

Grief, Humility and Hope for Peace  
A Sermon for Pilgrim Church  
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October 22, 2023

(Though our Narrative Lectionary text talks of David's story, I'm not going to preach about David, except to say that David is complicated and to note that the story he was part of took place on the same ground that is making headlines today.)

Twenty six years ago I stood in a spot that was the center of hundreds and hundreds of years of conflict. A place where thousands had died, where war was intractable, where people experienced the pain of their great great grandparents as their own.

Before I went, teachers asked me to read ten books and twenty articles, and they said, even so: you will know nothing about this place and the peoples who call it home. They said, even after you stand in this place, you will still know almost nothing.

"More than 3,500 people were killed in the conflict, of whom 52% were [civilians](#), 32% were members of the British security forces, and 16% were members of paramilitary groups".<sup>1</sup>

It was the summer of 1997 in Northern Ireland, just before the summer marching season.

I was there with a group interviewing peacemakers.

There was heartache.

There was violence.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Troubles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Troubles)

And there were peacemakers.

There were politicians, and there were pastors and theologians and diplomats.

But more importantly, there were prisoners who came home determined not to let their own children continue the fighting. There were groups bringing Roman Catholic and Protestant teens together for peacemaking. There were mothers of children who'd died in the Troubles, who would not lose another child.

We went to listen. To sit with those mothers and witness their grief was holy and sacred.

In 1997 there were three things I observed about Northern Ireland:

I was less likely to be mugged than anywhere else in Europe - the paramilitaries on both sides saw to it.

The cliff above Giant's Causeway on the northern coast was the most beautiful spot on earth.

And peace *was not near at hand*.

I was there just before marching season, the most violent and volatile season every summer, when everything tended to blow up. Peace was nowhere to be seen.

But a year later, the Good Friday Accords were signed, marking the beginning of peace; the beginning of the end of the Troubles.

Here is the tiny, tiny thing I feel I can say right now, about another place where violence has shattered so many lives in the last three weeks;

another place where intractable conflict has lasted for so many years. And it all comes from that trip to Northern Ireland 26 years ago.

First, witnessing our neighbors' grief is holy work right now. Listening to them and showing up.

Second, as American Christians, - that is to say neither Jewish, nor Israeli, nor Muslim, nor Palestinian - humility is crucial.

And, finally, I cling to stubborn hope for peace.

Grief, humility, and stubborn hope for peace.

To stand next to our Jewish neighbors, and anyone who has friends or family in Israel since October 7 has been to witness profound communal grief. I can think of only a few other moments in my life seeing this kind of heartbreak in friends and neighbors. And it is not just sorrow, but also fear - and not just fear for friends or relatives in Israel, but also fear for their own safety in a time of rising Antisemitism. And it is not just an isolated fear of what happens today, but the return of a fear that has roots thousands of years old. I had the honor of sitting with Temple Emunah, and then Temple Isaiah, and then standing at a Lexington vigil for Israeli lives lost - weeping with our neighbors - and several other Pilgrims were at these gatherings. It was so important to be with our Jewish neighbors in this horrible, horrible moment.

So I'm clear - *I absolutely condemn the attacks of Hamas*. I grieve for the innocents killed in Israel and pray for the safe return of all hostages.

I will also tell you that checking in with our Muslim neighbors who are here in Lexington, I also have witnessed grief and fear, with civilian lives lost in Gaza and in the face of rising Islamophobia here.

I remember sitting with Northern Irish mothers whose backgrounds were loyalist and republican; Catholic and Protestant. Grief for children lost transcends background. A mother's grief is universal.

And this leads me to comment on humility. My teachers in 1997 were right: I could not possibly understand Northern Ireland, in a lifetime of study and listening. So I will tell you now, I don't think it's possible to understand what is going on right now in Israel and Gaza, at least not enough to make pronouncements. I thank God I am neither a reporter nor a diplomat - and oh, mercy, I pray for the diplomats.

Shadi Hamid talks about humility in this moment: "Intellectual humility is a trait and a practice that allows one to accept their own limitations. Even if we think we are right, it entails holding open the possibility that we might be wrong. But on a deeper level, humility involves the recognition that the truth itself is more complicated than it might first appear."<sup>2</sup>

I bring up the subject of humility because I have noticed some expectations in these days. An expectation that I or others would know in an ultimate sense which group is entirely and unquestionably right, and what right and perfect action should be. An expectation that a side is to be taken and no questions are to be asked about that side. And let me be clear - I heard that personally - and from friends and neighbors who are, you guessed it, on "both sides."

It's a challenging moment in the interfaith world. A Boston area imam named this in a commentary saying in part, "I hope interfaith friendships can survive this turmoil."<sup>3</sup>

I condemn the atrocities of Hamas, and Hamas as a whole, without reservation. And I recognize and agonize with my Jewish neighbors

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/10/16/intellectual-humility-israel-palestine-debate/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2023/10/18/israel-hamas-gaza-war-taymullah-abdur-rahman>

because an attack on Israel provokes an existential fear for the Jewish people, and I've studied the Holocaust - such a threat to all Jewish people must never happen again.

But beyond that I don't know enough to do more than weep with those who are weeping, to pray for the return of hostages, to pray for no more civilian death anywhere, and to pray for peace.

The same imam writes, "This issue is a very human one. It's nuanced, complicated and layered. If you find yourself caught in the middle of a political conversation, it's OK to say, "I'm not sure." It's OK to admit, "I don't know enough."

I will note that it was a member of one of Lexington's synagogues who sent me this article, written by her friend.

I've been trying to tend to my interfaith friendship this week, to show up. To make the call, to check in. To say to each one: you are God's beloved child and you are not alone. I know many of you have done the same. Keep it up.

Another commentator said this week, "Hardliners feed on each other."<sup>4</sup> In other words, an eye for an eye until the whole world is blind. Or, to quote poet Yehuda Amichai, "From the place where we are right / flowers will never grow in the spring. / The place where we are right / is hard and trampled / like a yard..." To move from the hard line, then, perhaps is to be willing to grieve for every innocent civilian life in Israel and Gaza, to be humble, and to imagine that even when peace seems impossibly far away, God is still working toward peace.

I remember the mothers who grieved in Northern Ireland - these same mothers who would let no more children die, the same mothers who sang

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/18/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-israel-palestine.html?showTranscript=1>

out for peace. And I cling to that stubborn hope that one day - sooner than anyone can imagine - peace will come to the Holy Land.

Amen.

(Today - after I finished this sermon - an article in the New York Times has described ongoing grassroots peacemaking efforts:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/22/world/middleeast/peace-activists-israel-palestinian.html> )

*Soundtrack to this Sermon:*

*“Jerusalem” by Eddie from Ohio & “Hallelujah” by Leonard Cohen*