fish or obedience to God, but in fact the Jonah story is an argument against tribalistic notions of God. It’s a lesson that needs to be taught over and over again. But it’s a lesson most people don’t want to hear. People tend to prefer a literal God, a tribalistic God, a God small enough to put in their pocket where he can whisper to them that they are better than their neighbor. Such an idea of God makes the Promised Land a waste land. Would that both sides would learn that the land of Israel will not be a true promised land until every person – regardless of religion or ethnicity is welcome and able to live there in peace.

Amen.