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The Palestinian struggle for justice

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

There we were last week in Bethlehem, hundreds of us from sixteen nations praying with a hundred local Palestinian Christians, singing hymns, listening to the Sermon on the Mount, offering intercession -- all in the dark shadow of the evil Israeli wall which imprisons the Palestinians of the West Bank.

To our left, just a few feet away stood a Palestinian refugee camp for the displaced peoples, and hovering over them on a hillside, one of the many unjust Israeli settlements.

Our prayer for peace was held in the court yard of the Wi'am Palestinian conflict resolution center, which faces the towering wall several yards away.

From this vantage point, we could easily read the hand-writing on the wall: "This is not peace, this is fascism!?" "\$7 million a day for this??" "Stop the \$3 billion a year for Israeli apartheid!?" "Seriously Obama, you're okay with this??" "War is not the answer,?" "Build bridges, not walls,?" "Is this security??" "Mr. Netanyahu, tear down this wall!?"

High above the colorful graffiti, friends had painted the name of our conference in large letters: *Challenging Empire: God, Faithfulness, and Resistance*.

This was political liturgy at its finest. Its dramatic context set the stage for our week of reflections.

"Jesus is our peace who knocked down the wall,?" we heard from second Ephesians. "Blessed are the meek; they shall inherit the land,?" we heard in the reading from Matthew.

A Palestinian preacher explained:

Every empire has occupied our land from the Assyrians to the Babylonians, from the Greeks and

the Romans, to the Arabs and the Crusaders, to the Ottomans and the British, and now the Israelis with the Americans. But Jesus tells us that empires do not last; they come and go. He releases us from the power of the empire. We are the ones who inherit this land!

There is a fifth Gospel, the land of Palestine itself, for this geography cannot help but point to God. But there's also a sixth gospel -- the people of this particular land. If we want to understand the Gospel of two thousand years ago, we have to hear from the people of this land today. For they are being occupied, persecuted, imprisoned and killed, just as the people of Jesus' day were also occupied, persecuted and killed.

It's a beautiful, sunny day here in Bethlehem as I write this from my hotel room over-looking Bethlehem, the walled-in land and its beautiful, suffering people. The testimony we have heard this last week is heartbreaking.

This is the Eighth Sabeel Conference, sponsored by Sabeel, an ecumenical Christian group of Palestinians who offer programs for their oppressed people and promote justice and peace.

It was founded in the early 1990s by a saintly, charismatic Anglican priest and liberation theologian, Naim Ateek. He is the author of two excellent books, *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation*, and *Justice And Only Justice: A Liberation Theology of Palestine*, which I highly recommend.

This past week, we heard scores of leading Palestinian Christians speak on every angle of the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation -- the wall, the apartheid, the settlements, the house demolitions, the low intensity ethnic cleansing, the \$3 billion annual U.S. military aid, the siege of Gaza, the terrorism, the checkpoints, the road system, the murders, the Islamophobia, the recent U.S. veto of the U.N. statement condemning the illegal settlements, the U.S. Israeli lobby, the Israeli murder of sheep and dogs, and the particular targeting of Palestinian children.

Back home, the U.S. is great at building prisons instead of schools. But here, the U.S. has built the world's largest prison.

The towering Israeli wall snakes throughout the West Bank, closing the people into an ever tighter holding cell. One home, caught in the crazy vortex, is surrounded by a four-story concrete wall on three sides!

Of course, the Israelis treat every Palestinian as a 'terrorist' and justify the wall as 'security,' but the wall is used to steal more land from the Palestinians. Though over 2.5 million Palestinians live in the West Bank, half a million Israeli settlers have stolen land in violation of international law and daily terrorize the people.

'Since the 1967 war, the Palestinians have become conscious of their life under a basically global American empire where Israel constitutes an integral and essential strategic partner and extension of it located in the heart of the Middle East,' my friend Naim Ateek wrote in his letter of invitation to me.

The local expressions of this empire are obvious to its victims on a daily basis -- the occupation, the settler colonization, the excessive use of military force, the system of control, the manipulation of laws and regulations that humiliate and oppress people, the wall, the checkpoints, etc. Indeed, one of the main characteristics of this empire is its disregard for human rights. This domination has become extensive and unbearable.

What is truly significant and exciting is the awareness of some biblical scholars and theologians of the global dimension of American Empire. Consequently, they started to alert the world to the dangers and threats of empire and to challenge people everywhere to look at it in light of the life and teachings of Jesus about the kingdom of God. As people of faith and conscience, we ask: what should be our response?

Due to Israel's growing military power, its intransigence has increased and so has its oppression of the Palestinians. Since Israel has been unable to bring the Palestinians to their knees and exact further concessions from them, it refuses to make peace based on the demands of international law.

Israel's link with American Empire has, therefore, become the main problem because it has hindered the U.S. from playing a constructive role in the achievement of peace.

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How can we be faithful to God and our human values as we daily interface with empire? Weak as we are, how can we challenge and resist empire? What does Christian discipleship mean for us today and for our friends who live in the shadow of this global empire?

I could not refuse such an invitation, so I came here to participate in this extraordinary conference and to listen to these suffering Palestinian sisters and brothers, to reflect on our global empire, its impact on these people, and the theological and spiritual challenges it presents.

Over the course of this week, we analyzed the occupation, studied the technique of empire and traveled through Jerusalem, Hebron and the West Bank to hear first hand stories from the terrorized Palestinian people.

We studied the scriptures at length with two of the world's leading Christian scripture scholars.

Richard Horsley taught us in general about the Roman Empire's occupation in biblical times, and how Jesus organized a campaign of nonviolent resistance against it. Ched Myers walked us through several texts from Mark to examine Jesus' call to the oppressed people to defect from the empire and join his movement of nonviolent resistance.

Others explored how empire uses fear, theology, politics, media, economics, culture, and education to manage the occupation and killings.

We studied the recent ecumenical statement, "Kairos Palestine," which calls upon Christians around the world to join the campaign to end the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation. We heard about the church's complicity with empire, and how the church could become a force of resistance. We discussed what could be done, and heard the Palestinian call for "Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions."

I was asked to conclude the conference, along with Cardinal Michel Sabbah, Patriarch of Jerusalem. I spoke on the spiritual basis and resources for our nonviolent resistance to empire. (All the talks were videotaped and will be available, along with the texts, here. I encourage everyone to study the website from this great Christian group. If you wish to join the U.S. "Friends of Sabeel," visit here.)

Of course, these topics made this one of the most compelling conferences I've ever attended. In fact, I don't think I have ever joined a church conference in the U.S. which addressed our empire and our Christian response.

I was especially moved when my new friend, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba of Cape Town, South Africa, preached at our ecumenical service in the Church of All Nations in the Garden of Gethsemani -- and later when we were heard from Archbishop Elias Chacour, a long time voice of the Palestinians.

But it was our visits to the local communities of the West Bank which touched us all. We were divided into small groups and scattered throughout the area. The group that attended the weekly protest in Hebron was tear gassed twice. Israeli soldiers even fired their machine guns over the crowd.

Of course, this is par for the course for Palestinians. Each week hundreds of Palestinians are tear-gassed by the Israeli soldiers. And every tear gas bomb reads: "Made in the USA."

In fact, the main company that makes these tear gas bombs is located in Pittsburgh. Pennsylvania readers take note: we need to start regular demonstrations outside that tear gas manufacturing plant until it shuts down. Their tear gas -- *our* tear gas -- injures thousands and recently killed a young Palestinian woman.

Because I spent time years ago in Hebron and Beit Sahour, I journeyed instead to the remote southern hills below Hebron, the southern end of the West Bank. This barren, rocky landscape reminds me of New Mexico. But the poverty we encountered, and the stories of terrorism by the Israeli settlers and soldiers we heard, were horrifying.

First, we came to a small Bedouin place where Palestinian Muslims had lived for centuries. But their land has been stolen by Israeli settlers, and they are now confined to a rocky hillside. They live literally on the rocks, in small squares piles of white stones with tattered tarps covering them. A hundred yards away, the expensive homes of the settlers stand behind large fences.

On all sides, Israeli military jeeps keep their guns aimed on them. Of course, our group was watched and followed extensively by these Israeli patrols.

The utter poverty was shocking. The Palestinians have no running water, plumbing or electricity -- unlike the illegal settlements, many of them made up of Americans. As we arrived, an elder greeted us and immediately launched into a passionate cry for justice.

Later, we agreed that every Palestinian tells the same story: "Israelis stole our land; they terrorize us; they target our children; they kill our animals; they call us names; they threaten us with swords; they shot us; and they keep closing in."

"We are all children of Abraham," he said.

"Why can't we live peacefully together as friends and neighbors, as we did for centuries?" he asked. "The whole world is appalled by what Qaddafi is doing in Libya; why are they not appalled by what Israel is doing to us? It's the same thing!"

In Sussiyya, we met mothers and children living in tents on the rocky hills without running water, electricity, or any modern conveniences. Again, we heard hair-raising stories of daily harassment by the Israeli settlers and soldiers.

At that very moment, on the next hill over, Israeli settlers had surrounded one of their shepherds with his sheep. They charged the sheep who scattered in all directions. Some of the sheep of course will be lost and die; and the villager's livelihood will be hurt. A few brave Israeli Jewish peace activists come from Jerusalem each week to accompany these people, but they too get harassed.

In the village of At Twani, volunteers from the Christian Peacemaker Team have been living among the suffering people for years, because the threat of nearby settlers is so violent.

We saw photos of the sheep and dogs who were shot and poisoned just in recent weeks by the Israeli settlers. We met the children who have been attacked by the settlers and have to be accompanied to school by Israeli soldiers, who are often settlers themselves. Each day, Israeli settlers yell at the Palestinian people, especially the children, calling them, "Nazi! Nazi! Nazi!?"

But the Palestinians we met do not want to leave the land where they have lived for centuries. Life has become for them a full time, twenty four hour campaign of nonviolent resistance to empire. You have to see it to believe it.

During one of the many conference workshops, I met the legendary young hero of nonviolence, Iyad Bornat, leader of the Bil'in nonviolent resistance campaign.

For six years, these Palestinian villagers have demonstrated every Friday at noon against the evil Israeli wall and the illegal Israeli settlements. Their town, located to the west of Ramallah in central West Bank, has become a worldwide symbol and model of nonviolent resistance.

Over the years, 1300 people have been injured, over 1100 arrested, and two people have been killed. They suffer daily harassment, beatings and arrests by the Israelis. In particular, their homes are raided each evening. Apparently, the Israeli soldiers want to scare and provoke the children to fight back or throw stones, so that the children can be arrested and the families will leave. Many little children have been put in jail. The psychological damage alone is immeasurable. Many compared these terrorist tactics to the Ku Klux Klan of the American South against African Americans.

Meeting Iyad was like meeting Gandhi. He was quiet, thoughtful and serious. He showed us video footage of their weekly demonstrations and their creative nonviolence. Once, they put themselves in a big cage to symbolize their imprisonment. We watched as an Israeli bulldozer arrived, lifted it, the people were dragged away in chains, and then it was destroyed. We saw Palestinian demonstrators chain themselves to fences, walls and trees, and get arrested and dragged away.

We cringed at footage of Israeli bulldozers destroying dozens of olive trees, all over a thousand years old. In recent years, they have destroyed nearly 1,000 olive trees owned by local farmers.

Once, villagers painted themselves blue, to resemble the indigenous people of the blockbuster film *Avatar*. Just as the indigenous blue people in the film have their land and lives stolen by an imperial military force, so have the people of Bil'in been terrorized by the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation.

We watched horrific footage of Israeli soldiers hitting the demonstrators, beating them, and tear gassing them. This happens every Friday in Bil'in. And nearly every demonstration has been filmed.

So then Iyad showed us what happened on April 17, 2009. A few demonstrators are seen standing about, holding their banners, and chatting with one another, not far from the wall. In the background, the usual

armed Israeli soldiers hover about.

Then, one of them casually lifts his weapon, takes aim, and fires a tear gas bomb right at one of the peaceful demonstrators. Bassem Abu Rhama is hit full force right in the center of his chest. He falls to the ground, rolls down the rocky hill, and dies then and there at the foot of the Israeli fence.

This is Jesus being crucified all over again by the empire in the land of Palestine. And it is all paid for by us: \$3 billion a year in U.S. military aid to Israel.

What we should do? I asked Iyad.

?Go home and demonstrate in your streets,? he said.

?Speak out against the U.S. veto of the recent UN denunciation of Israeli settlements. Work to end the U.S.?Israeli occupation of Palestine. The U.S. government, for us, is the same as the Mubarak Egyptian government. Tell the U.S. government the people of Bil?in want to know: Why are you arresting and killing our children and our people? It is time to stop the killing and the occupation.?

Editor's Note: The original version of this column incorrectly reported the amount of aid the U.S. provides to Israel. We apologize for the error. The correct figure is \$3 billion a year.

John will speak this weekend in Chicago, at the West Suburban Peace Coalition on Saturday, and St. Jude's on Sunday. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, visit: www.johndear.org. To hear a new podcast interview with John Dear, go to www.jesusradicals.com. His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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