

**Sunday, October 15, 2023**  
**20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23A)**

Isaiah 25.1-9

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1008709770385521>

*(Sermon begins at about 25:35)*

**“The Vineyard Aflame”**

In last week’s sermon, we focused on the image of Israel being a vineyard and of God being the one who cares for the vineyard, particularly as presented in the parable of the wicked tenants. As I unpacked that parable, I noted that in using a vineyard as location for his parable, Jesus was invoking more than just the image of Israel as a vineyard. He was calling to mind an oracle from the Prophet Isaiah—part of which was our Old Testament reading from last week—that foretold the destruction of Israel by the Assyrian Empire in the eighth century BC and the events that followed. Significant and painful events in the life and history of the people. All told in an oracle that used the image of the destruction of the vineyard. The final verse of last week’s passage from Isaiah reads: “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!” (Is 5.7).

As we read those words in our worship service last Sunday, that ancient oracle of an event that occurred 2,700 years ago was once again playing out. The vineyard that is the nation of Israel once again ran with blood. The inhabitants of the vineyard again cried out in pain, cried out for justice. And over this past week, we have all seen on the news the horrific images and heard the heartbreaking stories coming out of Israel and Gaza. Parts of the vineyard aflame. Parts of the vineyard reduced to rubble. And in the process, so many of God’s beloved children injured. So many of God’s beloved children left homeless. So many of God’s beloved children lying dead in the streets. And looming over it all, the fear that this may only be the beginning.

To say that the situation in Israel-Palestine is complicated would be a serious understatement. The conflict currently being played out in the Israel-Hamas War is merely one in a long string of disagreements, conflicts, and wars that have been going on for millennia. A conflict that began in the second millennium BC with Abraham and concerns over who would be heir to God’s promise that Abraham’s descendants would possess the land that we now know as Israel—Isaac, the son of Abraham and his wife Sarah, whose descendants would become the Jewish people; or Ishmael, the older son of Abraham and the slave Hagar, whose descendants would include the Prophet Mohammed, the founder of Islam. Attempting to solve the problem, Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away, presuming Isaac and his descendants to be the sole heir to God’s promise.

But that did not solve the problem. The conflict would resurface, in a different form, when the Hebrews, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, left Egypt and settled in the Promised Land, which happened to be occupied by the Canaanites—whose descendants include the modern-day Palestinians.

And the conflict would resurface in modern times with plans following World War II to create Jewish and Palestinian homelands on land they have both held, both controlled, and that they have been arguing over, for nearly 3,500 years. A plan that was never fully implemented. Israel got their homeland, but the Palestinians are still waiting for theirs. An argument that has been playing out ever since in a series of wars, conflicts, terrorist activities, and endless political negotiations. Never reaching a satisfactory solution. Least of all for the Palestinians, who have been relegated to a situation that can only be described as apartheid. So, once again, the vineyard is aflame. Once again, the vineyard runs with blood. Once again, the inhabitants of the vineyard cry out in pain, cry out for justice.

Although, this time, the conflict has taken an even darker turn. What is happening even as we speak is not the usual interactions, the occasional violent actions, between Israel and the Palestinians. These are the actions of a radical terrorist organization that, while comprised of Palestinians, do not speak for or represent the sentiments of all Palestinians. Far from it. The actions of Hamas—which I certainly will not enumerate, as none of us need those images in our heads—the actions of these terrorists can only be characterized as pure evil. Actions against their sworn enemy, Israel, but also actions that are indiscriminately harming their fellow Palestinians.

That is the history, the substance, of what is happening right now in Israel. Why do I bring this into a sermon? Because the vineyard that is aflame, the vineyard that is running with blood, is our spiritual ancestral home. That vineyard is the home of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the place that formed who he was, what he did, what he taught. It is the place and the people for which he was willing to go to the cross so that they—so that we—might be saved. As the cradle of our Christian religion—the largest religion in the world, the religion that particularly shapes the morals and values for western nations, including our own—what happens in the vineyard of our spiritual birth has the potential to impact us, as well. And being the cradle for the three Abrahamic faiths, a land that has been in dispute for millennia, what happens in the tiny plot of land called Israel certainly has potential ramifications for the fate of the entire world.

So, what do we do? What can we do? I, probably like you, feel at a loss. Seeming that all we can do is watch the nightly news, read the newsfeeds, and feel overwhelmed. And if you are like me, there are times that all that can be done is to weep. To weep because of the horrific and barbaric actions we witness. To weep in solidarity with fellow people of faith—be they Christians, Jews, or Muslims.

I want to share with you the pastoral letter written by our Bishop earlier this week. He starts his letter with the quote from Isaiah that I quoted at the beginning of this sermon: “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!” Bishop Taylor then continues with the letter proper:

My siblings in Christ:

I know you join me in lamenting and grieving the devastating losses resulting from Hamas' savage, unjustifiable terrorist attack against Israel beginning on Saturday, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. By Wednesday, Israeli and Palestinian deaths had exceeded 2,300.

As followers of the Prince of Peace, our first and best instinct is to pray, and pray hard: For those who have died and been injured; for those most at risk from continued violence; and for all who have the power to end the suffering by ending the violence.

We also lament every missed opportunity for an equitable peace in Israel and Palestine, year after year, epoch on epoch, that could have kept this outrage from the pages of history. We pray for the transfiguration of the agony of these terrible days into a relentless determination among leaders of good faith to make sure it never happens again. Experts on multigenerational conflicts say they end only when the suffering becomes unendurable to all sides. That this may be such a moment in Israel and Palestine is the moment's only salutary feature.

This is not the time to make political points beyond saying that all in the region deserve freedom, peace, security, and national self-determination. It can be done, if everyone gives something up. This includes those of us observing from a distance who love the Holy Land, follow its politics, and are passionate about our views. It is time for us to lower our voices and stop choosing sides.

At the same time, as people of faith, let us stand our ground on the immorality of murdering noncombatants and taking hostages. No historic grievance or trauma can justify what Hamas did. By the same token, Israel must do all it can to spare civilians in the hours, days, and weeks ahead.

As we pray for peace, seek wisdom, and hold power to account, let us keep a special place in our hearts for The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and its archbishop, the Rt. Rev. Hosam Naoum, our Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles keynoter last year at convention and a respected leader in the Arab Christian community in Palestine. I've written to him on the diocese's behalf, offering prayers and support. For his sake and the sake of all whom he serves so faithfully, always preaching peace with justice, reconciliation, and the power of Jesus's love, please join me in making a gift to American Friends of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which supports the Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City.

Yours in Christ's love,  
The Rt. Rev. John Harvey Taylor  
VII Bishop of Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>

We do not know how what is happening right now in the vineyard that is Israel, the vineyard that is Gaza, will play out. Will it be destroyed as in Isaiah's prophecy, or will it be spared as in Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants? As people descended from that vineyard, all we can do, as our Bishop notes, is to pray and to provide whatever support we can to help God's beloved children who are impacted by these atrocities. And to hold on to hope. That is the message we

hear in our Old Testament reading for today. Another passage from the Prophet Isaiah. As is typical in such apocalyptic literature as the Book of Isaiah, oracles of doom and destruction as we heard last week are generally followed with promises of hope. With words looking forward to and celebrating redemption for the righteous who are God's beloveds. As we hear in today's passage from Isaiah:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples [for ALL peoples]  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.  
And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations; [ALL nations]  
he will swallow up death forever.  
Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the LORD has spoken.

As members of the Body of Christ, as followers of the Prince of Peace, as those spiritually rooted in the vineyard that is Israel-Palestine, this is our hope and our prayer for all of us. Especially for our sisters and brothers—be they Christians, Jews, or Muslims—who still reside in and call that ancient vineyard home.

I want to conclude with a prayer written by the Right Reverend Deon K. Johnson, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri:

Cry out! Cry out!  
O God, what shall we cry?  
Cry out for justice, cry out for love.  
Cry out for hope, cry out for mercy.  
Cry out for kindness, cry out for compassion.  
Let everything that hath breath, cry out!  
What shall we cry?  
Cry out for peace! Amen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Episcopal News Update October 15, via email on October 11, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> "Prayers and Other Resources in Wake of Violence in Israel and Palestine," Episcopal Church Office of Public Affairs, email October 11, 2023. <https://mailchi.mp/episcopalchurch/the-episcopal-church-press-release-digest-293522?e=6936d67475>.