

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent: Luke 3:7-18

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At Bible Study last week -- I know, I've mentioned Bible Study a lot lately. And yes, we actually will meet this Thursday -- anyway, at Bible Study last week, we set Jeremiah aside and focused on the historical progression of the borders of what would become the modern state of Israel. We didn't do this to stir up trouble. Instead, we tiptoed that tightrope to see just how helpful and unhelpful historical precedent can be. Here's a brief overview: if you want to use the historical borders of Israel as justification for modern borders, you're gonna have a bad time. Bless the patience of that class, I drew fifteen different maps spanning from the days of Abraham to today, and every single one of them showed something different. I could've done another fifteen snapshots and still needed more. The historical borders are all over the place, sometimes nonexistent.

In spite of the shortcomings of a one and a half hour class and a bunch of poorly drawn maps, we still got somewhere with it, maybe a couple of somewheres. And one of those somewheres is Zionism. Zionism's a complicated thing. In some ways, it's totally innocuous, maybe even good. A quick definition: in its simplest form, Zionism is the desire to create a homeland for the Jewish people. Zion is a specific hill in Jerusalem, and it was applied more broadly to represent that city or the whole of Israel. Jewish Zionism emerged in the 1800s and focused on creating that homeland in the area with the most cultural and historical significance to the Jewish people. The downside is that many of the original proponents wanted to establish this homeland, fill it with as many Jewish folks as possible, and remove as many Arabs as possible. Not every original Zionist agreed, though, and there was an effort to begin that process without displacing the existing inhabitants.

In time, Zionism developed into two major categories: Jewish Zionism and Christian Zionism. Neither are monolithic, of course, and if a one and a half hour class on this stuff wasn't enough, a single sermon won't capture the fullness of all this either. That said, in Jewish Zionism, there are two basic camps. The first simply says the Jewish people need a place to live; the second promotes a place to live *where no one else does*. Christian Zionism has two or three camps. The first is the same: the Jewish people need a place to live. The second is also pretty much the same: Jews should live there without Arabs but maybe sprinkle in a handful of Christians, too. But the third is unusual. There's this idea that the Second Coming of Christ can't happen until every Jewish person lives in Israel. This branch of Christian Zionism seeks to hurry that process along, and in its most extreme forms, to hurry it along by force. It's a weirdly pro-Israel yet Antisemitic stance. For its proponents, rounding up all the Jews and sending them to Israel accomplishes a few things, namely getting them out of our country, getting them into their own, hastening the coming of Christ, and bringing his judgement down on non-believers (many of which, they say, have conveniently just arrived right there where Jesus will return). Now, to be clear, not all Zionists are anti-Arab or Antisemitic, but some are, and it's way more than I'm comfortable with.

I bring all this up for a couple of reasons. First, because the words "Zion," "Israel," and "gather" show up in today's readings three times, "Jerusalem" shows up twice, and "defence" and "oppressors" once a piece. It's really easy and really tempting to take those scriptures and apply them outside of their original, very specific contexts. Don't. While we use scriptures with words like these often, we also recognize that they had specific meanings modern usage often twists. Second, we're in Advent, the season where we anticipate both the First and Second Comings of Jesus. There's the cute little baby in the manger, and there's Lo! He comes on clouds descending. The second, tradition says, will set the world right after all these years of injustice. We can work towards that goal, but it takes Jesus coming back to get there fully. The second, also, isn't quite as popular. We sing about it here, but there aren't that many Second Coming carols piped into grocery stores, which is a real shame, 'cause while cute babies are cute and miraculous ones are miraculous, neither really force us to change. But the Jesus-Is-Coming-And-He's-Seen-What-We've-Been-Getting-Up-To Coming, that puts some

urgency on us to make things right. The Second Coming puts urgency on us. It's not the other way around. Advent doesn't put any urgency on Jesus. We can't make him come back, we can't hasten the coming of his Kingdom. We can hope it comes soon, we can ask for it to come soon, but we can't force God's hand. Which means we've gotta be ready at any moment, gotta be living right at all times, so that when that return surprises us, we're not caught doing what we shouldn't. Advent directly opposes the claim that we can do something to make this happen sooner. No action of ours, not even the Christian Zionist rounding up of Jews can speed this along.

And this matters right now not just because it's Advent. The Israel-Hamas conflict is a complicated affair. There are people of all stripes weighing in including Christian Zionists who want to see Israel succeed not for Israel's benefit but so that Jesus will come back and teach them a lesson. See if you can follow this reasoning: If Israel wins now, the Palestinians lose, which for those Christian Zionists is a win on its own. And if the Palestinians lose, more Jewish people can move in, which is another win. And if all the Jews move in, Jesus will come back and then the Jews will lose, and that, for many, is the ultimate goal: Jews and Arabs both lose and blue-eyed-Jesus-following Christians win. I know it's more complicated than just that, but this form of Christian Zionism not only exists but has been and continues to be extremely popular. President John Adams, Herman Melville, Arthur Balfour, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, they're among the many prominent figures that promoted this theology. Today, the Zionist organization Christians United for Israel boasts over 10 million members in the US alone. It's a prime example of something nasty hiding behind a name that sounds good. All that to say, be careful with the information you ingest and don't be fooled by delicate wording.

Now, jumping over to scripture, when all those people flooded to the Jordan to hear John preach, they were looking for hope. Instead, John welcomed them by shouting 'em down, a brood of vipers by Luke's telling made up of regular people seeking truth. What they found was an admonition to serve those they'd neglected. It wasn't about homeland or the end times or what to do about Palestine. John preached the same thing prophets had been preaching for ages. Don't take advantage of people, don't cheat, don't coerce. And while you're at it, clothe the poor and feed the hungry. Those are all values of the Kingdom of God. We may not be able to make it happen fully but we can strive to live into what that Kingdom stands for. This was not new. Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Amos, Jeremiah, Elijah, really nearly all of the prophets said the same thing. What made John unique was that he pointed towards Jesus. But mostly, John reminded them of the old and somewhat forgotten priorities: love people and care for them. Be a force for good right here with the people right in front of you. Those people needed that message. And before we get up on our high horse, this is one of those scriptures we can pull into our context. Because as a people, we need that message, too. We can't hasten the Kingdom of God, but we can love our neighbor. John's message isn't complicated. Don't wait for Jesus to come back and fix everything. He will, John says, but that's no excuse for complacency. Feed the hungry now. Clothe the naked now. Be fair in business now. Seek justice now. Toss in the other prophets, and search for truth now. Dismantle injustice now. Do the best we can with what we have where we are, but do it now. Jesus will come, in a manger and on clouds descending, but don't wait to act right until then. Get to it. And get to it now.

I know Israel and Palestine are on the other side of the world, and I know we can't snap our fingers and fix it. But we can search for justice and truth and hope right here. Listen carefully to our friends and neighbors. Seek justice. Push against propaganda and misinformation. Listen to what people need, and help them get it, now. Look, I don't know when we'll see that clouds-descending Jesus. But I do know this: Jesus is there in the face of every soul we meet, and we serve him by lovin' all of 'em. Even if that weren't so, even if Jesus wasn't in all those folks, we'd still serve God by lovin' 'em. Injustice cannot stand love. Here, out on that sidewalk, even in the midst of war, injustice will lose and love will win. That's the hope of John. That's the purpose of Advent. And that's the promise of Jesus. So get to it, and get to it now.