

What Did You Bring Me?

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Matthew 5:13-20

Kirkland Congregational Church; Kirkland, WA

That is the question we always ask when someone goes away, right. *What did you bring me?* Well, I won't keep you in suspense. At least entirely. When you get to the lounge for our Fellowship time after worship, you will find a box of treats that I purchased in Nazareth from a shop which happened to be the favorite sweet shop of the tour guide we had on the trip. He told us he always brings stuff from there back to his family. So, I hope you enjoy them!

And, I brought you back many stories, many experiences, many perspectives that I will be sharing with you over time. There is an awful lot to process. I am still somewhat on Israel time, I was falling asleep by 6 or so last night, and by 2 this morning I was wide awake and ready to go. I will try to make it through that Seahawk-less game happening down in Texas later today, we'll see if that can keep me awake.

There are pictures too. They are still in the camera that Van was kind enough to lend me. I will be putting them together soon, and I hope to have a presentation for you in coming weeks.

I have 2 more things I bring you from my trip too. The second of them, well, you'll just have to wait a little bit. The first, though, is an unexpected take on the verse we heard Joanne read just a few moments ago. The words Jesus spoke in this verse came quickly after the Beatitudes – and yes, I visited the mount where they were delivered. Pictures of that forthcoming too. In the midst of these words, a short phrase is uttered, one which would not have had all that much meaning of its own to me before this trip. *A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.* A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.

There are so many contexts through which we might consider this. The metaphor of the city on a hill is one that flows deeply through our own history in this country, one which was used back in the time of the Pilgrims, and one which politicians today use when they wish to cast this nation as a light to the world. We would be hard pressed, as a faith community, not to think of Jerusalem when we hear this phrase. A city built on a hill.

The part of Jerusalem we would think of indeed stands on a hill, high above the once-fertile farming valleys below, and barely a stone's throw from other hills, like the Mount of Olives. High on this hill is the Old City. It is where we would find the Via Dolorosa, traditionally the path Jesus took to his crucifixion, where we find the Stations of the Cross. It is where we would find the Western Wall, often called the Wailing Wall, a space near where the Temple once stood, a space sacred to our Jewish brothers and sisters. It is where we would also find the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa mosques, 2 of the most holy sites in Islam. This city built on a hill shines for billions of people, for different reasons, but all related to the same God.

Hills, and the things built on them, stand out in the Holy Land. They are as ubiquitous as the rocks that just seem to be everywhere. I've never seen so many rocks in my life. The hills are so plentiful that you can have numerous valleys in a very short area. As you might imagine, we who live in a place where wonderful views abound, there is a desire to build on the hills. What gets

built on them is often a very contentious subject – with effect on things like the availability of water in a reasonably dry land, but also with ties to who owns the land.

If you look at a map of present-day Israel and the surrounding area, you quickly notice just to the east of central Israel is what we call the West Bank – since it lies of the west bank of the Jordan River. On the map, it actually bears an odd resemblance to the shape of the state of New Jersey. This is what, in 2011, is generally meant when one says Palestine. This is what we know as the occupied lands, the lands where many Palestinian people live, where the Palestinian Authority has some measure of control, and where you find places of importance to our faith like Bethlehem. It's also where you find the Mountain where traditionally it is believed Jesus spent those 40 days in the desert.

The land has changed hands many times. It was under control of the Ottoman Empire for centuries, then British, and then it was part of Jordan until 1967 when it came under Israeli control after the war that year. Many families have been there throughout all of this, including the family of Daoud Nassar. Daoud, which is Arabic for David, is a Palestinian Christian who lives high on a hill somewhat near Jerusalem. The land on which he lives, often called Daher's Vineyard, has been in his family since the First World War. His grandfather purchased it in 1916, while the Ottoman Empire still ruled. Daoud can, and has, produced the deeds to the land dating all the way back to then – through the various rules of Jordan, the British, and the Ottomans.

This is land that his family has worked since then, farming things like wheat, grapes, and olives. The olives are particularly important, both in reality and symbolically. The olive tree is valued for many things, its history – some of these trees live 2000 or more years. They are beautiful, they endure, and products from these trees are the source of livelihood for many families in this area. You know about olive oil – this happens to be the 2nd largest export from occupied Palestine - but soap can also be made from an olive base, and the wood makes remarkably beautiful carvings, such as the nativity set I got for myself while I was there.

The olive tree's symbolic meaning is easier to understand when we remember the phrase often used when we speak of trying to make peace – extending an olive branch. For centuries and centuries, the olive tree has been a peace symbol. The land that Daoud's family has owned for nearly 100 years has olive trees all over the place, you can't miss them.

Hills like the one where Daoud's family lives have become the product of another activity, confiscation. When you visit the West Bank, you see the "settlements" that we hear of on the news. You see them high on hills, on lands that were owned by Palestinian families who worked the land for centuries, but were confiscated from them. We live in a space where farmland has become town and suburb, but here we see that having happened by force. People told simply to get off the land, their homes bulldozed, end of story. It's a story that can be told over and over and over.

Daoud's grandfather was smart to register the land he purchased, something which was rare in his culture. We live in a culture where of course we have deeds and the like, but in this place halfway around the world, that generally wasn't done. Even when it was done, though, it often

didn't stop the confiscation of land and forcible removal of its residents. This is what Daoud Nassar and his family are presently facing, and have been for 20 years.

In 1991, the Israeli government decided to take the land in this area, declaring it to be state property. The Nassars objected, as you'd expect, since they owned it. They were told to produce papers showing it was theirs – and they did. All the original land papers dating all the way back to the Ottoman Empire were produced. The initial confiscation was stopped, but what has ensued has been shocking. The courts have demanded all sorts of things too unreasonable for us to imagine. The deeds weren't enough – they wanted eyewitnesses that they owned the land. I am not exactly sure what that means, let alone would I know how to produce one from 80 or 90 years ago. But the Nassars were able to do it.

But with each succeeding response, they were simply told by the court that it wasn't enough. The message was clear, the government wanted the land. This has been going on since 1991. The case is known internationally; even former British Prime Minister Tony Blair attempted to intercede on their behalf. Meanwhile, the Israeli government has cut electricity and running water to their land, it has built access roads for nearby settlements on their land, and it has blocked roads which the Nassar family is allowed to use – there are restrictions on who can drive where on the West Bank – which means they can't even get a car all the way to the top of their own hill.

Orders were issued for demolition of their buildings. When tents were put up, orders were issued to bring them down, since there was no building permit. Mind you, applications for such permits are frequently “lost” in the system. And just try to imagine needing a building permit to put up a tent.

20 years later, the entire case is still in court. 20 years later. They are told they have no proof of ownership of the land, even though they do. They subsist on the top of this hill, in part living in natural caves. They continue to try to make use of the olive trees for livelihood, but even that has proved problematic. You see, apparently some of the residents of the nearby settlements have tried to help convince the Nassars to give up and leave. Their means was to go and uproot their olive trees. Hundreds of them. Imagine that, going onto someone else's land and uprooting their trees. Then imagine the authorities being completely unwilling to take any action to stop it, and the other forms of harassment of the Nassar family that have also been taking place.

That might be enough for a lot of us to give up. That might be enough for a lot of us to give in, to sell, and to do whatever to make it end. The Nassar family has a different response. When you drive as close as you can to their home, get out of the car where the giant boulders block the road and walk the few hundred yards to the entrance, you see a sign at the main gate. It says, *we refuse to be enemies*. They live this statement.

The Nassar family has developed a project called 'Tent of Nations.' As you can read on its website,

“The Tent of Nations project seeks to bring youth of various cultures together to build bridges of understanding, reconciliation, and peace. We invite youth from around the

world, especially from areas of conflict, together for face-to-face interaction. We also offer programs and facilities for solidarity movements, churches, youth organizations, and tourist groups. On the long-term, Tent of Nations desires to prepare young people for a positive contribution to their future and culture by bringing values of understanding and tolerance into their life experience, and to teach them the true belonging to their country. Tent of Nations is devoted to address cultural conflicts around the world, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, by facilitating positive encounters between young people from different cultures.”

This is pretty remarkable to me - a family so unjustly treated choosing not to act in anger but to use this as an opportunity to build a different kind of city on a hill, one that indeed shines brightly, a beacon of peace and non-violence. It's a place where people from all over the world can and do already go, including Palestinian and Israeli, Jewish & Christian & Muslim. It's a place where bridges of understanding, peace, and reconciliation can be built even in the midst of ugly conflict. The Nassar family has discovered what the world is like when salt has lost its taste, but they still let their light shine before others, so that all may see the good they do in their own lives following Christ.

What did I bring you? Oh yes, I did say there was one other thing. I brought you an olive tree. I brought you this universal symbol of peace that holds so much meaning particularly in the Holy Land. Now the tree isn't here – it's in Palestine. It's being planted at the Tent of Nations, on the Nassar family's land. While I was there, I arranged for an olive tree to be planted in your names. I don't have a picture of it, but when you get to the lounge and take your first taste of the sweet treats I brought from Nazareth, I hope you will find just as sweet the certificate which I will hang in the church which reads as follows:

The Tent of Nations officially recognizes the generous donation of Reverend Jason S. Boyd that makes it possible for a tree to be planted on Daher's Vineyard near Bethlehem, Palestine, on behalf of Kirkland Congregational Church, UCC, on this day, the 28th of January, 2011. This tree grows as a symbol of solidarity and hope for peace in the land of the Bible.

I hope that when we do make a venture to the Holy Land as a congregation, as many of you as possible can go. But even if you can't, know that a piece of you is already there. A symbol of solidarity and hope for peace in the land of the Bible grows in your name. Your presence, your love, your prayers, your desire for a world of peace and non-violence have been made known on a hill near where Jesus was born. Your light is shining before others halfway around the world, and like a city built on a hill, it cannot be hidden. Let us through all we say and all we do continue to make the light of Christ shine. Amen.