

" War In The Middle East: What Can We Do?"

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June 2, 2002



Fountain Street Church
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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READING (by Rev. Donald Hoekstra)

The reading and the scripture this morning are related. I will continue the reading after the anthem. This reading is from the second testament of the Bible, from the gospel according to Matthew.

It is the story or the parable of the weeds and wheat. Jesus told this parable:

The kingdom of heaven, he said, is like a farmer who sowed good wheat seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, someone came and sowed weeds among the wheat. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owners' servants came to him and said, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did the weeds come from? Do you want us to go and pull them up?" "No," he answered, "because while you are pulling up the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters, first collect the weeds, and then gather the wheat and bring them into my barn."

The parable I read before the anthem has an apocryphal appendage. The parable concluded with the farmer saying, "First collect the weeds and then gather the wheat and bring them into my barn." The appendage is as follows:

The servants counseled together saying it would be much better to pull those weeds out right now rather than wait, but we must obey the master even if he is wrong. In the meantime, let us look about for who would do this evil thing to our master, who is kind to everyone and doesn't deserve this treatment. So they quietly inquired and made search in all the region roundabout but they could find no one guilty of this. Then one of the servants came privately to the chief steward at night saying, "Sir, forgive me, but I can no longer bear to conceal my secret. I know who sowed the tares. I saw him do it." At this, the chief steward was astonished and full of anger. He demanded of the servant why he had not come forward sooner. "I dared not," cried the servant. "I scarcely dared to come and tell you this, even now. I was awake that night the weeds were sown. I saw the one who did it. He walked past me seemingly awake and yet asleep and he did not appear to recognize me. But I recognized him."

"And who was it," asked the chief steward in great excitement. "Tell me, so that he can be punished." The servant hung his head and finally in a low voice, replied, "It was the master." And the two agreed to say nothing of this to anyone. Let us, together, join in a time of quiet meditation and reflection.

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RESPONSIVE READING

MINISTER: If someone with courage and vision can rise to lead in nonviolent action, the winter of despair can, in the twinkling of an eye, be turned into the summer of hope.

CONGREGATION: It is possible to live in peace.

MINISTER: Nonviolence is not a garment to put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our being.

CONGREGATION: It is possible to live in peace

MINISTER: Nonviolence, which is a quality of the heart, cannot come by an appeal to the brain. It is a plant of slow growth, growing imperceptibly, but surely.

CONGREGATION: It is possible to live in peace.

MINISTER: If a single person achieves the highest kind of love it will be sufficient to neutralize the hate of millions.

CONGREGATION: It is possible to live in peace.

MINISTER: If we are to reach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.

CONGREGATION: It is possible to live in peace.

MINISTER: The future depends on what we do in the present.

CONGREGATION: It is possible to live in peace.

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SERMON

Well, good morning everybody. I'm glad to be back. I think the first time I came here was 30 years ago. And I'm glad to be in what I would regard as the temple of liberal religion in western Michigan, a place in which it is not easy to champion liberal religions. I congratulate you.

I also have very fond memories of one of the most important voices for liberal religion in American. His name is Duncan Littlefair. And I do want to say at this time, I had the pleasure almost 12 years ago, of meeting Reverend Hoekstra and I understand this is his last Sunday here at the church and I think it would be appropriate for us to express our pleasure in the service he has given to this congregation. (Prolonged applause)

In America time may be divided between before September 11 and after September 11. Because our lives were dramatically changed by what happened on that September day. And now we are at war. Our enemy is not exactly clear. What we have learned is that we are now dealing with a part of the world concerning which we have, publicly, very little information. We are now finding our enemy lies somewhere within the Muslim world. And certainly within the Muslim fundamentalist world. We know that we are at

war and that our enemy is clandestine, sometimes out in the open. After September 11, we, as Americans and our government, responded to the assault on the United States of America. We did something that was, in the minds of many people, questionable, that is, they questioned whether we would be able to achieve it. We did bring down the Taliban government in Afghanistan. And I, personally, was in favor of that measure, because, indeed, something had to be done. And although the removal of the Taliban government doesn't mean that Afghanistan is securely in our hands, it was, for the Americans, a great victory.

But the greatest victory of all was the alliance, the coalition, which the American government, under President Bush, created - much to his surprise, because, indeed, the Republican Party ran on a slightly isolationist platform back in the presidential election. A coalition, a world coalition, which included not only the European Union. It included Russia. And now, when Vladi, and you know, Bush get together, it's lovey-dovey. They admire each other. Can you imagine the leader of the Republican Party lovey-dovey with the former leader and agent of the KGB? I find it so delicious!

And then, you add to that China, and then add to that, if you will, India. What unites this coalition? Well, they all feel threatened by Muslim fundamentalist terrorism. But, if this coalition can hold, then it can serve as a foundation of something that the 21st century needs -- a kind of bulwark, a kind of foundation that the United Nations will ultimately need.

Now that alliance added other people that were absolutely necessary. There are one-and-one-half billion people in the Muslim world. One-and-a-half billion people in 55 states. To conduct a war against the Muslim world is to have a world war. Most of the people in the Muslim world do not endorse Muslim fundamentalist terrorism. We need the moderates in the Muslim world on our side and, indeed, that was achieved. Otherwise the Taliban would not have been removed in Afghanistan.

But now we confront some obstacles. In fact, over the last few months, the alliance that was so brilliantly put together is collapsing and it's collapsing because there are two other wars that inflame the Muslim world which stand in the way of our maintaining Muslim allies and which undermine our ability to recruit moderates in the Muslim world.

The first war is on the front page now. It's a war little known to the United States until recently, the war between India and Pakistan. Between the Hindus and the Muslim world, which threatens to break out into a nuclear war. That war is 54 years old. But there is another war that's even more inflammatory. It's been around not for 54 years. It's been around for 81 years. And that's the war between the Israelis and the Palestinians or, more accurately, the war between the Jews and the Arabs.

81 years. And the antagonists? Well, on one side is the Arab nation. The Arab nation consists of 200 million people. It stretches from Morocco all the way to Iran. It includes 22 states. The overwhelming majority of the people in the Arab world are Muslim. And there was a time, back in the eighth, ninth, and tenth century, when the Arabs went out, inspired by their new religion of Islam, to conquer the world and created the largest land empire the world had known. In fact the center of world wealth

and prosperity lay in that world. And then it was undone. The Arabs were, in turn, conquered by the Turks, who became Muslim and the Moguls, and then the Turks again, and after them came the rising power of what I call the Europeans. No longer fully Christian, because by the middle of the 19th century, the great powers of Western Europe were no longer interested in sending out missionaries. They were interested in things that capitalism is interested in, resources and markets. So they went out, this secularized west, to conquer the whole Muslim world, including the Arab world. And the great agenda of the Arab world was to expel the foreigners, to expel, to unify the Arab nation, and to make it powerful again.

So there now arose a force in the Arab world, which sometimes competes with Islam. It's called nationalism. Nationalism is sort of modern. In a secular age, it often takes the place of religion. Because nationalism has all the attributes of religion. It has hymns and songs and pledges of allegiance and flags and sacred heroes. I grew up with the American civil religion. On one wall was, sort of vague, George Washington and on the other side was the other saint and god of the American religion, Abraham Lincoln. And none of them ever told a . . . lie! They were absolutely perfect.

Well, so in comes Arab nationalism and now, in a secularized age, it was a gift of Europe, now takes over part of the Arab world. It now produces a set of intellectuals and military figures. And their aim is to expel the foreigners, to unify the Arab world. The most famous of all these leaders was a man called Gamal Abdel Nasser. And, he was on his way to succeed as the unifier of the Arab nation. But then in 1967, he fell. He was defeated by another power, the one European presence that had not been expelled by the Arabs. And that was the state of Israel.

The state of Israel has its origins, of course, in the fact that there is an historic nation called the Jewish people. In the Bible, the Jews are not a religious denomination. They are the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are a nation with their own language and their own culture. They lost their land. They were indeed, dispersed, but they never lost their sense of national identity. In the 19th century it became convenient in the Jewish world to view the Jews only as a religious denomination, but that was ended by what happened at the end of the 19th century with the rise of a new movement called anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is different from anti-Judaism. Anti-Judaism is directed to the religion of the Jews. There's a cure for anti-Judaism – convert. But anti-Semitism doesn't care what religion the Jew is. If he becomes a Methodist, he becomes a Methodist Jew. And if he becomes a Catholic, he becomes a what? A Catholic Jew. Anti-Semitism is directed to something called the race. The ethnicity of the Jew. And what anti-Semitism, as it arose at the end of the 19th century did, was to trigger among the Jews, a powerful movement called Jewish nationalism.

Well, if you say we are a nation, we are. The overwhelming majority of the Jews lived in Europe and, in fact, no European nation was prepared to give them any territory, so a movement arose called the Zionist movement, triggered by a book written by a man called Theodore Herzog. The idea was to take the Jews back to their historic homeland. The movement from the very beginning ran into trouble. The land was owned by the Turks. And occupied already. By the Arabs. There was no money. And

there were no immigrants because the overwhelming majority of the Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe were getting on steamships and sailing for Ellis Island.

And already no sooner did the movement begin, than it divided up. Put two Zionists in one room and you get five movements. It may happen even in liberal churches, I don't know.

So you had capitalist Zionists, socialist Zionists, left-socialist Zionists, I mean, the whole. They all divided up. And they began to fight with each other. And, not only that, there were large elements of the Jewish world that were opposed to this nationalist movement, thinking that it might undermine their status of citizenship in other countries, so, it all seemed to be failing when, it succeeded. The reasons for its success was, one, that the British defeated the Turks in the First World War, and in 1917, hoping to win Jewish public opinion in the world over to the Allied side, they issued the Balfour Declaration, which promised Palestine, now a British mandate, to the Jews as their national homeland. It was reinforced by a terrible event, series of events in the 20th century called the holocaust, which destroyed one-third of the Jewish people and increased the resolve of European Jews to find some kind of refuge in their ancient homeland. It was reinforced in 1924 before the holocaust. In fact, Zionism never would have taken place, if in 1924 the United States of America had not closed the doors of immigration to foreigners. You may remember that between 1924 and 1965 until the time of Lyndon Baines Johnson, they had, like, certain racial quotas. You came from central England, you could get in. Not from Italy, not from Japan, not from (unintelligible). That was it. So, indeed, people were directed to other places.

Well, this war has been going on for 81 years. It started in 1921. Four years after the British Balfour Declaration. It's gone through various phases. The first was the civil war between Jews and Arabs in British Palestine. And then was the war of the new state of Israel after 1948 with the Arab powers around. And when that came to an end in 1967, with the defeat of Nasser came the creation of a special force representing the Arabs of Palestine, The Palestine Liberation Organization. And that ended, when in the Lebanon War, the PLO was defeated in Lebanon and Arafat was forced to flee to Tunis. And then, the Arab world chose a strategy, which has proved to be very successful. The strategy has an Arab name, Intifada.

Intifada is what happened in my city of Detroit in 1967. The blacks rose up in a rebellion. Now the response of the people of Detroit to that rebellion was very easy. Since there is so much land in Michigan, in America, all you do is what, pick yourself up and move to the . . . suburbs. But, indeed, Palestine and Israel are so small there is no place to move. So, in the end, what the Jews in Israel now live with is this perpetual . . . civil war. There are five-and-a-half million Jews in the territory of the old British Palestine. There are three-and-a-half million Palestinian Arabs, one million of which live within the boundaries of the old Israel before 1967.

So what are some of the realities?

The first is that there are two nations occupying virtually the same territory. The second is that both sides are right. I don't know whether you have ever had one of

these discussions where you invite a Jewish spokesperson and then you invite an Arab spokesperson and they're supposed to have a civil discussion on how to negotiate peace. Screaming, screaming, screaming. It's like a divorce hearing. "I'm right!" "No, I'm right!" "I'm right!" Both sides are right.

Was the territory occupied by Arabs? The answer is yes. Are the most of the Israelis who now live in Israel, were they born there and raised there? Yes. I now live in Birmingham, Michigan, on a piece of land which was owned by the Odawa Indians. Am I prepared to surrender it? I don't know. Are you prepared to surrender? Did we come and occupy this territory? Did we eliminate the natives, whatever it was? But we were born here. We're also natives. This is our home. This is our land. Yes, we came from Europe, but this is our place. And the argument, the screaming, you can't resolve.

Third, being right, which is always what the argument is about, solves no problem. Generally when two people are screaming at each other saying, "I'm right, I'm right, I'm right, I'm right, I'm right, I'm right," I say, "It's my fault." Now you know whose fault it is, how do we solve the problem? And the difficulty is that people can't get to how to solve the problem. They're always into who's right? One of the realities, certainly, is that the war that Israel fights is not simply with the Palestinians. It fights it with the whole Arab nation, because Palestine is regarded by the Arab world as part of the Arab nation.

It is also clear that negotiations have failed. Whatever the reason. Is the leadership sleazy? I don't know. Is Arafat trustworthy? Is Sharon fully rational? I mean . . . The reality is that there is a cycle of vengeance. Have you ever been caught up in a cycle of vengeance? If you were a kid in a school playground, you understand it. Somebody pushes you. If you don't push back, you will be perceived as . . . weak. Oh. So, oops, somebody pushes me, I push them back. Then what? He pushes me. I push him back. It's called a cycle of vengeance. There may be people in this room, in terms of family and friends and community, that are engaged in what I call a cycles of vengeance, I don't know.

The only way it stops is there's a teacher in the playground, who goes up to the kids and what. . ? Separates them. If you sit them down to negotiate, you can't stop it.

Reality. There is in both the Arab and in the Jewish world strong forces that are opposed to peace. There is in the fundamentalist Muslim Arab world people who say, "This land belongs to us and we will drive the Israelis from their territory." And, in the Jewish world, there are religious extremists and people who tell you that religion always brings peace and love. It's not the history of religion. There are religious extremists among the Jews who say, "God, . . . the Bible is a real estate document. God gave us this piece of land, the rocks and the rills and we will not surrender it."

The reality is that there are issues that simply can't be resolved, I mean, the first issue is the whole issue of recognition. There are many, many Arabs who will not recognize the right of the state of Israel to exist and there are many Jews who will not recognize the right of the state of Palestine to exist and so there you are. There are the boundaries. How do you take a piece of land, it's 11,000 square miles, one-fifth the size

of the state of Michigan and divvy it up? Can you make a viable state out of 3,500 square miles? And a viable economy?

There is the issue of Jerusalem. It's very interesting. I grew up in Detroit. So I say to my friends who grew up in Detroit, "Detroit." Do they have tears in their eyes? Do they cry? But if I say, "Jerusalem." Oh! It's a piece of real estate. "Jerusalem." People cry, scream, holler, I mean, it's incredible! So, "no, it's mine!" "No, it's mine!" "No, God gave . . . Please, alright, thank you."

There's the issue of the refugees. There are three-and-a-half million Palestinian Arabs, who live outside of Palestine, many of whom want to return. If they return, in particular to their former homes in Israel, Israel will cease to be a Jewish state and will become an Arab state. And, in fact, the Jewish nationalist movement will have been defeated.

Above all, the main issue is the issue of hatred and suspicion. There's so much hatred and so much suspicion, that nobody trusts anybody else on the other side. And you can always find reasons for not doing it. I've done a lot of counseling and I listen to a lot of people and what I call the smaller, private level is extended to the larger, public level.

What is clear is that this war is bad for Israel. Israel has developed a first-world economy. They started with oranges and then they moved to textiles and now they're into high tech. Tel Aviv is one of the major high tech centers in the world. But this economy cannot function in the global economy so long as this war goes on. This war is bad for the Jews. Wherever they are now, I mean, you can read in France, Germany, whatever else it is, synagogues are being attacked, often Muslim immigrants, fired up and inflamed by hatred from this war, act wherever it be.

This war is bad for the Palestinians. How can they have a nation if military incursions occur all the time? It's bad for the Arabs, because all it does is it removes moderate leaders. And the man who wanted to be the successor to Gamal Abdel Nasser was the leader of Iraq. His name is Saddam . . . Hussein.

This war is bad for the United States of America. We are, whether we want it or not, the superpower of the world. We are responsible, with our allies, for the peace of the world. And, in fact, this war is a threat to the global economy and to the unified world that we're hoping will emerge in the 21st century.

This war is bad for the world and world stability. And it's certainly bad for the war against terrorism because it undermines the support that we may receive in the Muslim world among Muslim moderates in order to make this war and this coalition work.

So there are three scenarios.

The first scenario is that America does really nothing beyond pious statements like, "Stop shooting." You know, you say that to your kids all you like, "Stop it. Stop it right now. Go upstairs to your room, right now! Thank you." And the war goes on and, in

fact, the consequences of the war is that moderates in the Muslim world will be overthrown. And Muslim fundamentalism and the terrorists in Muslim fundamentalism will grow in power.

The second is sort of suggested by what's now happening with India and Pakistan. That would be a war against the Muslim world. There are two forces, indeed, that might not mind the war. One certainly would be India with almost one billion people, the center of the Hindu world with great hostility to the Muslim world. And the other would be Israel. America, Israel, India, I mean, you know, it's a world war.

The third scenario is the scenario that I favor. My mother had a phrase, which she used which I liked. It's what I would call a Yiddishism, it's English with a Yiddish flavor. Yiddish was the language of my childhood, so she always used to say it when there was a problem, which the two people having the problem couldn't solve on their own. She used to say, "Somebody has to mix in!" And, indeed, that is true.

The third scenario is that the United States of America takes responsibility as it did in Bosnia and in Kosovo. Takes responsibility as the hegemonic power in the world, hoping to build and maintain its coalition, which has been undermined by the trouble between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The bonds between the Europeans and even the Russians to some degree have been compromised. To bring that coalition back together again.

And to impose . . . a peace. The two kids in the schoolyard cannot stop the cycle of vengeance. So you call them in to a meeting. They arrive scowling. And then you twist their arms. And then they appear after the meeting, do you understand? Smiling outside, or, blaming the fact that they're accepting this thing because they're forced to. What you have to do is to impose a peace, which would involve withdrawing the orthodox Jewish settlements from the Palestinian West Bank. Digging a ditch, building a wall and a fence between the two. You are not going to get peace but you may get a truce. And then policing it with soldiers from the United States, Canada, Europe and maybe a few other allies. Separating the belligerents.

Would the Israeli government, the present Israeli government be opposed to that imposition? Yes.

Would the Palestinians be opposed? Certainly, the extremists would. They don't want the recognition of the right of the state of Israel to exist.

Would all terrorism stop? No.

Is it the beginning to what I would call the creation of some kind of world order? The answer is yes. Children can no longer fight in this world without the danger of blowing it up. And the chief parent cannot allow it nor encourage it.

In conclusion. We, the American people are the superpower of the world. Do we deserve to be? It's irrelevant. We are. We are the center of the world economy, and we have the greatest amount of military power, and we have a moral responsibility to

use that power to effect peace in the world. And, in fact, we have the power, together with our allies, if we chose to do that and use our power, to impose a peace that in the end would be good for the Israelis, good for the Jews, good for the Palestinians, good for the Arabs.

It would support Muslim moderates, it would undermine Saddam Hussein, and it might lead ultimately to some way of resolving the war between India and Pakistan.

I view myself as a pragmatist and as an idealist. I do not believe that they are separate professions. And right now, the ball is in the court of the American government. And right now, the future of peace in the world is in that court.

Thank you very, very much.

(Delivered extemporaneously. Transcribed from cassette tape.)