

# A BRIEF MOMENT OF TRUTH

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on Sunday, January 15, 2017

*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **A Strange Experience; a Suicide Bombing**

Let me start by telling you that I had a strange experience a number of years ago in 2005. I was in Bethlehem at the time as part of a fact-finding group that had gone to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Writing in my journal one evening at the start of a two-week stay, I reflected on the context, which was a little tough.

The day before we arrived, there had been a suicide bombing that affected a rabbi who was to be a leader for our group. His daughter was one of the casualties. She was a teenage girl who worked at a pizza parlor that had been bombed, and she was killed. That tragedy was the context that set the mood of the group as we arrived.

During the day after our arrival, while traveling the road between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, we stopped at a pull-off with a scenic overlook. We pulled over, and I stepped off the bus and stood at the guardrail, looking at the expanse of the Holy Land.

There in the distance, a couple miles away, was beautiful Jerusalem, bathed in sunlight and evocative of that sense of ancient history and sacredness. Here was the HOLY LAND, spread before our eyes.

For anyone who had a desire to visit the biblical locales and to see the actual settings described in the Bible stories we've read, this was beautiful scenery.

## **Retribution Comes in a Bulldozer, Despoiling the Charm of Jerusalem**

Taking this all in sight and feeling exhilarated, I noticed in the foreground, down below the guardrail, that there was a tiny village of a dozen or so scruffy homes. They looked very cheap, built of one-story concrete blocks with one or two rooms and metal roofs. There were rocks everywhere, all around the houses in the middle of a field of rocks.

Staring at this little village, I noticed a tent in the middle of these homes. So I asked the bus driver, "What's the deal with the tent?" He explained, "That's where there had been a home, but it was bulldozed." Apparently, in this little Palestinian village, somebody had angered someone else, and that's what happened. So you get your home bulldozed.

Looking at the tent and the remaining homes, I suddenly realized that all those rocks weren't rocks. They were concrete blocks. Where there had been 60 or 70 homes in this village before, there were only a dozen left.

On the one side, you have the Palestinians bombing a pizza parlor full of Jewish teenagers. On the other side, fire up the Caterpillar and destroy a few homes. Maybe that'll teach them a lesson.

That was the mood when I wrote in my journal that night. And I wrote a sentence that startled me: It was this:

### **“I’m not Going to Pray for Peace in the Middle East Anymore.”**

There is a certain irony in that sentence. I mean, what with the bombing and bulldozing shouldn’t you pray all the more for peace in the Middle East? So here I’m writing, “*Not* going to pray for peace in the Middle East any more.” So I looked at what I wrote. It startled me. “What’s going on,” I asked myself. “Why would I write that?” Immediately, my mind began racing.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, I was about to have one of those illuminating theological moments of my life. With my mind racing, I realized that I had been harboring rather ridiculous notions about God in my mind, in my theology. This is a bit embarrassing. Here’s what my mind did:

I began wondering that maybe God is waiting for more prayers. After all, we’ve had at least two generations of people throughout America, Europe, and the world — Muslims, Jews, Christians — praying for peace in the Middle East. But God’s up there and it’s like, “Not good enough, folks. I need more. Keep the prayers coming. Haven’t had enough yet.”

#### **My Racing Mind Took Many Turns**

Perhaps God is thinking, “Well, wait a minute. Maybe it’s just not the right time. It doesn’t matter how many prayers I get. It’s not the right time yet. More suffering, more violence. Let’s make them go through the mud a little longer. Then I’ll grant peace. Yes!”

Then my mind took another turn: Maybe deep, deep inside, God just doesn’t care. “So, hey, you want to shoot each other? You want to blow each other up? You want to bulldoze each other? Knock yourself out! Not going to hurt me. I don’t care.”

Next my mind went to the thought that maybe God is hard of hearing. God’s got all those people down there praying up a storm, and God’s saying, “Eh?”

And then my mind went to the prophet Elijah. It’s one of those details that you learn about in seminary, where Elijah is battling the prophets of Ba’al, and he’s making fun of them. He says, “You know why your God doesn’t answer you? Sorry, he had to go to the bathroom. He’ll be back shortly.”

I understood that my mind was going through a lot of permutations, and I realized I no longer believe in that kind of God, the kind that is apathetic, cruel, hard of hearing, incontinent. My God is none of the above. I comprehended that I needed to change my theology again.

You want peace in the Middle East? Go do it. Stop waiting for some power from on high to grant it to you reluctantly. You want peace in the Middle East? Stop pulling the trigger. Stop pressing the button. Stop turning the key on the bulldozer. Stop the violence. Return to the table. Talk.

#### **What Is the Nature of Our Hope?**

This brings up a question, one of those fundamental questions. It has a theological side, but it also has a universal side that doesn’t have anything to do with religion. The fundamental question is this: What is the nature of our hope?

- Is there hope for peace in the Middle East?
- Is there hope for constructive dialogue between the two factions within the United States that right now seems to be characterized mostly by contempt and disgust and fear?

- Is there hope for the world to muster enough agreement to address the climate change before it's too late for our children and our grandchildren?
- Is there hope for ending poverty worldwide, with food resources abundant but the need blocked between sources of production and the places where the needs are greatest?
- Is there hope for ending disease worldwide, with millions of lives at stake and insufficient funds and talent to erase the gap between saving salvable life and rounding up needed funds and talent?

What is the nature of our hope? Of all the issues that face humanity, the big ones that I talk about and also the little ones, the personal ones, the private ones. Pick your disaster. Is there a kernel of hope?

### **The Church Offered Two Kinds of Hope...**

...Throughout the millennia. One kind is transformative. One kind harbors a belief deep inside that no matter what the problem might be there *is* a transformative and often redemptive hope for reconciliation.

You've got hatred between two people. You've got hatred between two groups, red and blue. You've got hatred between nations. You've got hunger, disease, climate, poverty, and the idea is to dive in, engage, and express in terms of action your hope in doing something to solve or at least to relieve our problems.

The other kind of hope is actually much more popular. It is the hope of heaven, the hope that we can just leave behind the problems of this world. There's a place for this kind of hope. It had been the hope of the slaves in

Alabama and Mississippi and Georgia, where there was no hope of getting out of their situation. So the people imprisoned in slavery hoped that in the by-and-by they might wear that golden crown that helped them get through the day.

However, the hope of heaven has become transmuted over the years.

The gospel message of the church has been that you pray certain words, you believe certain things and criteria get met in the mind of God. You go to heaven, and you can leave this world behind. Let it rot, for all you care.

The problem is that this kind of hope has had some really virulent forms. Believe it or not, it's that sort of thinking that led to the fall of the Roman Empire. It's hard to believe. Here's a quote from Edward Gibbon, author of *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He wrote:

“The pagans were incensed at the rashness of a recent and obscure sect, which presumed to accuse their countrymen of error and to devote their ancestors to eternal misery.”

Do you see it? The pagans — in other words, those who were not under Roman rule at the time — took it personally that they were judged by this relatively new and obscure sect. They, the pagans, were accused of being all wrong. We, the Romans, are right; you are wrong, and by the way your ancestors are in hell. Sorry, but that's where they are. So the pagans took it personally for some reason, and they got so mad that they ransacked Rome and dumped the Roman Empire.

### **Religious Antiphony in the Present Day**

There's another virulent form of religious antiphony in the present day. I'll give you one

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more example: It's called Christian Zionism, and it's the belief that Israel must occupy *all* of the land of Israel in order for certain criteria to be met.

Once again, there's a hiccup in the mind of God. Prior to the second coming of Christ, the Almighty will not send Jesus back until the Jews own *all* the land of Israel. So they will have to get rid of *all* the Palestinians first. And the Christian Zionists *vote!*

Right now, as we speak, there's a summit meeting in Paris to seek peace in the Middle East. We've seen these barnacled attempts before. We don't hold much hope for it in asking both Israel and Palestine to embrace the two-state solution. But now we have a portion of our theological population saying, "No! Don't do it! God demands that Israel must have all the land. To heck with the Palestinians. Without that mandate, Jesus won't come back."

### **Two Forms of Hope**

As one theologian has called it, you have the gospel of evacuation and the gospel of penetration.

I hope for heaven, probably more or less just as you do. But I realized while writing that journal entry a number of years ago that Jesus preached engagement, involvement, penetration deep into the problem and thus being the recipient of overflowing spiritual guidance while we do so.

Let me give you a cursory look at Jesus' metaphors: You see salt penetrating the food, bringing in flavor. You see light penetrating the darkness, and the darkness has not and will not overcome it. You see yeast penetrating the lump of dough.

I offer these two options, two kinds of hope, simply to show you that one is superior to the other. One is a cop-out, and the other brings healing and reconciliation upon its wings.

**No. I'm not going to pray for peace in the Middle East. But I am going to work toward it and to help create it.**

*Amen.*