

Christ the King 2019
(Luke23:33-43; Jeremiah23:1-6)

Some of you have already heard about part of the ending of the Holy Land trip.

We woke up at 3:30 am to get to Ben Gurion airport, said goodbye to Nael, our guide and dear friend, and got in line for the Turkish Airlines ticket counter when an Israeli agent began to question, then cross-examine, then cross-cross-double-examine us. The main problem seems to have been Bethlehem.

Because we stayed in Bethlehem, I got pulled apart from the group for nearly 45 minutes as those so-called security agents rooted through my luggage and weren't pleased to find Arabic writing—terrorizing propaganda ...of the Lord's Prayer and a poster from the Lutheran-run Environmental Education Center about that violent, extremist activity of bird-watching.

Seriously, the security strong-arms were peeved about these things and pressured me for answers and bullied me. They even directly told me I was lying, that I was not on a church trip. Dear siblings, I *thought* I was on a church trip! I tried to organize a perfectly legal church trip. I believe we were church as much as thick crowds with matching hats or t-shirts who thronged—as one of our group members colorfully articulated—to every nook and corner where Jesus allegedly hypothetically went to the pottie (though that tones down the color).

What really got them steamed for our endangering security and kept them chattering back and forth on walkie talkies was a Lutheran World Federation annual report⁺. (I swear, it's the most worked up anybody's ever gotten over a church annual report.) The despicable things in the report they kept paging through were about the Lutheran-run Augusta Victoria Hospital. As I kept insisting that this was a church trip and was part of what our church does, they didn't like hearing that you help fund that hospital, that with your offerings, some small tidbit finds its way to

helping Palestinians from Gaza do awful things, like get cancer treatments, and Palestinian children receive dialysis from their only available source.

As I was being called a liar and interrogated (and as I was worrying what harm I might cause to the amazing but trapped people we met and visited), I wanted to invert the interrogation and demand: What the hell is wrong with a hospital?! You may be grateful, though—if not slightly surprise—to know I can at least on occasion behave myself.

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. I will raise up shepherds over [my flock] who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.”

These words came from the prophet Jeremiah, and happen to come to us on this Christ the King Sunday.

I was reading some Walter Brueggemann for the trip, and he gave the helpful parameters of the prophet's role: “The prophet is intended [he writes] precisely for speech in the land, in the face of the king, against idolatrous forms of self-securing.”*

About forms of “security” and the state of Israel: that practice at the airport, a very minor instance of what Palestinians live with and have lived with for fifty years or more, was self-securing at the expense of others. The answer is always security. The reason for almost any aggressive or punitive action is given as security. Things that even violate international law are explained away as being for security.

But our experience wasn't about rockets or suicide bombers. This was an attempt to intimidate a church group about a church-run hospital for people desperately in need of medical care and humanitarian assistance and with little place to turn.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote “The prophets were the first [people] in history to

⁺https://jerusalem.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/documents/lwf_annual_2018.pdf

* *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, p87

regard a nation's reliance upon force as evil...The heart of God goes out to the humble, to the vanquished, to those not cared for.”**

Along those lines, it strikes me as all too apparent where a God who stands for the weak and vulnerable and dispossessed is standing, where God's heart is. It seems clear which are the sheep being cradled and carried in this God's arms. The prophetic voice says, stop it. Stop. Your evil doings are being attended to.

Of course our awareness through this trip was that though things are particularly awful over there, we have a log in our own eyes, too. It's not just their apartheid wall. It's not just their racist policies and divisive speech. It's certainly not just their refusal to shepherd those in fear and in need.

Besides too often failing the vulnerable sheep in our midst, we too enable this dispossession and distress of the Palestinians. Our government has refused for three years to release funds assigned for Augusta Victoria Hospital, meaning that at the end of October they had to stop taking new patients because they can't afford the chemotherapy drugs. And part of our group got off the plane in Chicago to learn of the new policy condoning settlements that steal land and resources that have belonged to families for generations, a practice judged criminal by international consensus. We find ourselves on the wrong side, contributing to worsened conditions instead of helping alleviate harm and animosity.

On this Christ the King Sunday, in the face of the corrupt and corrupting powers, we may be reminded that as church we belong not on the side of power but as the prophetic speakers in the land, those like Jeremiah, who go against the king, and against idolatrous forms of self-securing, meaning those ungodly but-claiming-to-be-good-practices that manage to ignore others. Sometimes that prophetic voice speaks to others. Sometimes it confronts our own complacency.

The airport insecurers asked how I knew about Augusta Victoria Hospital. The most direct answer would've been that I know about it because the ELCA encourages us to advocate, to

raise our voices against our government's bad policies and on behalf of what we ought to be doing. We are the prophets.

Yet I don't want this to be about policy or about my self-righteous airport story or how well we do at these things.

That's partly since prophetic speech may also seem too fearful, too daunting, too challenging, words we can't swallow, more than you are capable of because your life is also wedged in the gears of those relentless oppressive mechanisms. In that case, self-security isn't wrong. It's what God desires for you, to hold you securely in the shepherd's arm.

And so we look to Jesus.

On this last Sunday of the church year, this is the culminating Gospel reading, where empire is up to its usual tricks, distorting labels, calling names, shaming, trying to get a manipulative leg up, to put others down, with that placard taunting "King of the Jews" over one dying a painful wretched ugly death, while it's simultaneously over a nation under occupation where self-determination was impossible.

Such forceful efforts from empire are met by Jesus. Not a powerful Jesus to wipe out the other powers. Not a miraculous one-ups-man who can't be killed and climbs off the cross. And, I want to be sure you hear, not just a good example guy who would courageously see his commitment through to the end, even if the end was in getting lynched. To think of him trying to win for a cause just makes him like others striving after their way. Plus, in those terms he lost. I don't want you walking away today thinking how you need to be braver like Jesus.

This Jesus is about promises and possibility. God is with you. Jesus is attending to those who need him, attending even to those who scorn and think they don't need him. He confronts oppression with his self, giving up that security, giving to you. His word is new beginning as he forgives. His word is new life, even as he goes into death. And his word is for you: Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise. This is the voice of your Good Shepherd, calling you

** *The Prophets*, p212-13

over all the other intimidating labeling noises, whispering through the clamor of life's competing powers, reaching out to the dismayed, so that none will be missing. Today you will be with me in Paradise. For forgiveness. For encouragement. For a promise when it's bleakest and you need you need something to secure you, Jesus calls to you: Today you will be with me.

