

"How much longer, O Lord, must we wait?" by Tim Schmucker
Advent I sermon; TUMC December 3, 2017

The earth trembled under the feet of the residents of the Palestinian village as the military stormed in with full force. People tried to disappear into the shadows, cowering in corners, ducking into doorways. "Avoid eye contact. Don't let the soldiers see you. But don't run away." Parents had drilled this into their children. They had good reason to shrink and cringe. The soldiers were the oppressive occupiers personified, charged with keeping the subjugated peoples compliant and submissive at all times and at all cost. A misstep would result in imprisonment or even death. So Joseph and Mary would have likely prepared Jesus for these inevitable encounters with the despised Roman soldiers.

Those were difficult times for the Israelites. Once again, their land and their life were ruled and dominated by a foreign empire, as had been their story for much of the past 600 years. First Babylon, then Assyria, then the Greeks, then Syria. Brutish and ruthless rule century after century with only a brief period of self-rule until yet another empire began to bludgeon Israel and Judah. Starting about 60 years before Jesus was born, the Romans conquered, occupied and ruled Palestine with a heavy military fist. Once again, the Israelites were a subjugated and oppressed people.

And it was a pregnant time of expectation of the coming Messiah, the Anointed One who was to liberate and deliver God's people. The coming Messiah? "Messiah_s" I should say as there were various versions of the nature of this long-expected saviour. These deep yearnings for deliverance had been emerging and developing over the decades and even centuries. Some Israelites anticipated a military leader to overthrow the Romans and liberate Palestine or a political Messiah who would throw off Roman tyranny and establish a new kingdom of Israel. Other Israelites were waiting for a spiritual leader, an almost heavenly figure whose Messianic Kingdom would transition into the final full Kingdom of God, having restored the true priesthood of the worship of Yahweh with full obedience to the law and covenant. Yet others yearned for a miracle worker to perform signs and wonders in providing for the subjugated and oppressed people's physical needs. And yet others expected a Messiah who, in an apocalyptic force of cataclysmic proportions, would utterly destroy the world and usher in a utopian paradise presided over directly by The Lord, God's Self. In these various ways, the Israelites

expressed and experienced deep yearning and pregnant expectation. They were filled with anxious anticipation. Earthly and apocalyptic glory was about to burst into history to deliver them, to liberate them from their ages-long suffering.

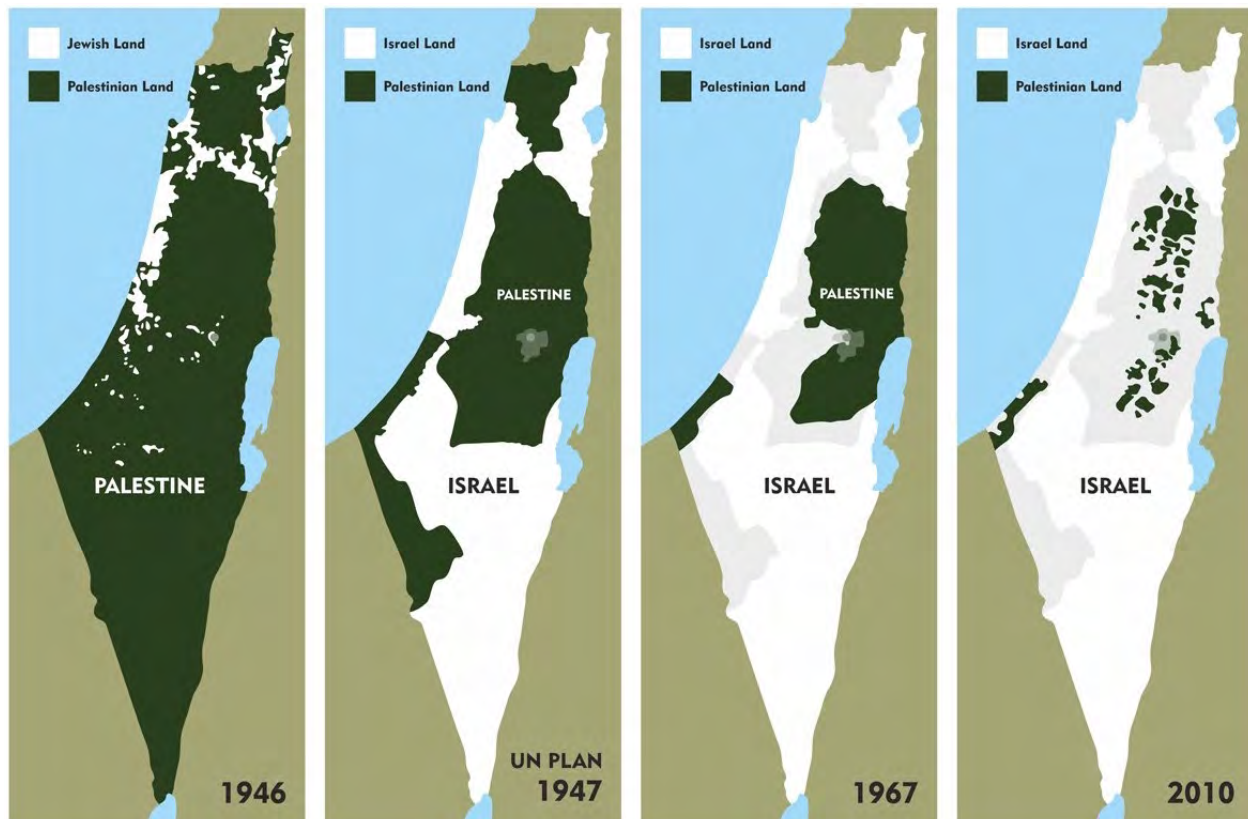
Yet, they had been waiting a long long time. Numerous centuries before, the Hebrew prophet whose oracles were compiled as the third section of the book of Isaiah despaired that the Lord would ever deliver the Lord's suffering people. Chapter 64, our First Sunday of Advent lectionary passage, is a lament and begins with this cry:

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence.” Isaiah then recounts the times that the Lord had delivered God's people, but then quickly expresses the people's utter alienation from God due to God's absence and silence: vs. 5b “But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.” The prophet attempts to retreat from despair and alienation by expressing submission and pleading for the Lord to remember that “we are all your people” and reminding God of their previous vibrant relationship. However, Isaiah quickly returns again to lament and despair, telling the Lord that all is wilderness and desolation now. He ends the oracle bitterly complaining: Vs. 12: “After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?” How much longer, O Lord, must we wait? Will you remain silent forever?

The earth trembles under the feet of the residents of the Palestinian village as the military storms in with full force. People try to disappear into the shadows, cowering in corners, ducking into doorways. “Avoid eye contact. Don't let the soldiers see you. But don't run away.” Palestinian parents drill into their children. They have good reason to shrink and cringe. The soldiers are the oppressive occupiers personified, charged with keeping the subjugated peoples compliant and submissive at all times and at all cost. A misstep will result in imprisonment or even death. Daily today the Palestinian Christians and Muslims brace themselves for these inevitable encounters with the despised Israeli soldiers. In the refugee camps, at military check points, in villages close to the many illegal settlements. In Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Palestine is again the place of domination and subjugation, of suffering and oppression.

After World War I, Britain took control of Palestine and, due to the plight of Jewish people, long targets of pogroms and massacres throughout Europe, favoured creation of a

“national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine. This was also a dream of the secular Jewish Zionist movement. However, the home was to be established on land inhabited for centuries by Palestinians.



Secular and religious Jews began to flock to Palestine, especially after World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust. This resulted in Palestinians losing their land and their autonomy. Thousands of Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim, were displaced and their villages destroyed, first in 1948 when the state of Israel was created, and then in 1967 when the State of Israel captured and occupied East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. Since then Israeli control over what remains occupied territory squeezes Palestinians onto smaller and smaller parcels of land.

Today, the State of Israel controls and occupies virtually all of historic Palestine. Its landholdings increase through construction of Jewish-only settlements in the West Bank. It responds to any resistance by Palestinian Christians and Muslims with military force, mass arrests and detention, demolition of Palestinian homes and farms, and walls and roads separating Israelis from Palestinians. Gaza’s situation is particularly difficult. The tiny Gaza Strip is 40 kilometres long and, at its widest point, 13 kilometres wide. Since 1994, Israel has enclosed

Gaza with a fence on three sides and by control of the Mediterranean Sea on the west. A virtual prison with increasingly tightening chains.

The State of Israel characterizes its military actions as a response to Palestinian violence such as rocket attacks and suicide bombings, while Palestinians regard their armed actions as a response to Israeli violence such as military campaigns, forced removal from their land and extra-judicial killings. Despite multiple peace processes over the past several decades, a just and secure peace for both Israelis and Palestinians remains beyond elusive.

Six years ago, I spent a day in the rugged and semi-arid hills around the West Bank city of Hebron. While only about 60 kms south of Bethlehem, it took about an hour and a half drive to get there. We – an MCC study group – were headed to “At-uwani,” an ancient Palestinian village of 150 people in those hills. Christian Peacemaker Teams at the time had had a presence in the village since 2004 due to frequent harassment from near-by Israeli settlers from the modern Ma'on settlement.

First we visited the illegal Israeli settlement, a green oasis among the dry and rocky Hebron hills. There, Ary’el a Jewish Zionist settler, welcomed us into his home. He was a friendly hospitable guy, an outgoing person you’d enjoy having coffee with. And we did; his small children scurried around their livingroom as we had coffee together. He was articulate and passionate about “The Land of Israel” and his people’s deep desire for security. He insisted that this land belonged to Jews, not to Palestinians. “God calls all Jews back to the Promised Land. This is the Land of Israel” he said. Ary’el insisted that as they occupy more and more of the land, they still want peace, but “I don’t know what will bring peace. We have the obligation to protect ourselves, our children. When we know that someone is going to attack us, we need to kill first.” Ary’el also blamed the Palestinians for all the violence. “Only a very few Palestinians want peace,” he insisted. “95% of them want all Jews to be killed. I carry a weapon. We have to protect ourselves. We have 2000 years of history of people wanting to kill us. Trust in God? Yes, but we have to act.”



We then went to At-uwani, the nearby Palestinian village. After a delicious traditional lunch, we spoke with Hafez, a Palestinian shepherd and community leader, who told us of the aggressive and violent settlers who try to drive them from their ancestral lands with beatings, attacks, building and road destruction, and more. These are his words: “Since 1976, Israel has had a policy of evacuation, to drive us out of our land. We Palestinians in this area are simple peasants. Settlements started in 1980, on land taken from us. Settlements brought aggressive and violent settlers. They are Orthodox Jews who target all Palestinians with threats, injuries and even killings.... Two weeks ago, a settler attacked Palestinian on the road. He was riding his donkey, he was an old, sick man. Usually international observers [CPT] watch the road. This settler was waiting until Mahmud [the old man] was out of sight of CPT to attack him; they beat him, and stabbed him.... When a settler attacks a Palestinian, Israeli authorities say ‘he was masked, we don’t know who did it, there’s nothing we can do.’ But when a Palestinian attacks a settler, every man and boy in village is arrested.”



And the Hebrew prophet Isaiah continues to cry out “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence.” “After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?” How much longer, O Lord, must we wait? Will you remain silent forever?

Just as in Jesus’ time, Israelis and Palestinians today seek salvation and deliverance, and there are many distinct versions of their long-awaited liberation. Many Jews both secular and religious trust in their all-powerful military while some religious Jews seek to fully follow the Biblical Law. Some Jews await a literal Messiah while others have long lost hope. Palestinians as an oppressed and occupied people have fewer options. Over the decades some of their desperation has been expressed in Hamas rocket launches into Israel along with suicide bombings. Many have given up hope for a negotiated settlement. Palestinians, their land

occupied by a foreign army, have sought liberation via military means – just like the Israelites of Jesus' time seeking a military messiah.

As Jean Zaru, a Palestinian Christian leader has so poignantly expressed: "I know full well that the people of Israel are not freer than we are. Both Israelis and Palestinians live in fear. Neither Israelis nor Palestinians have peace. Both Israelis and Palestinians yearn for security." And so with Isaiah, both Israelis and Palestinians cry out: How much longer, O Lord, must we wait? Will you remain silent forever?

Sadly, this cry for liberation and deliverance has also been reverberating across Canada for several centuries. On this the first Sunday of Advent as we hear the lament and cry for salvation from the peoples of Palestine, both in Jesus' time and today, we need also to hear the cry at home. Ever since white European settlers started crossing the Atlantic, taking over the land and subjugating its peoples, indigenous folks have been yearning for deliverance. Their subjugation by European settlers reached its horrific pinnacle with the genocidal residential school system.

As Canadian prophet singer songwriter Bruce Cockburn thundered three decades ago: "It's a stolen land; it's all we've got."

Subjected and oppressed peoples across the globe cry out with Isaiah: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." How much longer, O Lord, must we wait? Will you remain silent forever?

And yet.... And yet.... There are glimpses of hope – Advent hope – like a small steady candle in the midst of seemingly overwhelming darkness. We can see these glimpses, feel the pregnant expectation these candles offer, first in our lectionary texts for today, then in Palestine, and also here in Canada.

While our Isaiah passage is full of lament and alienation, the prophet has brief moments of potential hope. He recounts the times that the Lord did liberate the people; he pleads for the Lord to remember that "we are all your people" and reminds God of their previous vibrant relationship.

The lectionary gospel reading from Mark is the second half of a chapter quite different from the rest of Mark's Gospel. It's an apocalyptic genre and needs to be understood as such. Jewish apocalypticism developed in the centuries before Jesus precisely due to the despair and

alienation we hear from the Isaiah passage: The Lord promised us deliverance yet The Lord has been absent for such a long long time. So people began to explain this absence like this: “The Lord has relinquished control to the forces of evil. But this is only temporary! This horrible state of affairs will not last forever. Quite soon, The Lord will reassert God’s Self, destroying the evil forces and establishing God’s people as rulers on earth. When this new kingdom comes, God will fulfil God’s promise to God’s people.” So apocalyptic thought and faith held to the hope and expectation that in spite of God’s apparent absence in the present age, the Messiah is coming to deliver the faithful into the new era. This is how the Israelite people dealt with their subjugation and oppression.

Mark describes in chapter 13 the dramatic and cataclysmic coming of the apocalyptic “Son of Man.” Now, it would be fascinating to work toward an understanding this apocalyptic passage in its historical context. It was written about thirty-five years after Jesus’ death, during the time of the Jewish military revolt against Rome that resulted in the siege of Jerusalem and its subsequent destruction. However, for our Advent purposes today Mark has a timeless message. First, God has not abandoned us; God will liberate. Vs 26: “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Second, no one knows when God will act; any prediction you hear is nonsense. And third, be ready; “keep awake.”

“Keep awake.” I am particularly interested in this the very last sentence of Mark’s apocalyptic passage verse 37 where Jesus says “And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” I suggest that in times of domination and subjugation, of injustice and oppression, keeping awake means staying aware – aware of the realities of subjugation and injustice. And keeping aware means becoming active and engaged. Jesus says “until the Son of Man comes, keep engaged, keep working towards God’s reign of justice and peace.”

This is where the hope and expectation of Advent resides – in the decisions of God’s people everywhere to keep awake, to keep working for God’s justice. This is Advent hope. Hope is a choice – a choice not to sleep, a choice to keep striving no matter how difficult, no matter how absent we feel the Lord to be. Hope is an active verb. Hope is a choice to keep working for God’s justice.

We see this hope lived out in the lives of both Jews and Palestinians today as many refuse a military solution as they work toward a just peace for Israel / Palestine in spite of all

odds. Hafez, the Palestinian shepherd and community leader in At-uwani, shared with us this about their struggle. His words again: “We are in a new stage in our resistance: a focus on our non-violent direct action. Non-violent resistance is like a tree: it needs to be watered everyday. If you don’t, it will die. This is what we are doing. This for all who believe in peace and justice. You can make changes without violence.” Jean Zaru, Palestinian Christian leader, speaks with clarity: “Others cannot give us freedom, peace, and security. No government, no army, no wall no matter how long and high will provide for us what can only be supplied by the cultivation of mutuality and trust.” Mutuality and trust.



And we see this Advent hope in Toby Obed’s determination to keep working for justice, in spite of huge hurdles and endless roadblocks. Toby is the Innu man who ten days ago accepted Prime Minister Trudeau’s apology on behalf of all residential school survivors in Newfoundland and Labrador. Toby worked tirelessly with insatiable determination for many years. His unquenchable hope and fearless expectation is a model for us all this Advent season.

So Isaiah’s lament “How much longer, O Lord, must we wait? Will you remain silent forever?” is not the last word. Rather, hope is. And hope is a choice to keep awake. Hope is a choice to keep working toward justice. Last month as we marked Remembrance Day and Peace Sunday, many people across Canada wore the classic Mennonite Central Committee red button that says “To Remember is to work for peace.” On this first Sunday of Advent I suggest we need an Advent button: “To hope is to work for justice.” Will you choose this Advent to live hope? Will we?

