

## Sermon: Dear Israel — A Love Song

Before I preach today's message, I would like to offer a few qualifiers — disclaimers if you will. I am not a Jew. I do not have Jewish heritage in my blood. I am a goyim, a Gentile Christian, originally from Taiwan, and have settled in Canada for better part of my adult life. I do have a fondness for Israel (the biblical and the ideal Israel), and have a great admiration for the Jewish faith—its core tenet of believing in and worshipping the One True God, its resiliency to hold on to that faith in face of much suffering through history. I don't speak Hebrew, but have taken courses during seminary studies, and have devoted additional efforts to pick up the language, its beauty and simplicity, as a channel to understand and appreciate the Hebrew people, their culture and their faith.

I love preaching from the Hebrew Scripture, or as many in my Christian circle would call it The Old Testament. I have a fondness for prophetic literature, Ezekiel particularly. Yet I don't claim to be a prophet, in the biblical sense. The prophetic voice I do have, and have surfaced from time to time, arises out of my calling as a congregational pastor. Yes, I am keenly aware that I am an outsider, not from Israel, not 'one of their own', and really have no business saying what I am about to say. However, I am deeply troubled by what I am seeing in Israel / Palestine, over the past two years, and intensifying during the past two months.

What I am about to say is inspired by the recent article 'Dear Israel', published through The Christian Century Magazine, by Samuel Wells, who is an author, a vicar in the Church of England, and someone of Jewish background. His article has given me the courage to speak, in a structure I understand.

But before I speak further, let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. **Amen.**

Dear Israel, it has now been almost two years since the October 7 attacks of 2023, when Hamas militants (terrorists I call them), entered into Israel and brutally massacred 1,195 mostly civilians, and taken another 250 individuals hostage. This initial attack has triggered a massive military response, in the form of incursions by the Israeli Defence Force into Gaza, directed by the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu. There are some things that I understand, but some things I need help to understand, O dear Israel.

I understand the October 7 attacks has reignited the unimaginable existential terror felt by the people of Israel. Help me to understand how the response by the Israeli government thus far has made such an event less likely in the future?

I understand how difficult it must be to try to live in peace with neighbours who vow to annihilate you, the first chance they get. The original dream, in the creation of the modern state of Israel, that Jews everywhere can finally have a homeland and be safe, is turning out to be a bit of a nightmare. I am deeply sorry for that. But help me to understand how the death of 20,000 Palestinian children make Israel safer?

I understand the outrage felt by many Israelis, and by many people across the world, of Hamas taking and holding hostages, using them as bargaining chips, or worse, as human shields. Help me to understand how the killing of 60,000 Palestinian people, mostly civilians, has made the hostages' homecoming more likely?

I understand one should not equate the modern state of Israel to the biblical Israel, and neither one of them holds the candle to the ideal Israel, which, to be frank, never truly existed. Nevertheless, faith in the One True God, Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, is still shared across the ages. Help me to understand why the current generation of Israeli feel and act seemingly as if words of the prophets in the Holy Scripture do not apply to them today?

Take for example Prophet Isaiah, in the parable of the vineyard. Isaiah sings a love song. His beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill, planted it with choice vines, provided it with a watchtower, a wine vat in the midst. This benevolent owner expected good grapes but the vineyard yielded only rotten grapes. So do you expected him to do, but to remove its hedge, to break down its wall, to command no rain upon it, until the vineyard is trampled down, becoming a wasteland, overgrown with briars and thorns.

I understand from these words of Isaiah, this vineyard is a metaphor for the house of Israel. For people of Judah is God's cherished garden. Whereas God expected justice but saw only bloodshed, whereas the Holy One of Israel demanded righteousness but heard only a cry! Help me to understand how this generation of Israeli could honestly believe that cries of the Palestinian would not, finally perhaps already, reach heaven?

I understand the modern state of Israel sees and prides itself as the only democracy in the region, and I don't dispute that accomplishment. But

help me to understand what kind of democracy it is that regularly abrogates the rule of law, nationally or internationally. That its current leader has already been indicted internally for breach of trust, accepting bribes, and fraud, and externally for war crimes against humanity.

I understand many within Israel believe their country is deeply misunderstood, and their reputation is being tarnished by a coordinated international campaign at the United Nations, and across the world. I could see some merits to that line of thinking. Help me to understand how the targeted killing of journalists—Anas al-Sharif, Mohammed Aliwa, Mohammed al-Khaldi—and as CNN reported recently at least 242 journalists have been killed in Gaza since the war began. Help me, please, to understand how such targeted killings helps to repair the damaged reputation of Israel?

I understand that many who support Israeli government's actions believe the country has no reliable friends, and international opinion is flaky at best. Help me to understand how with starvation as a matter of active policy, couple with indiscriminate killing of hundreds of aid workers and thousands of health workers, that Israel expects to find any friend at all?

I understand some Israeli Jews (and even some Christians) justify their claim to this land based on God's promise to Abraham. That promise can be traced back to Genesis 12 when God called Abraham, and promised to bless him, to make his name great. However, there is a corresponding blessing that through Abraham, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). I rejoice that throughout history, Jews have blessed and continue to bless the world through art, science, commerce, innovation, learning, spiritual depth, charity and compassion. Help me to understand how the current Israeli government's policy towards Gaza, and the emerging plan to occupy it constitute a blessing to the Palestinians and to all families on the earth?

I understand antisemitism is a scar on the world and a daily threat to Jews everywhere. It rears its ugly head in unexpected places, in the hearts and minds of unsuspecting people, often with devastating consequences. It is incumbent upon all people of faith, of goodwill, to work toward stamping it out anywhere—be it workplace, university campus, in homes or social media. Help me to understand how Israeli government's brutal campaign in Gaza diminishes and dismantles antisemitism rather than fanning and fuelling it?

I understand Jews have endured ethnic oppression in one form or another for thousands years, and in some regrettable context, by the hands of Christians in the past. I sympathize. Help me to understand how many more deaths will it take before one comes the realization that such oppression can be pursued by more than one side.

As I understand what the psalmist says so pointedly, in Psalm 82, "You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you", that includes all believers who call on God Most High. Such a high privilege of begin called gods, *elohim* in Hebrew, carries with it corresponding moral and ethical imperatives of "giving justice to the weak and the orphan; maintaining the right of the lowly and the destitute, rescuing the weak and the needy, and delivering them from the hand of the wicked", just to name a few. Help me to understand how to bridge this insurmountable chasm between the current State of Israel and the ideal Israel, and help me to understand why you think God should judge you, O dear Israel, less harshly so that you would not die like mortals nor fall like any prince?

I am only quoting you words from a few places in the Hebrew Scriptures, and I haven't even begun to preach to you by the words of Jesus, for I know most of you do not subscribe to the notion that he is the *mashiach*, or messiah, God's anointed. So it is not fair to hold you to standards set by Jesus, of turning the other cheek or loving your enemies, or forgiving those who have sinned against you not once, not twice, but seventy times seven times.

Dear Israel, I am trying really hard to understand, but I cannot. I so much wanted to write a love song, like Prophet Isaiah, but this is turning out to be a dirge, a lament, like Jeremiah. I so much wanted and dream of Israel to be embodiment of God's promise, a kingdom of priests, a light to the nations, a sign of hope and blessings for all people. But that dream is being eroded, destroyed not by external attackers of October 7, but by internal loss of soul, faith, identity and truth.

Odds are, with superior weaponry, you will probably win the wars in Gaza, or Lebanon, or Yemen, or Iran or wherever you may find enemies with hatred in their eyes, but is it truly worth it if you become indistinguishable from those you are fighting against? When you dream of a promised land, a holy land, was it really for this?

"Rise up, O Lord God, judge the earth, for all the nations belong to you!" (Psalm 82:8)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**