

## **Confronting Evil**

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent, 28 February 2010

by Rev. Emily Martin

### **Genesis 15:1-11,17-21**

<sup>1</sup>5 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

<sup>2</sup>But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”

<sup>3</sup>And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.”

<sup>4</sup>But the word of the Lord came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.”

<sup>5</sup>[The Lord] brought him outside and said,

“Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.”

Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

<sup>6</sup>And [Abram] [trusted] the Lord;

and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

<sup>7</sup>Then [the Lord] said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.”

<sup>8</sup>But [Abram] said, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?”

<sup>9</sup>[The Lord] said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”

<sup>10</sup>[Abram] brought [the Lord] all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.  
<sup>11</sup>And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

<sup>17</sup>When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.  
<sup>18</sup>On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,  
<sup>19</sup>the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,  
<sup>20</sup>the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,  
<sup>21</sup>the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

### **Luke 13:31-35**

<sup>31</sup>At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”  
<sup>32</sup>Jesus said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.  
<sup>33</sup>Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’  
<sup>34</sup>Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!  
<sup>35</sup>See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.  
**Thanks be to God.**

**PLAY VIDEO** (Windows Movie Maker): Jerusalem Lament (2:25)

How did we get here? How did we get from blessings as numerous as the stars to concentration camps and separation barriers?

How did we get to bullet pocked gates and churches under siege and nineteen year old girls with automatic weapons?

We got here because of two verses that the lectionary would rather we not read...the verses that tell us that the land from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates is already occupied by the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Canaanites, etc., etc. God's words, it turns out, are a double-edged sword. The promise that was meant as a blessing has spiraled into a cycle of violence and retaliation. Surely there is evil at work here. But in whom?

There was a part of me that assumed that my visit to the Holy Land would solidify my sympathies for the Palestinian people. What I found instead was a land of contradictions.

I expected to be angered and saddened by the barrier erected around Bethlehem, and I was. I was angered by the fact that our Israeli guide was allowed to talk history and politics all day long, while our Palestinian guide in Bethlehem was afraid to give us even the bare bones facts about the 2002 siege.

But I was also angry that as non-Muslims we couldn't visit the Dome of the Rock, where Solomon's temple once stood and where God stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. I had no idea it was also a Muslim holy site, and one we were not allowed to enter.

I expected to visit the wailing wall and stuff a prayer scribbled on a scrap of paper into one of its crevices. I didn't expect to have to pass by young women holding automatic weapons to do so. I didn't expect to see Israeli soldiers being called by name and given the Hebrew Scriptures and a gun.

I also didn't expect to be weeping again the next morning as I walked through the Holocaust museum, looking at the family photographs salvaged from Jews who were hastily murdered just before the liberation.

On one side of the scale stood 6 million Jews brutally exterminated, and more who were persecuted and displaced and denied refuge in so many countries after WWII. On the other side stood six million Palestinian refugees, displaced with the creation of Israel and in subsequent wars, also denied citizenship by neighboring Arab countries.

On one side stood "Hamas" – whose name means violence in Hebrew—calling for the destruction of Israel and for suicide bomb attacks on Israeli civilians and children. On the other stood Israeli settlers and soldiers cutting Palestinians off from jobs, families, and resources, harassing and killing their share of civilians and children too.

When I came back from this land of contradictions with disturbing pictures and no easy answers, I found myself searching desperately for some hope, some reason to believe that the evil that I saw might be confronted, some reason to trust that God's promise can still be a blessing and not a curse.

This is what I found:

**SHOW VIDEO** (Quicktime) – Encounter Point Trailer – 7 min

<http://www.encounterpoint.com/trailer/index.php>

These Israelis and Palestinians in the Bereaved Parents Circle, who have every reason to be angry, to retaliate—found it within themselves to be vulnerable to the very people they should not trust. They take their pain, and instead of running from it or hurling it at the other side as a weapon, they give it to the other side as a gift. They never mention Christ. But they embody him.

I would stop right here, say Amen, and sit down, except for one thing. I heard an interview with one of the women featured in the video: the South African-born Israeli woman, Robi Damelin, the mother who lost her son David to a Palestinian sniper. She was at a restorative justice conference in Milwaukee, and a young woman came up to her ready to work for peace if only she could figure out how to get overseas.

Robi said, “Why? You live here, in Milwaukee. There are enormous problems with crime here. There are enormous racial problems. This is the most wonderful place to begin a journey of making a difference, in your own community and in yourself. Because you can’t go out and change things if you’re not willing [to do that].” Her words made me stop and think about the Diversity Series we’re planning for this month.

I know that when Harry Belafonte came to speak about the Civil Rights Movement at the Tiffany Series, we packed the house. I bet if Dr. Bascom gave a talk about his involvement, we’d pack the pews again. But in some ways, those are pretty safe ways to talk about our “isms.”

What I wonder is how many of us are willing to talk about prejudice, about race and class and all those other ways we are categorized, not abstractly as something out there or in the distant past, but as something here, among us and within us? Are we willing to encounter one another in ways that might be uncomfortable and even painful? We all have certain individuals or kinds of people we avoid or that we just don’t understand...or that never seem to make our inner circles.

I used to think that prejudice meant active hatred of some group or category of people. If you’d asked me about race relations when I was in boarding school at the Alabama School of Math and Science, I would have told you that everything was great.

Sure, the campus was 75% white, but that was a lot more diverse than the private school I had attended. And we were a lot more integrated than the public school I went to because we were all living together and taking the same classes.

Nothing prepared me for the reaction of the African American students and staff when the literary magazine I edited came out in the spring of my senior year. One of the pieces of art we published was a depiction of a KKK lynching—now hear me out.

The original title of the piece was “Who has really fallen here?” meaning of course that the Klansmen were the true fallen, morally speaking, but the art teacher convinced her to change the title to “The Hanging,” and let the viewer think for himself. The artist’s alien and disturbing rendering of the KKK and their hooded children should speak for itself. Just in case though, we placed the art in a story lamenting the evils of discrimination. Our art editor, who was Jamaican-American, approved.

You can imagine my shock, when I caught wind of students ripping that page out of the magazine, calling the artist a racist, and demanding that I apologize for printing such an offensive piece.

I did what any well-meaning, self-respecting editor would do. I defended my innocence and the artist’s and our right to publish offensive things anyhow, and refused to apologize for someone else’s uninvestigated and false assumptions. The artist responded more publically with a statement of her own, and a teacher arranged for a mediated discussion. For the life of me, I can’t remember what reason I had for not attending, but it is one of my biggest regrets to this day.

Looking back, I can admit how hurt I was—not just angry, and I can also see how afraid I was. Afraid of my African American peers and the staff—afraid of their anger, afraid of their pain, afraid of my own ignorance.

I am so sorry now that I missed that opportunity to talk about race in such an immediate and relevant way. I am so sorry I missed that opportunity to receive the gift of someone else’s pain and to share my own. Who knows what bonds might have been forged?

Now, when my African American classmates “friend” me on Facebook—the only way that I know we went to school together is when our mutual friends are white people whose names and faces I remember. I think that’s the kind of thing that makes God sad, that makes Jesus cry out in lament and frustration like a mother hen whose chicks refuse her protection, while the Fox licks his lips nearby.

One thing I did learn, in spite of all my avoidance at the time, is that the wounds of racism in this country are deeper than I could have ever imagined. I also learned how easy it was to convince myself otherwise. To convince myself that everything was ok, when it clearly wasn’t.

Today we baptize Landon Reiman into the body of Christ. When Landon grows up, he won’t remember this day, and he won’t have a clue as to what it means, unless we teach him. He won’t have a clue, unless we teach him, that his primary identity is not as an educated white person, or an American, or a male, or a consumer. We have to teach him that his primary identity is one he shares with all people—child of God.

Landon won’t have a clue, unless we teach him, that being baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, means that we don’t confront evil with bullets or bombs or angry rhetoric or by denying its existence.

We confront evil like Christ did, and like the Bereaved Parents circle are doing, by turning our pain into a gift. We confront evil by participating in the death of Christ, which means being vulnerable to the stranger, to the enemy, to one another, and trusting God to raise us up and to knit us back together.

That's how God breaks the cycles of violence and exploitation, of segregation and mistrust. That is how God clears the sky long enough to show us the stars.