

It's All About Jesus: A Personal Journey

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I am deeply honored to be here.

It is with great humility that I joined the roster of distinguished speakers at this event. I've joked with my friends that I'm the token "non-expert in anything" here. I'm certainly not a theologian. I have, however, read many of the books written by the other speakers here, and I am very grateful for their scholarship, their wisdom, their passion, their commitment to truth and their love for God, for peace, and for all the people of the Holy Land. I've learned much from them.

As the title of this talk makes clear—I hope—I'll be talking about my personal journey of engagement with the hope and dream and prayer for peace with justice in the Holy Land.

Before I describe what that journey has been, I want to state clearly what it hasn't been.

It has not been a theological journey—at least not the journey most people might expect. It is true that I grew up in an extremely conservative, dispensational, end-time-focused church. As a child I heard more about Armageddon than about feeding the hungry or caring for the sick or clothing the naked. I was more familiar with prophecy charts than with issues of justice.

But fortunately, my parents both had strong gifts of mercy and encouragement, and lived simple, quiet lives of compassion. Their influence on me was great. I eventually went to college to become a social worker, committed to walking with people in need.

But when I married a man who wanted to start a church, I was delighted with that path. Bill and I had both become convinced, through reading the book of Acts, that the church of Jesus Christ has a wholistic calling, to calling to address the needs of the whole person in the whole community in the whole world. When we started Willow Creek we were young and immature and inexperienced—we didn't actually know how to live out that beautiful dream of what the church could be—but we knew it was true and it was what we were aiming for.

In the gracious providence of God, in our early 20s Bill and I were mentored by a brilliant college professor who ultimately became our dear friend and partner in ministry. Dr. Gilbert Bilizekian—now in his 80s—is the son of Armenian refugees who escaped the Armenian genocide of 1915 by fleeing to Paris, where Gilbert was later born. He experienced his youth in Paris during the Nazi occupation, realizing only after the fact why his Jewish friends who left Paris never returned.

Later, drafted into the French military service, he refused to carry a gun because of his personal convictions about the immorality of violence. He was allowed to serve as a medic in Algeria, as the Algerians fought for freedom from the French occupiers. He was grateful that as a medic he had the freedom to save lives rather than take

lives, but it was still a horrible, profoundly disturbing experience for him. He returned from Algeria even more deeply committed to nonviolence and peace.

From 1967 to 1971, Gilbert (or Dr. B, as we affectionately call him) lived with his family in Beirut, where he served as president of the Haigazian Bible College. He left the country when his then nine-year-old daughter was shot, caught in the crossfire of warring factions. He left the country sadly, broken-hearted by the violence that had turned Beirut—the “Paris of the Middle East”—into rubble.

He also returned from Lebanon convinced that he had to take a deeper look at several aspects of his theology: including the end times theology he had been taught, with its violent implications for the Middle East. By the time we met him, in the early 70s, he was a professor at Wheaton College. Contrary to the views of many of his colleagues, he had concluded that when Jesus came, He brought with Him a universal understanding of the promises given to Abraham and to Israel. Through Jesus, those promises were now offered to the world. Everything in the Old Testament needed to be interpreted in light of the New Testament. That is the theology he taught us and that we accepted—and still accept.

During the next 20 years Dr. B led many Wheaton College and Willow Creek Community Church tours to Israel-Palestine. He taught a message called “Jesus the Servant Leader in a Power-Obsessed World,” while we visited both the traditional Holy Sights and the Living Stones—indigenous Palestinian Christians. On a trip with Gil nearly 20 years ago I first visited Bethlehem Bible College. I still have the olivewood nativity set I bought at the gift shop here.

The point of all this is that since my early 20s I have been more aware of the reality in Israel-Palestine than many Americans have been; and I have held to a theology that supports the sharing of this land by Jews and Arabs. But despite those facts, the reality of this broken land was tucked somewhere in a back room in my mind. The front rooms of my attention were filled with the challenges of marriage and raising kids, and later with ministry in the inner-city of Chicago, and then in under-resourced communities in Latin America, still later in Africa, where I initiated our church’s involvement with extreme poverty and AIDS.

In 2003 I learned what everybody learns when they get involved in Africa: that once you open your heart and your hands to Africa, you find a passion and a task that can keep you very busy for the rest of your life, which is what I assumed would happen to me.

And yet here I am, in Bethlehem, speaking about an issue that has become—as my husband would describe it—an obvious obsession. I am still passionate about Africa, but Willow’s ministry there is lead by a very capable staff, which has given me the freedom to respond to a new calling from God.

So that is the journey I want to talk about today: The journey that took Israel-Palestine from a back room in my mind to the front porch of my attention. The journey that turned a person who, to be honest, would rather be reading poetry and literary fiction, into someone whose desk is buried under stacks of book on the Middle East and theology and non-violence and interfaith relationships. The journey that turned a woman whose deepest pathology is a serious commitment to people-pleasing into an activist for a cause that is surrounded by controversy and criticism.

I'm going to talk about that journey because I hope some of you are on that same journey, and perhaps my experiences will give you an extra little nudge along the way.

In order to understand what has brought me to this place, spiritually and geographically, I need to briefly mention 3 foundational principles that put me in a position to take this journey.

1) The first principle developed, surprisingly, out of a crisis of faith that I experienced as an adult.

I became a Christian when I was a child, but I had a very distorted view of God. In my mind, God was a harsh, demanding tyrant, and if I ever wanted to earn his love I would have to be very good, follow all the rules, and work very hard for him. As a devout adolescent I did that. As a young pastor's wife I did that.

I worked very hard to try to please God; too hard, in fact, and I eventually became utterly exhausted, seriously depressed, and physically sick. That plunged me into a total life crisis in which I felt compelled to give up the distorted image of the God of my childhood, but I didn't know how to discover the true God. I was still a pastor's wife, so it was a quiet crisis, but it was very intense and frightening.

Finally a wise friend said to me, "For awhile, forget everything you've ever thought about Christianity, forget the Old Testament, forget Paul and the epistles—and just read Jesus."

And so I did. For months, for years actually, I just read Jesus. In Jesus I found two things that totally reshaped my understanding of what it meant to be a Christian.

1) I found the Lover of my Soul.

I found a Living Presence who says, "If you're weary, come to me and I'll give you rest. If you're empty, come to me and I'll fill you. If you're lonely, come to me and I'll be with you." I realized that I could bring my very weary self to Jesus and find the deep rest I needed.

I found a God/man who tenderly welcomed children. Even when other people wanted to send them away, Jesus picked the children up and sat them on his lap and wrapped his arms around them. And I realized that even when I feel as weak and vulnerable as a child Jesus will welcome me.

I met Someone who honored and lifted up women who felt invisible, devalued and misunderstood in a culture that considered them little more than a piece of property. I realized that anytime I feel invisible or devalued or misunderstood, I can go to Jesus and be seen in a way that no one else sees me.

I'll tell you very honestly, at that point in my life I needed to be welcomed and valued and understood and seen. I needed a resting place. I needed desperately to sit in that Presence of ultimate and unconditional love. I needed to know—and I still need to know, every day—that I am loved despite my failures, I am loved for the uniqueness of my true self, and I am loved as I sit quietly doing absolutely nothing to earn, or buy, or chase that love.

I absolutely cannot wrap my brain around what I just said. It's not a matter of logic or a systematic theology. I don't know how Jesus allows me to experience his presence and his Love. But he does. Whenever I lean fully into the reality of my loneliness, my insecurity, my fear, or my brokenness, I find Jesus there, loving me. That is a Mystery I cannot live without. It has become the foundation of everything else in my life.

2) The second thing I found in Jesus was a radical call to compassionate action in the world.

At Jesus' first public appearance he said, "I have come to set the captives free and to preach good news to the poor." And through his teaching and life of servanthood, he slowly and methodically turned the values of the powerful Roman Empire upside down.

He threw the moneychangers out of the temple because they were exploiting the poor.

He said that when we feed the hungry or clothe the naked it's like we're doing it to him.

He said to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us.

Frederick Buechner summed up Jesus beautifully when he wrote this:

"If the world is sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party. The world says, Mind your own business, and Jesus says, There is no such thing as your own business. The world says, Follow the wisest course and be a success, and Jesus says, Follow me and be crucified. The world says, Drive carefully—the life you save may be your own—and Jesus says, Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

"The world says, Law and order, and Jesus says, Love. The world says, Get and Jesus says, Give. In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion." *Listening to Your Life* p. 95

I love the fact that Jesus changed the rules and ushered in an upside-down Kingdom. I love the fact that the early church was known for the way it loved, not just within the little band of believers, but beyond it. I love that they met daily to sing and pray and honor the presence of Jesus in their midst, and then they shared their material resources so freely that none among them had any need. I love reading in histories of the early church that when deadly plagues cut a black swath through communities, all the healthy people left except the crazy followers of Jesus, because they knew they were called to care for the sick—for the least—and they weren't afraid of the consequences, even death.

I AM A CHRISTIAN TODAY BECAUSE OF WHAT I FOUND IN JESUS. IN JESUS, THE LOVER OF MY SOUL AND THE RADICAL ACTIVIST, I FOUND THE CHRISTIANITY THAT MY MIND AND MY SOUL LONGED FOR.

AND IN MY HUMBLE OPINION, THIS IS THE CHRISTIANITY THAT THE WORLD DESPERATELY NEEDS TO SEE ALL OF US LIVE OUT.

This beautiful Christianity centered in Jesus is undeniably a global Christianity—a Christianity that reaches across cultures and languages and races and even religion. This—the global nature of Christianity—is my second foundational principle, and it became clear to me some years ago on an international trip.

As you know, in the early 90s there was a horrible war in Eastern Europe as the former Yugoslavia crumbled. It was a vicious war, complete with ethnic cleansing, mass murders, mass graves, rape—atrocious crimes against humanity. Soldiers would come into a village and rape the women and take all the men and boys over 13, and most of them never came back.

Twice during that war I traveled with a humanitarian organization to Croatia and Bosnia. We visited refugee centers filled with middle-class women just like me who had lost everything: jobs, husbands, homes, country, their planned-for future. We visited schools where social workers tried to help kids who had watched their parents die; they suffered from such severe post-traumatic stress that they sat all day silently chewing their fingernails.

It was the first time I had seen war up close and I was stunned by what human beings do to one another.

The day before I left to go home, I went off by myself and climbed to a little park on the top of a hill overlooking the Bosnian countryside. For hours I sat there and wept and prayed for the women and children I'd seen. While I prayed an unbidden question repeated itself in my mind: *Am I my sister's keeper?* And the repeated answer was yes, yes, yes, you are your sister's keeper.

Then who is my sister? God, who is my sister?

I sensed God say: They are all your sisters. Croatian Catholics. Bosnian Muslims. Serbian Orthodox. They—and every other woman you will ever meet—are all your sisters. And every man you will ever meet is your brother. Because they are all part of the human family I have created, whether they know that or not. And I love them.

When you open your mind and your heart to God and to the world you end up with a huge family. And you realize that every single member of the family is as important to God as you are.

This changes everything. It changes the way I listen to the news. The way I think about war, global poverty, AIDS, human trafficking, refugees—everything. Distance doesn't matter, race doesn't matter, religion doesn't matter. If there's tragedy in world, it's touching my family. I have to pay attention to it. I have to care.

The third foundational principle was given to me by an Old Testament prophet.

Shortly after my experience in the Balkans, I was telling a friend of mine about the kind of things I was interested in, locally and globally. She said, "Isaiah 58 is your passage." I am ashamed to admit that I said, "What's Isaiah 58?" She said, "You read Isaiah 58 for 30 days in a row and you'll know why God put you on this planet." And so I did. And she was right.

As you know, in Isaiah 58, the Hebrews are apparently grumbling that they're following all the rules and rituals about fasting and worshipping and yet God doesn't seem to be responding and blessing them the way they think he should. They're going on and on about this, and then God says to them, "Wait a minute. Stop right here. You think I like the fasting—the worshipping—that you're bringing me: saying special words and pretending to be righteous, but behind the scenes you're exploiting workers, you're quarreling and fighting. I hate this. How can you call yourself My worshipers when you behave like this?"

"The kind of worship I want is for you to

- loose the chains of injustice...
- set the oppressed free...
- to share your food with the hungry...
- to clothe the naked, and
- provide the poor wanderer with shelter.

"If you do that I will guide you. I will satisfy your needs. You'll find joy in me. And I will make your life, your community, your church a light that shines brightly. My glory will follow you. I will bless you and you will be a blessing to the world—but only if you give me the kind of worship I want, which is to fight for justice for all people."

You can't read Isaiah 58 for 30 days in a row without becoming convinced that God really cares about justice.

So, these are the three truths that guide me:

- 1) For me, Jesus is the deal. He's the alpha and omega. He's the filter through which I read everything in the Bible. He's my hero. He's the lover of my soul and my call to action. He is the One I strive to follow, though I do it ever so poorly. He's it.
- 2) I believe that every person on earth is a beloved child of God who means as much to God as I do, as much to God as my children and my grandchild do. Every person on earth is part of my family—my brother or my sister.
- 3) True worship that God loves includes doing justice. The fight for justice is not a minor, ancillary part of honoring God; it's a central part.

Those are the 3 truths that ultimately led me to Africa. But in the spring of 2008 I became haunted by a notion that seemed to come from nowhere. It was a single sentence: *Christians, Muslims and Jews are going to blow up the world*. I became haunted by that thought—and it seemed so tragic and so wrong. I listened to the hate-filled public discourse between these 3 great faiths and thought, "I can't believe this. How did it come to this? If there were a different kind of conversation between Christians, Muslims and Jews, I would certainly like to be part of it." And with that unexpected thought, the journey began.

First Stop: Amman, Jordan, October '08

I had been invited to attend a conference sponsored by *Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding*, a conference taught primarily by Arab Christians from Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Palestine.

The conference brochure should have come with a warning: *You will leave this place feeling sick at heart and your tears will continue to fall long after you return home.*

Try to put yourself in my place as I listened to these stories:

- An Iraqi doctor spoke of his father, a pastor, who was recently killed by insurgents because he refused to close the doors of his church. "It's God's church," the pastor said, "I can't close it." So they shot him and threatened to do the same to his son if he didn't leave the country. The young doctor began his presentation with actual video footage of Iraqi citizens being lined up against a wall and executed. He finished by quietly reminding us that Americans never hear so much of what goes on in his country.
- A female activist born to a Lebanese father and a Palestinian mother told how thirty of her Palestinian relatives lost everything in the 1948 war and fled to Lebanon to live in her family's three-bedroom home. Her up-close view of the traumas of displaced people inspired her to become a psychologist. Today, she works in a shelter for abused women and children. "As always," she reminded us, "where there is ongoing violence, poverty, and a sense of powerlessness, women and children pay the heaviest price."
- A Christian educator with a doctorate in Islamic studies explained that one thing that unites all Muslims is their outrage at the injustices faced by Palestinian people who have lost their freedom, their land and their way of life. "This is a huge issue," he said.
- A Lebanese clinical and cultural psychologist outlined the psychological impact of ongoing violence on children, as well as the emotional and social forces that push moderate believers (of any religion or ideology) toward radicalism and violence.
- An international aid worker described the extreme poverty and desperation in the Gaza Strip, where many Muslims have joined the global masses living on less than one dollar per day. Though Christians cannot talk about religion in the Gaza Strip, she made it clear that "our help is welcome."
- A Palestinian educator, who was just nine years old when the 1948 Israeli-Palestinian war began, described how his father was killed by a sniper during that conflict. Raised by a devout Christian mother who taught her seven children never to avenge their father's death, he went to the US to study and then returned to his homeland to train pastors, educators and community leaders. One of his sons currently leads a Palestinian organization devoted to nonviolent resistance and works closely with members of the Israeli peace movement.
- A young Lebanese student recalled a childhood marked by "hiding in the bathroom, listening to soldiers firing guns outside, and never knowing if someone was going to open the door and kill me." He claimed that many of his friends who grew up with a similar history have "lost their minds." He told his story with a smile, which I didn't understand until an older gentleman informed me that Arabs often hide their pain behind a smile.

- To a person these leaders said, “We feel abandoned by the Western church,” and of course they have been. Most Westerners don’t even know they exist.
- They also all agreed on this: that US policy toward Israel-Palestine is making their lives miserable. They said, “We used to live in relative peace with our Muslim neighbors, even though we’re Christians. But now we are being equated with Christian American Militaristic Imperialism that sides with Israel in its oppression of the Palestinians. That is ruining our lives; it’s making us the enemy in our own neighborhoods.”

On the last day of the conference, I sat at a desk in the middle of a classroom and wept. I returned home from Amman with a simple prayer: “God, what is mine to do?” I felt overwhelmed with a sadness that bordered on despair. But I knew that the antidote to despair is action. So I did the only thing I knew to do at the time: I wrote an article about what I learned from Arab Christians.

It was just a little online article—*Listening & Learning in the Middle East*—nothing profound. But I was deeply moved when I received responses from Christians in the Middle East saying, “Thank you for telling our stories.” That’s when I realized how truly abandoned they feel—that one little article would elicit such heartfelt response. I knew then that I needed to go back to the Middle East and learn more.

Second Stop: Cairo, Egypt, February ’09

I attended a missionary Conference sponsored by an Egyptian Church that sends missionaries throughout the Arab world. For the sake of the missionaries attending the conference I will not be more specific about the location of the event or those who attended. But I want to describe three pivotal experiences I had during that trip.

1. The first one was very simple: I was standing on a busy street corner in downtown Cairo, confused by the chaos of an incomprehensible traffic pattern, overwhelmed by the cacophony of unfamiliar music and language, and uncomfortable as an obviously Western woman. But in a split second, as I began to cross the street in a noisy parade of pedestrians, I felt it, undeniably: these are my people, my family, my sisters and brothers. Obviously, that wasn’t a new thought, but in that moment in Cairo I felt it again, viscerally.
2. The second pivotal experience was a meeting with the leadership team of the church that sponsored the conference. In a little room I sat in a circle with a dozen Egyptian men and women. I said to them, “I find myself thinking and praying and dreaming about peace in the Middle East. Am I naïve to even entertain that possibility? From your perspective, what are the biggest issues standing in the way of peace?” They gave me three reasons, which I’ll give to you in reverse order.
 - They said that the third major hindrance to peace was Christians in the Middle East: too many of them hate Muslims. “We’re working on loving them,” they said, “but we have a long way to go.”

- The second problem, they said, is Muslims in the Middle East: the number of extremist, violent Muslims is growing. “That trend has to turn around.”
 - They said that by far the most serious hindrance to peace in the Middle East is US policy toward Israel & Palestine. “Americans don’t know what they’re doing to us,” they said.
 - The pastor of the church—a very articulate speaker and a strong leader—ended the discussion with these words: We need people like you to speak up for us—to tell Americans the truth. Of course you’ll get criticism and pushback, from all across the political and religious spectrum. But why can’t there be an evangelical lobby in the US that speaks up for us? *Yes, I thought, why not?*
3. That evening, the final meeting of the conference was a celebration of what God had done in the various countries represented by the missionaries there. People paraded into the room dressed in the traditional costumes of the country where they ministered. The room was lined with all the various national flags of these countries. Missionary after missionary told stories of how God is a work. In every way, it was a celebratory atmosphere.

But the longer we sat there, the sicker I felt. You know how sometimes a calling from God comes with such force and weight that you feel—literally—like you got kicked in the stomach? It’s a spiritual encounter but it’s so strong that you actually feel it physically? That’s what happened to me that night.

“I’m calling you to the mission field,” I sensed God say. “I’m calling you to be a missionary to American Christians on behalf of the Middle East. I’m calling you to help move US Christians toward a clearer understanding of Arab Christians, of Islam, and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

I’ve only received such a definite calling 3 times in my life. And I’m not the kind of person who frequently uses the phrase, “God told me.” But that night God told me to be an advocate for the Arab world.

Third Stop: Jerusalem, May '09

I was invited by former US congressman Tony Hall to be part of an interfaith group of American religious leaders—Christians, Muslims and Jews—who would meet with the Council of Religious Leaders of the Holy Land—again, Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders.

Before I left for this trip, I began meditating on the words of Jesus in Luke 6: Love your enemies. It was an appropriate passage because the main purpose of the trip was to connect with Israeli and Palestinian activists who are committed to peace and reconciliation.

I talked with Israelis who protest the demolition of Palestinian homes. I heard about *Combatants for Peace* (made up of Palestinian & Israeli former fighters who now protest the military violence). I heard stories from the *Bereaved Families Circle*

(where Israeli & Palestinian families who have lost children in the violence of this conflict join to grieve together and build a foundation of peace). I met an Israeli Modern Orthodox Jewish woman who plans events where Jewish, Muslim and Christian women meet together to build friendships. I learned about Sami Awad and *Holy Land Trust* and about Salim Munayer and *Musalaha*.

I heard an Israeli religious leader and legislator who is involved in interfaith work say this: "Israel needs peace urgently; we need defined borders and security. But we won't get it unless our neighbors have the same. Who is at fault is totally irrelevant. Who cares? We're living here. We're both going to be here. Either we work it out or we blow each other up. We as religious leaders have totally failed: we have turned what could be the most beautiful thing in the world to the ugliest kind of hatred: to hate another human being is to crush the image of God in that person. When we do that we're throwing God off the throne. We, as religious leaders, have the key to redeem, sooth, assist, move toward peace. We must do that."

These are the people we never hear about in the US—people who, whatever their faith, are following the ethic of Jesus. I came away from that trip committed to learning more about peacemakers, so that I too can become a peacemaker.

Unfortunately I had another experience on that trip that was not quite so inspiring: in fact, it was deeply disturbing. Because I serve on the US board of World Vision, I asked the World Vision staff in Jerusalem to show me the West Bank from their perspective.

One day they took me to Jenin, in the northern section of the West Bank. Our route to Jenin could have been much shorter had we taken the by-pass roads the license plates on our car would have permitted, but because we had a Palestinian riding with us—a wonderful young man employed by World Vision—we had to take a route that took much longer. But it did give me time to ask a lot of questions.

As we drove I asked about the big black boxes on the roofs of houses. "Oh they're water tanks," he explained, "to capture rain water and to store the water we Palestinians have to purchase because of our water shortage."

"You have to buy water?" I said. "But up on the hillside, it's so lush and green. It looks like it must rain all the time. How can there be a water shortage?"

"Oh yes," he said, "the settlements have plenty of water, but the water no longer makes it's way down the hillside to our villages. It used to, but not anymore. To complicate matters, many of the natural springs we had depended on have been contaminated by the sewerage from the settlements. And we can't dig new wells without Israeli permits. So . . . we have black boxes on our rooftops."

As we drove on I asked about the rows and rows of tree stumps I saw. "Those were olive orchards," he explained. "Some of the trees in those orchards were centuries old." I thought, Surely that must be an exaggeration. How could anybody cut down something that had been growing for so many years, for any reason? But I learned, in fact, that somebody did do that, and they're continuing to do that.

As we traveled, I learned that the northern region we were entering was once the fertile breadbasket of the West Bank, where small farm owners supported their families and enhanced the economy of their villages by driving their produce to

bigger towns where they could sell it. Now, because of the delays created by bypass roads and checkpoints, by the time the farmers get their produce to market, it has rotted, and they show up at the market with nothing to sell. I saw the long line of cars waiting at a checkpoint and imagined tomatoes and lettuce rotting in the sun.

Later I stood on a hillside with a group of men—leaders in their village—who pointed past the separation fence in the near distance, and said, “See that forest over there. That’s our land. That’s where we used to take our children on picnics on the weekend. And see that field? That’s our farm, where our whole extended family used to make a living. Now it’s on the other side of the fence and only one member of our family is allowed to work there—our eighty-year-old grandfather. Obviously, he can’t keep up the farm, so it will eventually be deemed unused land, free for the taking. And there’s not much we can do.”

For the most part, our journey to Jenin was depressing. But we had one experience that was 100% delightful and uplifting. A group of women whose husbands had no work and whose children were going hungry were given the opportunity to start a bee-keeping enterprise. There were maybe 20 women in this cooperative. They faced hurdles during the start-up, because they were permitted to secure needed supplies only through Israel, and those supplies were often delayed due to complex and confusing regulations, but they persevered and started their business. Each woman had to learn every aspect of the enterprise, from building the bee boxes to tending the hives to retrieving the honey.

I asked the woman how the bee-keeping business had changed their lives? “Twice a week we get out of the house and meet with other women,” they said, “and it’s fun! And we like learning new skills; it makes us feel strong. And for the first time ever we can help support our families. We can help our kids go to school.” “How do your husbands feel about this?” I asked them. They looked at each other and laughed. “Some of our husbands didn’t like it, so we invited them to come and see what we do. Now they think it’s good. They’re proud of us.”

On that day I was grieved by an up-close view of the tragedy of the occupation, but I was also so incredibly impressed by the resilience of those women. I saw how quickly hope can be renewed when people are given just the smallest reason to hope, and how hard people are willing to work when there is just the smallest opportunity for reward. And I left committed to do whatever I can to fuel that hope.

Fourth Stop: Bethlehem, Fall '09

I had come to the Middle East straight from the Congo, where I had seen the most extreme example of what can happen to a country, to a people, when the rule of law is violated. I saw what can happen when foreign governments are allowed to fuel civil war with impunity. When multinational corporations can exploit a country’s resources with impunity. When soldiers can rape women and girls with impunity. Where this is no rule of law—on the local, national, or international level—there can be no security, no protection, no justice, no progress.

So I came to the West Bank pondering the importance of the rule of law in general—the importance of individuals and governments obeying laws that have been agreed upon based on accepted moral principles. In particular, I found myself pondering the

various UN resolutions that continue to be violated in Palestine through the expansion of settlements, land seizures, and house demolitions.

In the midst of pondering the rule of law I spent a morning with Nora Carmi from Sabeel. Nora took my friend, Christine, and me to visit a young Palestinian family; the wife and mother of this family was named Isme.

Prior to October 12, 2009, Isme lived in a small but tidy one-story house on the outskirts of Jerusalem. But on that morning, while she drove her three young children to school, policemen broke into her home and demanded that her husband get out of bed and come outside. Isme returned home just in time to watch bulldozers destroy her home and everything in it. Though Isme and her husband owned the land where their house was built, demolition had been a constant possibility, because they did not have a permit to build the home—a common plight, since it is nearly impossible for Palestinians to acquire building permits. But the threat had not materialized until an unseasonably hot October morning two weeks prior to our visit.

We met with Isme and her family in their new home, a white tent given to them by the Red Cross. Isme's 29-year-old husband was recovering from serious heart surgery, which is why he was home sleeping on the morning of the demolition. Their two little daughters have adjusted fairly well to living in the tent, and they talk freely about the demolition, describing it in detail to their friends at school. But their 8-year-old brother holds his fear and frustration inside. Because of the stress, he has become unable to control his bowels, which humiliates him. He is becoming increasingly hostile and violent. And like many children in similar situations, he is feeling more and more vulnerable as he sees the inability of his parents to provide a safe and stable life for him.

Isme remained stoic until my friend Christine embraced her, expressed her sorrow and promised to pray for her. Then she began to wipe the tears away from her eyes. We heard several days later from a Palestinian friend that the family was now being threatened with eviction from their Red Cross tent. As with many things here, no one seemed to know quite why; the family owns the property on which the tent sits. Why was their house demolished? Why the threat of eviction from a Red Cross tent?

I learned more about the property issues in the West Bank a couple days later when I visited a hilltop farm not far from Bethlehem called Tent of Nations. A Palestinian Christian family has held title to this one hundred-acre parcel of land since the early 1900s, but only extensive legal battles have allowed them to keep it. It's now surrounded by settlements and nearly cut-off from Bethlehem by settler-only roads and concrete blockades. The family receives no electricity or water and can obtain no building permits. So they live in tents and caves and have dug a cistern to collect rainwater.

Volunteers come from around the world to help replant the trees that are repeatedly cut down by soldiers and settlers. Two days before we visited the farm, soldiers had come in the middle of the night and rounded up the international student volunteers at gunpoint. The soldiers seemed to have no specific complaint, so nothing serious happened—except that the students were terrified.

Daoud, the very articulate spokesperson for the family, said, "The settlers can stay here. We don't mind. We just want to have the same rights they have. We want to live here as equals." He explained that once when a Jewish peace group was serving at Tent of Nations, one of the Jewish volunteers invited a woman from the settlement to visit the farm. The volunteer explained to the settler that the farm could not obtain municipal water. The woman said, "But we have swimming pools. I didn't know this. The only thing we learn about Palestinians is that they are violent terrorists." She later brought her husband back to visit the farm and to wish them a Happy New Year. Other settlers have joined that woman at various times to come work at the farm.

"My approach to the conflict is people to people," explained Daoud, "to build relationships and understanding and change people's hearts. I also try to strengthen Palestinians from the inside out. Sometimes I see children in the refugee camps who have lost all sense of belonging. They kick trees and throw trash around because they have no respect for the land or for their country. I bring those children here to the farm to teach them about caring for the earth and for one another. I want them to become leaders and peacemakers in our culture. That's what I can do help my country."

"But," he added. "We need the global church to do what we can't do: to cry out to Israel against the violations of international law and justice. We need the global church."

And that brings me to my most recent stop on the journey: this conference, this talk, this challenge to shape my response to what I've learned during the last 18 months.

What do I believe about all of this? What do I think I need to do? What do I want to challenge others to do? As I have thought about that calling on me as an American Christian, I have identified several things that I believe I need to do. Perhaps you will agree that you need to do them too.

First, I need to bring people back here to see what I've seen. I need to do that partly for my own sanity. It's so hard to care so much about this place, and then go home and try to talk about—because nobody gets it; you feel really alone. Several weeks ago I paid for son-in-law to travel here with a group that I knew would really see whole story here. My son-in-law came back devastated, ready to do anything he can do to lift up this cause. Together he and I are planning an educational evening in our home, where we can bring together friends, church staff, and leaders from other churches to learn some of what we've learned. And I'll be coming back here again in the fall with my good friend, Dr. Bilezikian, who will be doing his last teaching trip to the Holy Land. The goal of that trip is to bring people who will commit themselves to bringing other people in future.

Second, I need to listen, also, to Israeli Jews and Messianic believers. I need to listen with my heart. I need to pray to God for understanding of their pain and their fear and their perspective. I don't want to cut them off because I don't agree with some of their theology. I want to learn from them and understand them.

Third, I have to work hard to educate myself about this issue. This is probably the most complex geopolitical situation in the world, and certainly one of the most

challenging theological and spiritual issues. Bits and pieces of knowledge and trite sound bites are not enough to pierce the misinformation and misunderstanding surrounding this issue.

I've spent the last 7 years talking to American Christians about AIDS in Africa. In the beginning it was a hard sell—people got stuck on the related sexual issues, overwhelmed by the scope of the problem, and generally thought it wasn't our problem. Those of us who were committed to that cause had to systematically and thoughtfully break through those barriers. It was hard, but it worked. But the barriers related to HIV/AIDS are nothing compared to the barriers you face when you start talking about the Middle East. Misunderstandings run so deep, and opinions are held so firmly. We need to be prepared. We must educate ourselves.

Fourth, I feel compelled to stand with all people and organizations—Christian, Muslim, and Jewish—who stand for peace. Not all Israeli Jews—whether secular or religious—support the expansionist policies of their government. Not all American Jews believe that being a friend to Israel means supporting every Israeli action. And certainly, not all Palestinians condone the actions of suicide bombers or Hamas.

In fact, there are many voices across the spectrum calling for nonviolence, reconciliation, and peace with justice. But we don't hear their voices. Cynical journalists focus on negative stories, so extremists get all the attention. We must highlight and lift up the voices for peace. We must add our voices to theirs, so that together we can be heard.

Fifth, I need to support local Palestinian organizations that strengthen Palestine from the inside. Bethlehem Bible College, Holy Land Trust, Tent of Nations, and scores of other groups prepare young Palestinians to be spiritual and cultural and political lights in this country. Every time I come here I meet another amazing person who is nurturing the heart and soul of the Palestinians. We need to walk with them—pray for them, encourage them, support them.

Sixth, I need to do what I can to support and build up Palestinian business. So many bright, educated young Palestinian Christians are emigrating because they can't get jobs; I've talked with some of them. It's a shame, because they're needed here. I'm not at all qualified to address this challenge in a big way; I'm the most un-business-oriented person in the world.

But there are a couple things that even I can do. The last time I left here I filled a suitcase with gorgeous traditional Palestinian needlework purchased from an amazing Christian Palestinian woman, Nora Kort, whose shop in the Old City sells needlework made by over 500 Palestinian women who were living in extreme poverty before they had this opportunity. They do gorgeous work, but they need a market in the US. So I filled my suitcase and sold their work to my friends.

On another trip I met women right here in Bethlehem who have started a soap-making business. I'll be meeting with them later in the week and I hope they can fill my empty suitcase with fragrant soaps made from Palestinian olive oil.

In the Fair Trade section in the resource center at our church, we've begun selling Palestinian Olive Oil produced in the Jenin region that I mentioned earlier.

I know these are such small things to do, but if we all do small things they add up.

Seven, I need to empower women. Anytime you empower women, you inevitably build up the family, the village, the city, the country. That's undeniable. It's true everywhere in the world. So anytime we see an opportunity to empower women, through micro-enterprise, or by drawing their voices into the peace process, or by developing their leadership skills, it's a no-lose deal. And, we should not forget that no one has ever lifted up women the way Jesus did.

Eight, I need to support humanitarian efforts here. Not long ago I was in Washington DC with a group of faith leaders committed to peace in the Middle East. In one meeting we learned that US government diplomatic personal are not permitted into Gaza because of security issues; it's too dangerous for them to go there. But in that meeting I was sitting across the table from an American pastor, Bob Roberts, who had just taken a team of doctors from his church into Gaza to serve the sick. They survived and they're already planning another trip! There are hundreds of opportunities like this—through individual contacts as well as through a variety of NGOs—to get involved with local Palestinians who are doing their best to bring healing to this land.

Nine, and most importantly, we need to tell others what we've seen and learned. That which has broken our hearts we need to shape into words that can at least begin to break other people's hearts. We need to lift our voices for the voiceless, and tell the stories the media doesn't tell.

But we need to do so carefully. We need to think long and hard about the best way to communicate to the people we know. Do they need to hear the simple call for justice? Do they need to hear the words of the Palestinian church? Do they need to be challenged to reconsider their theology? Do they need to learn about the UN resolutions that have been violated? We each have a unique constituency. What does our constituency need to hear about Israel-Palestine? How can we be used to present that message?

Those are questions I'm still trying to answer. I have learned that there are ways to communicate that increase hostility and division, and there are ways to communicate the build bridges of understanding. I am praying for discernment in order to speak the truth with love—because there is so much at stake here.

A year ago, in January '09, in the aftermath of the terrible violence in Gaza, I asked Dr. B, my 83-year-old mentor what he thought Jesus would do if he were in Israel or Palestine in the flesh in January '09.

He said, "He would do the same thing he did when he was here before."

- He would weep like he wept for Jerusalem
- He would speak truth to power.
- And then he would probably be crucified.

I have pondered his response prayerfully and at length during the last 14 months.

I may be wrong, but...

I have become convinced that if Jesus were here today he would stand with those who nonviolently protest the occupation of the Palestinian Territories, the extreme

military violence used against the Palestinians, and the economic decline and psychological pain caused by the occupation. I believe he would walk through the horror of Gaza, weeping.

I also believe he would grieve deeply the long history of horrific violence suffered by the Jews, that he would meet them at the point of their fear, and affirm earnestly their desire for a place to live in security. I believe he would weep for every Israeli mother who has lost a child to a suicide bomber or a rocket fired by Hamas.

I believe Jesus would see the human beings on both sides of this conflict and offer Himself to each one.

I believe He would say to Israeli Jews and world Jewry, I love you so much. I offer to you my peace. I long to be your Messiah.

I believe He would say to Palestinian Muslims and Muslims throughout the world, I love you so much. I offer to you my peace. I am The Merciful One, longing to wrap my mercy around you.

I believe He would say to Christian Zionists in Israel and elsewhere: I love you so much. I offer to you my peace. I call on you to be my witnesses of truth. I call on you to discern the words of my prophets with a mind shaped by my sacrificial servanthood. May you be agents of my love to all people, all races, all lands.

I believe He would say to Palestinian Christians and Arab Churches throughout the Middle East, I love you so much. I offer to you my peace. Take courage. You are my body in this land. You are my hands and my feet, my mind and my heart, my agents of redemption. Please take your calling seriously—and ask the world to join you.

I believe He would say to American and European Christians, I love you so much. I offer to you my peace. And I ask you to join your Arab brothers and sisters in my work of redemption and peacemaking in this land.

I want to end with one more thought. When I was here in May, traveling with an interfaith group, the more I listened to what everyone was saying, from many different perspectives, the more impressed I was with Jesus.

And I continue to be more impressed with Jesus—and more convinced that what the people in this land need more than anything is to see Jesus, incarnated in their midst by his followers. The question is this:

Can we live out the love and beauty of Jesus in such a way that all children of Abraham—Jews, Muslims, and Christians—will be compelled to take another look at him? Can we, learning and growing and serving together, incarnate Jesus here?

That is my hope and my dream and my prayer for this land.