

After the Wrestling Comes the Blessing

Erica Lloyd



November 17, 2024

Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost

I often start my sermons off with some kind of disclaimer, and this one is no different: when I agreed to preach a few weeks ago, my focus was entirely on how to frame our discussion, and

it somehow did not occur to me that this would also be in the aftermath of the election. I feel profoundly ill-equipped to be preaching in this context.

But maybe today's lectionary is of help. Jesus talks of power, of wars. These were, I imagine, topics that provoked some anxiety among the disciples. "When will this happen?" They ask, as if a timeline might make it all less scary, less unknown, less apocalyptic.

We are acquainted with this same anxiety, the two thousand years between us notwithstanding. Nation has risen against nation many times over. Jesus promises that these conflicts are birth pangs, but the labor has been long and messy and full of complications. What does it mean for us, today, that Jesus says that our greatest symbol of power will come tumbling down? I don't have an answer to this question, but I am trying to take solace in Jesus telling me I don't need to be afraid. The only thing I know to do right now is to put one foot in front of the other. As John Morris frequently reminds me, we just need to do the next right thing.

Which for me, means being here with you all this morning. Today, the Racial and Ethnic Justice Ministry Team is hosting a discussion about a proposed statement on the war in Gaza, and I want to use this time to provide some commentary on how we got here. Seekers doesn't have a lot of precedent for doing this. We have statements about big picture ideas that are central to our shared values, like gender and sexual equity, and rejecting white supremacy. But in terms of current events, we haven't done this much, so our group has been learning as we go. And it hasn't been smooth or easy. We, too, have been in the throes of labor pains.

For months, the members of REJMT wrestled amongst ourselves,

trying to come to some consensus on a statement that expressed our grief and our longing for peace. Even after multiple discussions, we hadn't reached consensus, caught up in the complexities of the language: what does it mean to say that we want Palestinians or Israelis to be safe in their own homes and land when there's no agreement on whose land is whose? As we grappled with these words, the idea arose to invite guests that might help us examine some of this language. We planned the conversation between Aaron Shneyer and Nizar Farsakh, who are deeply involved in peacemaking in the Middle East, and in the meantime decided to share a draft statement, however imperfect, at the September Stewards meeting, so that we might begin to get initial input from the wider Seekers community.

All of this, as well as individual exchanges that many of us were having both within and outside the community, yielded a lot of food for thought, but most of the feedback suggested we continue, try to refine the statement.

But when REJMT gathered to synthesize the suggestions and questions into an updated draft, we had the most challenging meeting we've ever had as a group. As we began to discuss, we seemed further away from consensus than ever. We wrestled back and forth as the mood shifted from optimism to uncertainty to anger to despair to exhaustion. With little progress to show for our *painfully* honest grappling, we decided to end the conversation and take a stab at some individual rewrites. As we closed the meeting, the story of Jacob wrestling with God came to mind. I prayed: *God, we believe that after wrestling comes the blessing.* Had I already read this week's lectionary, I might have also considered this metaphor of birth pangs, too. *Let our painful conflict birth something worthwhile.*

And, lo and behold, after a few rounds of rewrites, we came to unanimous agreement. After all of our wrestling, that indeed felt like a blessing to me. I'll venture to say that none of us think it's *perfect*, but it is the common ground where we can all stand together. This is the draft we will discuss

today. It attempts to incorporate the two most consistent pieces of feedback we received:

First, that one of our primary concerns is the role of the United States. The statement should reflect that, as Americans, our primary target of advocacy is with the US government. After all, this is one of our main motivations for wanting to make a statement, to say: we will not stay silent while our government participates in the slaughter of civilians.

Second, that we acknowledge that the reality of antisemitism is inseparable from this conflict. When we started this process months ago, we had understood the initial suggestion to be two separate statements about the war and antisemitism. But those two things are inextricable, and as Deborah has reminded us, we are members of a religious tradition that not only created antisemitism but also provided the theological justification to sustain it over millennia. Israelis, too, deserve to feel safe, and this conflict will never truly end until we grapple with global antipathy towards Jews.

So this rewrite of our statement tries to express these things better.

I also want to address a question that has come up repeatedly throughout this process: why should Seekers make a statement about this particular war when nation has risen against nation all over the world? There are many different reasons that I've heard members of this community articulate, among them:

- This conflict is unique in its longevity and in concerning a place that is central to our own religious roots.
- This war has become part of our own national news and dialogue more so than any other, and public opinion is more divided on this conflict than any other.
- And, as I've already mentioned, the participation of the

US government in providing weapons and funding to the Israeli military despite the enormous civilian casualties.

And I'm sure there are other reasons that various members feel moved to speak up on this. But at the end of the day, the reason Seekers might comment on this particular conflict is actually because it's just how we do things (and I want to thank Trish for so clearly framing this for me when I was grappling with this same question). It's the same reason that in our international giving we give to two organizations in Haiti but none in Yemen, and why every year we have a worship service led by a youth choir from South Africa but not from Cameroon: that is, we honor and support the calls and passions and connections of individual Seekers. Our community has been connected to New Story Leadership and the Museum of the Palestinian People for years – it isn't a surprise to me that many of our members feel a call to cry out for peace in this particular conflict. We are putting our mouth where our money is.

A while back, Marjory and I were talking about the statement as we stood out front during one of our Friday vigils. She said: "I find myself wondering why we are doing this, who is this statement for?" And I answered, "You know, in large part, I think this is for *us*. I think we as a community need to wrestle with this." And, in a realization that would have made 12-year-old me roll her eyes so far into the back of her head they might never have come back, I realized that for me, the process was more important even than the product. Because doing my best to follow Jesus on the journey of working on this statement has been a spiritual discipline. It has forced me to persevere in tense discussions despite a strong propensity for conflict avoidance. It has required deep listening and compassion for different perspectives. I have had to abandon my preference for black and white thinking and embrace nuance. It has also, quite frankly, forced me to

confront some of my own antisemitic ideas about the roots of this conflict. I have learned so much. So. I imagine many if not most of us are already emotionally exhausted from the last few weeks, and honestly, engaging on this statement might be the very last thing you want to do today. But I encourage you to stick around. I believe that after wrestling comes the blessing. I believe that all of our labor can bring about the birth of something beautiful. I believe that if we invite the spirit to join us in conversation, she'll show up, and we will learn something from it. May it be so