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A SHARED JERUSALEM: A VISION  
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Some years ago, at the beginning of a Confirmation class, one of the students approached me and said, with a tone of finality, "Pastor, I won't be coming to every other Confirmation class. I have a Scout meeting." My quick reply was, "No, Sean, what you will do is come to me outside of class and let me know you have a conflict. Then the two of us will sit together and work out a solution." Needless to say, Sean was not happy the rest of the evening. The next morning I received a telephone call from Sean's father. He related Sean's assertion that I had said he couldn't go to Scout meetings. Then he asked if that is what happened. I gave him my version. With no hesitation, Norm replied, "Thank you very much, Pastor." Two weeks later, at the beginning of the next class, Sean walked up to me and said, "Pastor, I have a conflict with my Scout meeting. Can we talk together and work out a solution." Without a trace of a smile, I answered, "Sure. We can do that." And we did. Norm's superb parenting still sticks in my mind as a great example of the absolute NEED to hear both [or all] sides of a story.

The greatest tool or resource a person, a people, a nation can possess is the means to control the story: that is, to control the way a context is built into which "facts" are placed. The story of Jerusalem—and for that matter, all of Historic Palestine, is one of the best examples the world has ever known. Today I hope to turn the story ever so slightly in a different direction.

1. It is far beyond my knowledge and expertise to be able to define the relationship between what Karen Armstrong calls "sacred spaces" and the people who are drawn to them. Suffice it to say that such sacred spaces are at least as much about emotion, religion and self-understanding as they are about geography. They are the spots where we humans encounter that which is "wholly other." There is none more dramatic or significant than JERUSALEM!

In concrete terms Jerusalem is held in highest esteem by

1. Jews: Holy Zion, City of God, Place of Solomon's Temple, where Abraham was called to demonstrate his obedience to Yahwah by sacrificing Isaac.
2. Christians: The place of the absolute essence of the birth of the faith: Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension.
3. Muslims: the place from which the prophet Mohammed [Blessed be His Name! as his followers would say] rose in his night journey to Heaven, and the site of the great and final judgment yet to come.

It is a city often conquered, long occupied, devastated, abandoned, restored, controlled...yet always appealing to people of faith to come and see—and often to take.

- II. My first premise: Jerusalem is more than a city. It is a concept, an ideal, a revelation which seeks to enfold one into its grasp. So, it is no surprise that I—like just about every person who has ever called that city home—have a premise with regard to its life and future: Jerusalem will NEVER be a shared place in any lasting way (1) if we attempt to sort out competing claims on the city, determining their relative strengths as a beginning place for compromise is sought, or (2) if a sharing is forced or imposed on the claimants by “outsiders.”

I have come to believe that a shared Jerusalem can only become a genuine reality when all the three faiths and the two peoples are willing to sacrifice their claims so that the sacred city might be saved. [I think of the two women who came before King Solomon, each claiming that she was the mother of a baby. When Solomon in his wisdom offered to split the baby between them with his sword, the imposter readily agreed, while the true mother stood ready to relinquish her claim so that her child would live. (I Kings 3: 16-28)] Such sharing does not mean that anyone’s love for the city will diminish, but that each will come to see the image of God in the face and life of the others...and will humbly step aside so that brothers and sisters may enter.

- III. A second premise flows directly from the first: A shared Jerusalem will never come to pass if it is assumed that such an arrangement will be based on each person’s tolerance\_of the others’ religious beliefs. Only when we all learn to embrace the “other” with acceptance and respect for her human worth, his culture, her religion, his ethnicity will we have laid the foundation for one holy place to be shared by all. I have watched Lutheran pastors observing the customs of Ramadan (refraining from smoking, drinking, eating during the day) and offering a sincere “Shabbat Shalom” to Jewish soldiers and police on their Holy Day. I watched while Muslim merchants whose shops were at risk come to see the Christian Bishop for assistance because of their trust and respect for him.

I know it is heresy to some, but we will not walk together toward a Holy City for all if we are looking down on the faith of others or seeking to convert them to what we may see as a superior faith!

- IV. The present occupation of East Jerusalem and the Old City of Jerusalem—indeed of the entire West Bank and Gaza—an occupation and annexation regarded by the rest of the world as illegal—is but the latest attempt by one people to elevate its values, its heritage, its beliefs over those of all others...But it is the insurmountable obstacle to a shared Jerusalem...and it rears its obstructionist head in so many ways:  
# Muslim Holy Day Prayers, Christian access for services and observances and Jewish Holy Day activities are entirely and totally controlled by Israeli authorities. What this means in real terms is that it is common for Muslim men under the age of 45 to be denied Friday access to the Al Aksa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock on the Haram a Sharif—the Noble Sanctuary [the Temple Mount of Judaism]. It means that Christians can only enter the area of the Holy Sepulcher on the day before Easter IF they carry a ticket issued by the Israeli police. It means that on the Jewish Day of Yom Kippur--the Day of Atonement--traffic lights are turned OFF in the Arab sector with no one to direct traffic safely through intersections. It means that roads, not inside, but adjacent to Jewish neighborhoods, may be blocked to all cars. And there is NO recourse to a higher authority.

Apologists for Israel often point out that when the U.N. passed in November 1947 its partition plan for Palestine, Arab states rejected the proposal while the pre-Israeli leaders

publicly accepted it. What they likely will fail to point out are two vital factors: (1) the Arab states had made it clear they they would not accept any plan imposed on them by others that meant taking away land which had been home to countless generations of Palestinians, Thus it was easy for Israel to accept; without Arab OK's there would be no legal partition and (2) the records of the pre-national leaders of Israel make it eminently clear that despite the U.N. provision which formed a "corpus separatum," an international trusteeship for all of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, they never intended to accept the planned inclusion of Jerusalem—regardless of whether the Arabs accepted or rejected the U.N. proposal.

If there is to be a shared Jerusalem, the occupation MUST END.

- V. Finally, there is a way through which we can move toward one Holy City for all, with access to its holy sites open and guaranteed—with respect for the three monotheistic faiths—with the life of the city a beacon set on a hill for all the world to see and to emulate. (1) If the people of each faith will walk the path their beliefs set out for them: welcoming the stranger and the sojourner, respect for the commonalities of their traditions such as the prophets and scriptural heroes which are cherished by all, a deep and abiding sense of justice for the widow, the orphan, the prisoner, and the oppressed. (2) If the people there—Jews, Muslims, Christians, Palestinians, Israelis, Druze—can remember the ways they lived together before human craving for power forced them apart. [The story is often repeated of the murder of scores of Jews in Hebron by Arab extremists in the 1930s. Seldom told, however, is that more than 400 Jews were saved from death by their Muslim neighbors who hid them in their own homes. The oldest generation remaining are still young enough to recall the times before 1948. They know the peoples can live together in peace; they experienced it.

Lutheran Bishop Munib Younan has often stated his disagreement with apparent U.S. foreign policy in the area. He believes that the key to peace and democracy is not found in Baghdad or Tehran or Damascus or Amman.

The road to peace in the Middle East runs through Jerusalem!