

PEACE BE WITH YOU (AGAIN)
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Second Sunday of Easter
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." **John 20:19-31**

And if you can believe it—Christ is among us this morning saying, Peace be with you."

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A couple weeks ago I received a phone call inviting me to attend a pastors' luncheon in Martinsburg at the end of this month. The event is hosted by an organization called "Christians United for Israel." This organization sponsors rallies called "A Night to Honor Israel." One was held recently in a church just outside Shepherdstown.

"Christians United for Israel" is a nationwide movement begun four years ago by televangelist John Hagee of San Antonio, Texas. He's a big man with a big following and pretty big clout in Washington, DC. Presidential candidate John McCain sought and got Hagee's endorsement and then publicly rejected it a few days later.

According to John Hagee any enemy of the state of Israel is an enemy of God and must, if necessary, be destroyed. Iran and Palestinians are at the top of his hit list. Simply put: Hagee and his ilk espouse Holy War. To me it is odd, if not downright weird that so many Christian pastors glorify Joshua, the Old Testament jihadist warlord—they glorify Old Testament Joshua as if there were no New Testament and no Jesus. *Hello!*

Joshua recruited and trained 12 men of valor then armed them with weapons to kill in the name of God. Jesus recruited and trained 12 men then armed them with love to heal in the name of God.

Now I just happen to know Hagee's view inside and out because I was weaned on it as a child and immersed in it as an adolescent. It's called "Dispensationalism." With my parents I attended numerous Bible Prophecy Conferences featuring large maps and charts detailing the pivotal role of the then brand new state of Israel, specifically its pivotal role in triggering End Time events: the Second Coming of Christ, the Rapture of the Church, the appearance of the anti-Christ, Armageddon, and the Millennium. It's all based on alleged codes hidden in the Old Testament book of Daniel and the New Testament book of Revelation and if you didn't know better, as I certainly didn't, it

could be convincing and compelling. Just this mere mention may cast a spell on some of you. Be careful!

It's true: that rendition of the Bible makes a spellbinding story and, in fact, made a best seller out of the "Left Behind" book series. Unfortunately, millions of people take this apocalyptic fantasy for the gospel truth, which people like Hagee then turn into a multi million-dollar fund raising tool for the state of Israel. It's not enough that Israel gets billions in military aid annually from the United States. Hagee wants Christians to cough up millions more.

Christians beware. Not everything called Christian is Christian. Jews beware. This organization is a Trojan horse out to nail you!

Anyway, I was surprised to be invited to the "Christians United for Israel" luncheon. My first impulse was to decline. But lately I've tried to be a little more open to new things the Spirit may be bringing into my life. *Behold, says the Lord, I am doing a new thing.* And I take that to mean not just with the world at large but with the world at small, namely with me and the world I inhabit daily.

If you haven't tried that, you might give it a try. Begin each day with a prayer or meditative moment to intentionally open your heart to what the Spirit has to offer. And then see what you notice in your world that day. This, by the way, is the main lesson in this sermon. All the stuff about "Christians United for Israel" is just a bonus. So here's a suggestion: at the start of each day breathe in God; breathe out love. And may peace be with you.

I thought about that invitation for a week or so and sought the counsel of others including several Jewish friends. I finally decided to attend but with two conditions. And so this past Thursday I sent my reply to the one who had invited me.

Quoting myself here: "Before I accept or decline your invitation I'd like you to know that while I am all for the Jewish people, I have a far different Christian position on the modern state of Israel than 'Christians United for Israel.'

"For many years I was in that camp, too. However, through study of Scripture plus listening to Jewish friends and Palestinian Christian pastors, I have had a change of mind and heart. I believe the state of Israel is in violation of international law as well as in violation of Old and New Testament standards of righteousness.

"With the organizers' permission, I will gladly share my conversion experience at the luncheon, answer questions and engage in conversation as long as time allows. I'd also like to bring a Jewish friend who does not support Jewish or Christian Zionism. So, yes, I will consider accepting your offer if: (1) my Jewish friend is comfortable attending and (2) we are allowed to give our respective testimony and witness.

"If my offer is inappropriate for this particular gathering, I'd be happy to meet with you (and others) personally to let you know how and why my mind and heart has changed. Let me know which, if any, of these options you prefer.

"May the peace of Christ be with you."

Peace. Ah, yes, peace.

In today's gospel lesson Jesus offered it not once, not twice but three times because *in a violence prone world*—and where in the world is there more propensity for violence, revenge and retaliation than where Jesus and his boys roams—*peace is what we need*. Peace doesn't come easily. It often comes with wounds and scars because *without justice peace is a sham*. "Father, forgive them" is the prayer of the Beloved from the cross. In other words, forgiveness is the very breath of the new community, the New Jerusalem, Jesus is calls into being.

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about Israel and the Palestinians and the endless rounds of violence there and in so many other places. I've just finished reading *A Palestinian Christian's Cry for Reconciliation* by an elderly pastor born and raised in occupied Palestine. He and others are urging Muslim and Christian Palestinians to resist the brutal and humiliating Israeli occupation of their land with non-violence, in the way and in the spirit of Jesus. Not to acquiescence; but to resist. Non-violently. It's not easy. It's a fledgling movement. And wounds and scars are inevitable as Jesus found out.

Jesus and his people, like the Palestinian people today, lived under a long, brutal and humiliating occupation. In his day, Jesus discovered that we can't blast or bomb our way into a new world. He had that option and rejected it. It's what the armed Zealots offered.

Nor can we pray and chant our way into a new world. Jesus had that option and rejected it. It's what the Essenes praying in their desert caves for a Messiah offered.

Nor can we compromise our way into a new world. Jesus had that option and rejected it. It's what the Sadducees working with the Romans offered.

Nor can we purify our way into a new world. Jesus had that option and rejected it. It's what the Pharisees in their gated religious communities of self-righteous piety offered.

As it turns out, Jesus discovered that a new heaven and a new earth rises out of full bodied, fearless love which is, as he said, *the way, the truth and the life*. Even now it rises before us.

In case you're wondering about that luncheon, yesterday I was dis-invited. My conditions were unacceptable. There was no room in the program for dialogue or contrary views.

Oh, well. Jerusalem wasn't built in a day; nor will the New Jerusalem be built in a day. We simply must keep on praying and working for peace in the world we inhabit daily. Where there is hatred, let us sow love. Over and over again.