

First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Burlington, Vermont

Date: August 11, 2013

Title: “Reflections on the Middle East”

Pastor: The Reverend Peter Cook

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 1: 1, 10-20

1 The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

10 Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! 11 What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. 12 When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; 13 bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. 14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. 15 When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17 learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. 18 Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. 19 If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; 20 but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Today, I would like to offer some reflections on the Middle East. As many of you know, I traveled to Israel and Palestine with my son earlier this summer. We saw many things and met many people. We were disturbed and delighted all along the way. Over the course of the coming year, I will find ways to talk about this multilayered experience. This morning, however, I wanted to offer some initial reflections and introduce some themes, ideas and observations which will be expanded upon in the months ahead. After church today, we are blessed to have with us my fellow traveler and son, Alex, the family academic and writer, who will offer his reflections.

So to begin, I have picked a text from the prophet Isaiah. In the first chapter, Isaiah is addressing four kings of Judah: They were: King Uzziah, King Jotham, the son of King Uzziah, and King Ahaz who was succeeded by his son Hezekiah, the fourth king. They ruled between the years of 781 to 686 BCE. These kings ruled Judah and parts of Jerusalem.

Where is Judah? Judah extends from Jerusalem south towards the Egyptian border. Judah does not include Israel which was otherwise known as the Northern Kingdom. It used to be that the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) were ruled by one king notably King Saul, King David, and King Solomon who reigned between 1079 and 931 BCE.

But after King Solomon died the Northern Kingdom (Israel) broke off from the Southern Kingdom (Judah). Why did that happen? Well it seems that King Rehoboam tried to impose heavy taxes on the Northern Kingdom (Israel) to pay off Solomon's bad debt. He also wanted the money to subsidize the temple in Jerusalem and his high flying life style. The residents in the Northern Kingdom said, "No thank you." They then revolted and broke off from Judah.

So now Isaiah is addressing himself to the kings of Judah (The Southern Kingdom) who have a lot less power and now preside over a lot less land than did Saul, David or Solomon. Within the Hebrew Bible, you have several groups of people who are evaluating the success or failure of these kings using some specific political and religious criteria. I am always impressed by the diversity of perspectives among the devout and not so devout of what it means to be faithful. Put another way, religious people can look at the same historical period and pick very different winners and losers based on what they think is religiously important.

In the Hebrew Bible, a dominant theological approach for those particularly vested in the construction and preservation of the Temple, was to say that a good king was devoted to worshipping one God, as opposed to several Gods. A good king built and preserved the temple in Jerusalem because it offered order to a chaotic existence. The temple gave order to the cosmos. A good king was successful in standing up to foreign powers. He was also adept at expanding the borders of Judah. By contrast, you were a bad king if you allowed for the worship of other Gods. You were a bad king if you weakened the temple. You were a bad king if you succumbed to foreign powers. And you were a bad king if you lost land to others. Now you will see in a short while that the prophet Isaiah has a very different set of criteria to evaluate success or failure of these kings and the faithfulness of their followers. For now, however, let us use the more traditional lens to evaluate the success or failure of these Kings.

So what can we say about the four kings? First there was King Uzziah. We are told that Uzziah was able to subjugate some local enemies including the Philistines who occupied what is today the Gaza Strip going north up the coast of the Mediterranean. King Uzziah also subjugated the Ammonites to the East in what is now Jordan. In some ways, it was hard to imagine that the Ammonites were really enemies since they were really kissing cousins with the Hebrews in many ways. In his later life, when Isaiah was just beginning his prophetic work, King Uzziah was stricken with leprosy. Uzziah's leprosy was seen by some as divine punishment for taking over the functions of the Priests in the temple. The temple purists drove out King Uzziah, and his kingship was turned over to his son Jotham.

Now King Jotham was actually a regent for his ailing father, Uzziah. In effect, he already held the reigns of power for eight years before assuming the throne. Jotham carried out several building projects. He was also known for doing an even better job of subjugating the Ammonites than his father. King Jotham was a prosperous person because he was seen as aligning his life with the one true God. Unfortunately, in the temple Jotham kept high places for people who offered sacrifices to Baal. His singular devotion to Yahweh was called into

question. In the last years of his reign, he forged what some might have regarded as an unholy alliance with Pekah of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and Rezin of Syria. He forged this alliance to prevent the Assyrians, who came from what is now modern day of Iraq, from invading Judah. Jotham succeeded for a time and held the line against the Assyrians through his death.

After the death of Jotham, his son Ahaz assumed the throne. Ahaz was not able to prevent the Assyrians from invading. The Assyrians attacked the whole region. Not just Judah, but also Israel in the North, Damascus, and the Philistines along the coast. So Ahaz, to prevent Assyria from attacking, formed an alliance with Rezin, King of Syria, and Pekah, King of Israel, to stop the advance of Assyria. Ahaz could not, however, persuade his own people in Judah to support this alliance. So some people sought to replace King Ahaz with a man named Tabeel who was more to their liking. King Ahaz, fearing his loss of power, gave to Assyria's king, Tiglath, large portions of the temple treasury. He also sought to replace the altar in the Jerusalem temple with one modeled after Damascus. So when King Ahaz sold out to the Assyrians he fell out of favor with the temple purists in Judah. Ahaz was also severely judged for adopting abominable Canaanite practices of sacrificing his son and worshipping at high places.

After King Ahaz died, his son, Hezekiah, assumed the kingship. Hezekiah was much more popular with the ritual purists and worshippers in the temple. It says in the book of Kings that Hezekiah "trusted in the Lord the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him" (2 Kings 18:5). Hezekiah made every effort to refurbish the temple which had fallen into disrepair over the years where he centralized the worship of Yahweh at the Jerusalem temple. He also banned the worship of false Gods. And he also banned the revering of the bronze serpent associated with Moses and the miraculous healing of the people who were attacked by scorpions in the desert. Hezekiah, however, did not do so well standing up to the Assyrians who sacked Jerusalem while he was king. Some criticized him for being too accommodating of the Assyrians. They felt Hezekiah laid the ground work for the Babylonian exile which took place some years later when the temple was destroyed and many were deported to Babylon. So these four kings, as you can see, had varying degrees of success in preserving the temple, encouraging people to worship one God, and guarding Jerusalem and Judah from harm and land appropriation.

Now the prophet Isaiah had different criteria for evaluating the success of these kings than those with a more traditional view who supported the temple. Isaiah was not unsupportive of the temple. Isaiah cared a good deal about worship and temple life. Famously, in Isaiah 6, during the last year of King Uzziah's reign, we get these fantastic pictures of glorious and awe-filled worship in the temple complete with God on a throne with flowing robes and winged seraphs. But Isaiah in spite of his devotion to the temple and its worship, felt people were so caught up in rituals that they became oblivious to the pain and oppression of those around them. Consequently, Isaiah ripped into all four of these kings, referring to them as rulers of Sodom (which I drove by incidentally a few weeks ago) and Gomorrah. And Sodom and Gomorrah's

sin if you recall was the resident's lack of hospitality to strangers and their propensity to bless violence. Listen again, to Isaiah strong words to the kings:

“10Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! 11What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. 12When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; 13bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation— I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. 14Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. 15When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.”

Now hear Isaiah's point. The temple and the use of ritual to worship even the one true God, is complete nonsense if it is not matched by justice and a compassion for the poor and the oppressed. The kings, when they assumed power, promised to care for the oppressed and the vulnerable and to bridge the gap between rich and poor. Unfortunately, in the eyes of the prophet, after the kings assumed power they promptly forgot these promises. So Isaiah, while he believed in worship and even was more supportive of the idea of the temple than other prophets, was really clear that all of this was a distraction if there was no justice.

According to Karen Armstrong in her book Jerusalem, during this period justice and compassion became more central virtues, and without them, it was said, devotion to sacred place was worthless.ⁱ According to Armstrong, “the opposite of ‘poor’ was not ‘rich’ but ‘proud.’”ⁱⁱ In Jerusalem, people were not to rely on human strength, foreign alliances, or military superiority but on Yahweh alone; he alone was the fortress and the citadel of Zion, and it was idolatry to depend arrogantly upon mere human armies and fortifications.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Again listen to what Isaiah said to the kings and the people:

“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

So you see among the Hebrew people that there was a great conflict between the prophets, who demand justice for the oppressed, and those who placed the emphasis on preserving the temple, land acquisition and holding off foreign enemies. In light of this classic tension with Judaism, I would offer three points for us to ponder as we look at the contemporary situation in the Middle East

First the biblical record shows that the borders which delineated what land belonged to who was incredibly fluid. In any given year, Kings had more land to claim than at other times. Sometimes

the amount of land the kings had control over, reached deeper into the south and the north but more of the time it centered around parts of Jerusalem and the surrounding area. The idea that a group of Hebrews alone had exclusive claim to any land was a very dubious idea since many times the occupants of the land could be related and other times not. They had equal claim and did not make a distinction between Hebrew and non-Hebrew.

I bring this up because many times we think that the original borders of Israel were one big land mass from the borders of Egypt all the way north to the Syrian and Lebanese borders. Except, however, for a very short period of time of about 130 years, Israel never had such extensive borders. Judah and Israel were separate and had a lot of tensions between them. They were not united. In fact, it is more accurate to say that blood relatives shared that mass of land of what we call modern day Israel. Any of those who lived on the land had just about as much right to live there as anyone else. Indeed Isaiah had a very unifying view of Jerusalem where all the nations would gather together as one to create the New Jerusalem.

I offer the insight of shared ownership and co-existence for Jerusalem and Israel as a whole as we consider the prospect of a two-state solution where Palestinians get some land, but Israel gets a lot more of the land. The two-state solution becomes a problem because Israel keeps taking more and more land from Palestinians through building more settlements. Such settlement activity is a violation of international law. When you reach a negotiation, the Palestinians would have in actuality so little land compared to Israel, that it is hard for many Palestinians to imagine an equitable peace settlement. There is a sense that, with a two-state solution, Israel will get all the good land, natural resources, and access to water ports. The Palestinians, on the other hand, will get a much smaller piece of land with little going for it in natural resources. Given the imbalance of power between Palestinians and Israelis, and considering the history where people in this region really lived together, the idea of one state for everyone, Palestinian and Israeli, alike has more appeal. Everyone would have access to the riches of the region instead of just some folks.

The idea of modern nation state with fixed borders is really a recent development. Borders in the Middle East, and most certainly in Israel were drawn by foreign powers often with little regard for those who actually lived there. These modern nation states with such fixed borders would be a foreign idea to the biblical writers. Indeed, I would argue, it is still a foreign idea in a lot of ways which is partly why you have so much tension and conflict in the region.

Secondly, it seems to me that the ideology of the temple and the obsession with security and defeating enemies, even if you are related, is the order of the day and gets worse all the time. If you go to Jerusalem, there is an ever expanding effort for Israel to claim Jerusalem all for itself and kick the other folks out. Settlement activity to grab more land is constant. 7,700 new settlements have taken place in the last 6 months. Recently 69 housing facilities in East Jerusalem—which is considered a Palestinian area—went up. Leading up to the eve of the beginning of the peace talks, it was announced that 3,000 more settlements would take place

predominately in the East Jerusalem but also the West Bank. At the same time, Palestinians are excluded from Jerusalem itself, including my son's friend's father who cannot legally enter while the rest of his family can. It is also worth noting that there are 7 million Palestinians who may never be permitted to return to land that was forcibly removed from them and their families in 1948. This is called by Palestinians, "the Catastrophe." If you raise up your voice against the land grab, you are on the outs with the Israeli government. Those who think land acquisition and the restoration of the temple, combined with unmatched military power is a good idea, hold the power card.

Prophets in Israel would have a different view. What gives you the right to this land, they would ask, if you can't do justice to its inhabitants? They would say Israel's security is at risk because of its injustice through the erection of the wall and the ever expanding settlement activity. I find myself wondering, quite frankly, whether Isaiah the prophet would ever get through airport security and their multiple questions about what he thought and who he would be talking to. Let's just say, if we used the justice laden language of Isaiah and his criticism of abuse at the temple, it is more likely he would be detained than allowed through. At the moment, Israel is a very strong military power. We do, however, see some glimmers of Isaiah's argument in the current peace process. That argument is that justice towards Palestinians will in the long run prove far more stabilizing to the region than all the check points and military resources Israel can muster. All of this preoccupation with security, military power, and taking more land, is really a house of cards which will eventually collapse. Justice and compassion offer the most appropriate and secure path for all concerned.

Finally, to bring about change in the region, non-violent approaches are important. The pattern is at times to use violence, but pressure can be brought to bear through non violent means which has been effective in getting Israel's attention. One way to change a society is through military might. As we have seen, however, in ancient and more recently history of the region such approaches are really not very stable. Bringing about pressure in non-violent ways is better along with more robust relationship building. A few weeks ago, the European Union, responding to the organizing efforts of Palestinians, imposed severe sanctions on Israeli settlements. Recently, the European Union also announced they were cutting off significant grants to the region. Some argue these moves of economic pressure, prompted Israel to move towards negotiating a peace settlement with the Palestinians. Many are skeptical about whether these talks will succeed. Some feel they are merely a cover for Israel to keep building settlements and continue other discriminatory practices. However, what brought Israel to the table was not the Palestinians great military power (because they have none). Instead, the non-violent pressure and sanctions called for by Palestinians have prompted some world leaders to hold Israel accountable. Sanctions and moral appeal really do count for something. The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction movement, which some actively seek to discredit, provides Palestinians a much more constructive way to channel their frustration and seek justice than the use of violence.

The focus on land acquisition, preservation of the temple, prayers to even one God detached from justice-seeking and military conquest, is not workable compared to paying attention to the cries of those who are suffering and seeking to do something about it in non-violent ways. Isaiah put it well to all those kings years ago who were struggling to maintain their power through temple devotion and military might. Isaiah would speak today to King Netanyahu, King Obama, and King Abbas, “Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; if you are willing to do justice you will be blessed. The path is justice. But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

ⁱKaren Armstrong, Jerusalem. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. 66

ⁱⁱIbid.

ⁱⁱⁱIbid.