

STEADFAST ACCOMPANIMENT

Patti Talbot

Guest Preacher – Program Coordinator – People in Partnership

Bloor Street United Church

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – October 3, 2010

Reading: Lamentations 1.1-6

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.

She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has no one to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,
they have become her enemies.

Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,
and finds no resting-place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.

The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are desolate,
her priests groan;
her young girls grieve,
and her lot is bitter.

Her foes have become the masters,
her enemies prosper,
because the LORD has made her suffer
for the multitude of her transgressions;
her children have gone away,
captives before the foe.

From daughter Zion has departed
all her majesty.
Her princes have become like stags
that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
before the pursuer.

Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!'
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

Luke 17.5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!' The Lord replied, 'If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea", and it would obey you.

'Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, "Come here at once and take your place at the table"? Would you not rather say to him, "Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink"? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!"'

Last year, when I was in Israel-Palestine, I visited the small Palestinian village of Yanoun. To get there from Jerusalem, we drove for a couple hours through the West Bank, past thousands of olive trees, through a rural, mostly agricultural landscape.

YANOUN itself is on the side of a steep valley slope.
It has two stories: one of **tragedy**, and one of **enduring hope**.

A close-knit community, Yanoun was once a typical Palestinian village. The villagers have always been farmers. They grew wheat in their fields, tended their ancient olive trees and grazed sheep and goats on the hills.

In the late 1990s, armed youths from the illegal Israeli settlement of Itamar took over the hills around Yanoun and began violently harassing the villagers. In **2002**, they evicted almost the entire population of Yanoun at gunpoint. Families fled with the few belongings they could carry.

Yanoun was the first Palestinian village to be forcibly evacuated since Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in the Six Day War of 1967. As the settlers of Itamar tightened their grip in the area with the backing of the Israeli state, the situation seemed hopeless.

But a small group of **Israeli peace activists** refused to accept what the settlers were doing in their name. Volunteers moved into the village to deter attackers. International volunteers were invited to join them. The impact of their presence was profound.

As accompaniers in the village made themselves visible and reported settler attacks, the level of violence dropped sharply. The people of Yanoun began to return to their homes. Yanoun is intimately tied to the **Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel**.

Since **2003**, this programme has been responsible for the international presence in Yanoun. Wearing distinctive vests, a small team of Ecumenical Accompaniers or “EAs” is permanently stationed in the village. Living with the villagers, accompanying them to their fields, reporting settler harassment and abuses, the EAs provide a measure of protection to the villagers, and assurance that **they are not alone**.

From its very beginning, The United Church of Canada has been part of the **World Council of Churches' Accompaniment Programme**.

Why did the World Council of Churches begin this programme?

- In **2000** the US-led negotiations for peace between Israel and Palestine failed. By September, the Second Palestinian Uprising, or *Intifada*, had begun.
- In **November 2000**, the **“Heads of Churches” of Jerusalem** – the leaders of all

thirteen Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant denominations in Israel-Palestine and based in Jerusalem – called on Christians around the world to stand with the suffering churches and people in Palestine and support efforts for a just peace in Israel and Palestine.

The Call was answered by The World Council of Churches. The World Council urged its member churches, like the United Church of Canada:

- to pray for and promote a just peace in the Middle East
- and to support negotiated end to the Israeli occupation

As a concrete response to the heads of churches' call for a **Protective Presence, Linked to local churches**, The World Council began the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in 2002.

The mission of this initiative is twofold:

1. **accompany Palestinians and Israelis in their non-violent actions to end the occupation and support a just peace**
2. **and to carry out concerted advocacy in support of these efforts.**

In 8 years, WCC member churches have sent over 700 accompaniers to serve in six communities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

To date, Our Church has appointed 10 volunteers, representing 8 Conferences across the country. Today UC volunteer **Sara avMaat** from ANTIGONISH arrives in Jerusalem to be part of the 37th Group of EAs.

- Volunteers like Sara are formed into 4-member Teams to spend 3-months in Israel-Palestine.
- They spend most of their time assigned to a given place, monitoring checkpoints and agricultural gates, land confiscations and settlement activities.
- They do what they can to protect vulnerable communities,
- they monitor and report violations of human rights,
- they support Palestinians and Israelis working for peace.
- EAs Work closely with local communities, Israeli human rights groups and international agencies.
- When they return home, EAs are expected to continue their commitment, to engage in education and action in church and society, to advocate for a just and

peaceful resolution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict through an end to the occupation.

I visited all six of the communities to which EAs are assigned. **Yanoun** is one. Another is **Jerusalem**, where the assignment includes particular accompaniment of ISRAELI peace groups, which are often harassed by authorities.

The ancient city of **Hebron** is another placement. Let me tell you briefly what is included in EAs assignment there.

Hebron

- is the largest city in the West Bank, with around 166,000 residents.
- An important trading centre, it is revered in Jewish, Christian and Islamic history due to the presence of **graves** believed to be the final **burial places** of four Biblical couples, including **Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah**.
- This also makes it a flashpoint in the ideological struggle for the West Bank.
- It is a city that has seen violence and terror, killings by Palestinian extremists of Jews during the British occupation of Palestine, and by ultra-Zionist Jews of Muslim Palestinians in the 1990s.
- Today, an extremist Jewish group lives in an illegal settlement in the Palestinian heart of the city. These "ultra-Zionists" believe all of Israel and Palestine belong only to Jews.
- These extremists are responsible for some of the worst settler violence in the entire West Bank.

Last fall, I walked up **Shuhada** street in this ancient **Hebron** neighbourhood. The settlers have forced out all Palestinian residents in this area and established their settlement in the buildings lining most of the street. The settlers are `protected` by the Israeli defence force. Soldiers strictly control Palestinian movement in and out of the area, requiring all Palestinian men, women and children to queue up, pass through military checkpoints.

And pass through they do, for on one side of Shuhada street, directly across from the settlers', is a **Palestinian elementary school**. Palestinian boys and girls, 6-12 years of age, must pass through the checkpoint, walk a short distance up Shuhada Street, and then climb a steep set of stairs to reach the school entrance.

Every morning, every afternoon, the team of 4 EAs DOES stand along that short distance to provide a protective presence for the children. That's right – groups of children as young as 6 have endured being targets of bottles, large stones, garbage and worse ... as well as physical attack from the extremist settlers.

I met **Reem Al Shareef**, the Principal of the School. An engaging, dedicated educator, she said:

“When the EAs are around we all feel safe. They don't have any means to protect us or even themselves against attacks by Israeli settlers, but it's their presence that makes the difference. A settler thinks a thousand times before doing anything while all these people are monitoring and may be recording. Sometimes they spend whole days in the school. When troubles happen, EAs stay until everybody is safely home.”

Why is the United Church involved?

Our participation as a church reflects two of our fundamental commitments:

1. to actively engage with others in God's Mission for the world that ALL may live in justice and peace, and
2. to respond to the call of global partners – Israeli AND Palestinian -- in that engagement.

And our partners have called upon us to engage.

One such Israeli Partner of the United Church is **Women in Black**. It's an organization that organizes a weekly peace demonstration in Jerusalem in the company of EAs.

Gila Svirsky, a Jewish Israeli member of that United Church partner, says:

“Ending the occupation is better for Israel. Israel cannot be a light unto the nations while we are an occupying power. If you really care deeply about Israel, you'll care about its soul, and its soul is being **eaten away** by the Occupation.”

Our Church understands this accompaniment Programme

- as part of **our** response to the global call to join Christian efforts to end the illegal occupation of Palestine.
- It is a reflection of United Church support for reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians, and their coexistence in a just peace.

our Church's response and support is based firmly on a number of premises, including:

- That Palestinians have the right of self-determination and the right of return.
- That **both** Palestine and Israel have legitimate security needs.
- That the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are illegal, and constitute an obstacle to peace.
- That the "Separation Barrier" constructed by Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories is a grave breach of international law and must be removed from the occupied territory.
- That there is no military solution for this conflict. Violence in all its forms cannot be justified whether perpetrated by Israelis or Palestinians.
- That the life and witness of local churches is at the centre of worldwide church advocacy for a just peace.

CHRISTIAN PALESTINIANS ARE TELLING US THAT A RESPONSE AND SUPPORT IS URGENT AND CANNOT WAIT.

In December 2009 Christian Palestinians issued this urgent call in a unique message entitled

Kairos Palestine – A moment of truth

A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering

endorsed by **all** the churches of the Holy Land, this is a faith-based document; the Christian Palestinians' word to the world about what is happening in Palestine. It stands in the tradition of an earlier *Kairos* call, one made by South African Christians in 1985, that addressed the political situation in South Africa during its apartheid era.

The *Kairos Palestine* call does not attempt to set out political terms for a resolution of the conflict, but rather offers principles upon which a resolution could be achieved. Their word is a cry of hope, with love, prayer and faith in God.

In it, Palestinian Christians declare that the military occupation of the land is a **sin** against God and humanity, and that any theology that legitimizes the occupation is far from Christian teachings about a God of love who desires peace with justice – **SHALOM** – for all of creation, especially those who suffer unjustly.

The word of `faith, hope and love` is addressed first of all to themselves and then to all the churches and Christians in the world.

It asks us all to

- stand against injustice,
- and act toward a just peace through non-violence in which all God's people in the Holy Land, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, both Palestinians and Israelis, can prosper together.

The *Kairos Palestine* call. I commend it to you.

Today's Scripture READINGS:

(Lamentations, Psalm 137, Luke 17:5-10)

As we consider together hope for just peace in the Holy Land, what insights are provided by this week's scripture passages?

Lamentations speaks of the end of the empire and the grief of a fallen nation. The once proud nation is ruined and little hope is in sight. The nation no longer can claim to be unique in God's eyes. In fact, God is named as the **source** of the nation's suffering. The PAIN and ANGER evoked by all the People's Losses against Babylon are palpable. The author declares that God has **withdrawn protection** and let the nation's enemies overrun its borders and destroy its sacred places.

Psalm 137 also speaks of destruction and of exile... by the Rivers of Babylon. In the verses that we *didn't* sing ... grief turns to rage and vengeance. The Psalmist imagines Babylon experiencing the same fate as Jerusalem and suggests that the people launch a holy war against their captors and writes "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"

Merciful Heavens. God the source of the nation's Suffering? Violence toward the innocent children of the oppressors?

As I read these verses,

- I learn **more** about the people's expression of **grief** and **loss** at what is happening to them

- and **less** about the God that is being worshipped by this people

The gospel of Luke presents two very short, but very pointed messages from Jesus:

Luke 17:5-6 focuses on the power of faith to transform our lives and the world.

17:6 The Lord replied, "If you had **faith the size of a mustard seed**, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

- The "mustard seed", is very small. The "mulberry tree" is large with an extensive root system, making it hard to uproot. It would not normally take root in the sea.
- Jesus tells them that with genuine faith, however small, great things are possible.

Jesus tells a parable in vv.7-10.

17:7 "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'?

17:8 Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'?

17:9 Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?

17:10 So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

In those days, Slaves were expected to do their duties, and no master would absolve a slave of them, so the disciples would answer *of course not!* to the question in v. 7: should a slave eat before his master?

Perhaps what Jesus is saying is that simple OBEDIENCE is **not** faithfulness.

Faithfulness ... or true DISCIPLESHIP to Jesus' teachings of love and compassion is different than DUTY or OBEDIENCE. Faithfulness may involve the courage to see and accept what God is asking of us.

On World Communion Sunday, we are called to imagine **life-giving alternatives** to the present state of affairs, whether in our lives, our church, or our world ... not simply "do our duty".

We are called to move from

limitation to **possibility**, from conflict to **partnership**.

at this meal of possibility, in the sharing of Bread and Wine, we are invited to imagine a diverse, possibility-filled faith emerging from a mustard seed to transform our world.

As God calls to each of us in love, God empowers us to tackle the hard work of reconciliation, to engage with others in the hard work of restoring community, TO STEADFAST ACCOMPANIMENT

Let us echo these words: **“Let us together say YES to voices in Israel and Palestine who call to us to say “Partner with us as we seek peace and pursue it.**

- **Time has not served the cause of peace but has served the cause of extremism.**
 - **Christians and Muslims and Jews in the Holy Land have, can and will understand one another and live together as neighbours.**
- **Let us say and believe Peace is possible. ”**