



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon May 16, 2021

“Restoring God’s Land” Rev. David Jones

When Caity and I had our first long distance date after she had graduated from the University of Toronto and moved back to Jacksonville, but I was still working my way through seminary, we decided to visit St. Augustine, Florida. Caity had gone to school and lived there in college, it's a very old and beautiful city. Maybe some of you have been there. This trip that Caity and I were on was just after New Year's, which is a peak time for tourism to the city. So there were a lot of tourists. And I discovered that in this very old city--a place where Dr. King marched, and the place where the very first service of mass was held as European colonizers landed on its shores--there is also this very profane tourism industry that prominently includes ghost tours. St. Augustine likes to tell stories of its history with pirates, but they tell it like a Disney movie, and tourists can be guided around the city's cobblestone streets on the lookout for any playful ghosts lurking around the corner.

A couple of years later, when I had moved to Jacksonville, I remember talking to a friend of mine about how strange it is to see this garish pirate stuff in such an old city, that harbors such important history. And he pointed out to me that this is not uncommon. That in such old cities, with histories of colonization and slavery, often you will find such commercial ghost tours. It is as if the cities are haunted by their pasts, and cartoonish, playful ghosts are so much easier to confront than real ones.

I don't remember what I set out to write a few days ago when I first decided on our readings today. But international news changed my plans. As I sat down to write our sermon yesterday, I read that 41 Palestinian children have now been killed in bombing campaigns by the Israeli military. Depending on where you get your news, you are likely to find different facts emphasized, or even entirely different 'facts' altogether. And sitting here in New England, it is a situation that has seemed to unfold--unravel--so quickly. I am not an expert on the situation, but it is hard for me to look at the undisputed death toll of 41 Palestinian children, as anything other than a terrible crime. And our faith calls on us to grieve with the nearly 150 Palestinian families in mourning today, as well as the 8 Israeli families in mourning, as the violence worsens.

Growing up, I was taught in school that the Israel-Palestine conflict is as old as time, or at least as old as scripture, that it is intractable, a dispute over promises made by God; that is, a matter of religion, a contest between Jews and Muslims without end. I would ask about what is happening today in East Jerusalem, and a teacher would talk to me about the Crusades. These explanations remind me of the ghost tours in St. Augustine. It is far easier, in our schools and churches and media, to make up and seek out these ancient and mysterious ghosts, rather than be haunted by real ones, which might actually be confronted.

Our reading today from the book of Acts describes Peter addressing the early community of faith that formed around Jesus in his life and that held together even after his awful death. But you might notice the reading is incomplete. However, the lectionary omits three key verses, skipping from verse 17 to verse 21. The verses 16 and 17 say that Judas had a share or an allotment in Jesus's ministry, in accordance with the scriptures. Then, skipping to verses 21 and 22, Peter says a new person from this early faith community must now be chosen to assist the original 11 disciples in being witnesses to Christ's resurrection. There are 11 apostles who have this great work ahead of them, this great task of proclaiming the good news of Jesus

far and wide, and they need one more now to step up into the role. Two members of the early Christian community have been nominated for consideration.

For us today, especially for those who read this passage through a Christian lens, it is curious *why* Peter and the others can't invite both Joseph *and* Mattias to step up to help with this work? If they are both qualified, why not invite them both? In the faith of the apostles, of course, it is God who is making the choice, but still the question stands: if the work is to spread the apostles' witness to the resurrection--and both Joseph and Mattias qualify as such witnesses--wouldn't it behoove this faith community and God to enlist as many qualifying witnesses as are available in order to accomplish this important work? Why must they choose?

The Book of Acts is actually a follow up or a sequel to the Gospel according to Luke. Luke is the author of both. And in each of his works, Luke is especially concerned with establishing for his audience and for Roman authorities, that this community of believers in Christ, is not really something new at all--or at least that it is not new in a disreputable way (the religion of the Israelites was persecuted and marginalized by Rome but it was also tolerated because of its ancient history and pedigree). Luke means to emphasize that whatever *is* new about this early Christian community, it nonetheless stands in continuity with the religion of the Israelites. And one important way to communicate this both internally to this community of early Christians and externally, to Roman authorities, is through the number of apostles. The number cannot be 11 and the number cannot be 13; the number must be 12. And it must be 12 because the 12 apostles represent the 12 tribes of Israel.

In the Old Testament, the 12 tribes are the descendants of the sons of Jacob; in the Quran the 12 tribes are the distinct communities who formed in support of Moses. And as God allotted 12 parcels or shares of the Promised Land to each tribe, so God has allotted shares of ministry to each apostle. Luke wants there to be no doubt in his reader's mind that after Jesus' death and resurrection, the early Christian community continued the work of the Israelite God. And that's why this strange, brief episode comes early in the book that purports to describe the 'acts' of the apostles. The 12 apostles--and tribes--must be restored.

But this only partly explains why Peter and this community are making this decision. The rest of the explanation is gestured or hinted at in the version of this passage that the lectionary provides us, but much of the remaining explanation is missing. So let's see what has been left out. Maybe then we can understand what the passage later means when it says that Judas went "to his own place."

According to verses 18-20, Judas takes the money he was given by authorities to betray Jesus--someone he genuinely believed in and followed, perhaps loved--and he bought a field with it. Judas takes bribe money, ransom money, blood money--whatever we want to call it--and acquires land with it. The text is somewhat ambiguous about what happens next, and what is recorded here differs from what Matthew says about this, but in any case, on this land, Judas dies violently, either through misfortune or his own hand. We don't know that Judas felt remorse or shame or overwhelming guilt, or if he just had a bad fall, but we do know that on this land he has acquired through betraying Jesus to his death, Judas dies in a violent way. And this manner of death, as much as his actions, fulfills the scriptures, from which verse 20 quotes directly: 'let his homestead become desolate, let there be no one to live in it, and let another take his position of leadership.'

Judas chose his own land over the portion allotted to him by God. And such a land becomes a land of death rather than life. The scriptures say a person cannot have two masters, that he cannot worship both God and money. Judas didn't only betray Jesus to the Romans or to the Pharisees; Judas betrayed the God of Israel, forsaking his share of the Promised Land entrusted long ago to 12 tribes who would know to share it. If the Promised Land of God allotted to the 12 tribes of Israel is to be carried out now by the 12 apostles--as Luke believes--only a man who chooses to dwell on God's land, rather than who seeks his own land, is qualified to inherit the 12th apostleship.

Very important things are actually taking place in this passage that serve the wider story that Luke is trying to tell his early Christians readers. Christian apostleship is inherited through witness to Christ's resurrection, through the witness to life overcoming death. And this stands in solidarity with the scriptures,

which say the Promised Land should be inherited and shepherded only by those who understand it as something that *belongs to God*, not to ourselves. The Promised Land cannot really be conquered, though many try to conquer it; the Promised Land cannot be purchased with money, though many try to purchase it; the Promised Land cannot be settled and colonized, though many are settling and colonizing it. And in the same way, our apostles cannot betray Christ, though Judas did betray Christ. But settling land--taking it and calling it your own--and betraying God for money, this doesn't yield what those who do these things expect. Instead, the reward for this wickedness, what Judas' own land will come to--to quote the omitted verses with less sensitivity than our lectionary--the reward for this wickedness is a "Field of Blood."

I am old enough now to put away childish things. The struggle in Palestine and Israel is not about religion, it is not being fought between 'Jews and Muslims'. (For one thing, Palestine is home to the oldest Christianity community in the world, tracing its ancestry to this community described in our reading today). The struggle, each outbreak of violence, is not about religion, it is about land and the powers of production that a nation or people can gain from that land. Today Israel, through ever expanding settlement and encroachment into Palestinian territory, is counted among the world's highest-income nations. By contrast, 80% of Palestinians who live in East Jerusalem live below the poverty line. Yet our own government provides only a fraction of the aid to Palestine that it does to Israel.

I am not an expert on Israel or Palestine or the history of this struggle. But I know something about Christianity, and about this passage that we have been working through this morning. In order to be an apostle of God--a genuine one--you must witness to life overcoming death. You must worship God, not money. And you must receive a share of land with graciousness, knowing that the land is always God's land, never your own. Otherwise, if instead you worship money and acquire land and call it your own, you become like Judas, you become a betrayer, you become "one who is doomed to destruction," you become a child of perdition, as the Gospel of John says.

I want to echo the United Church of Christ in asking us all to pray for an immediate cease fire. I want to echo our Church in asking you to reach out by phone, email, letter, to our representatives in Congress, to urge that our government use its influence to stop this violence. I don't know what might come after a cease fire, but I know that a cease fire could save Palestinian children and Israeli children who think nothing about owning land, and only hope and need to grow up in a world that no longer confuses why God gave us to God's land and into community in the first place--to love one another, to serve one another, and to be sent into the world with the full measure of God's joy within us. May peace and justice be with the people of Israel and Palestine, and each and every one of you.

Alleluia and amen.