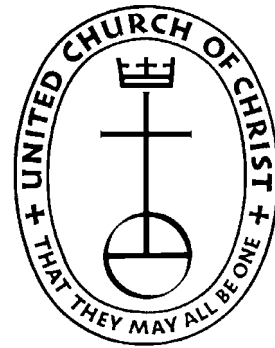


# Fear, Hope and the Affirmation of Life

A Sermon By —  
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This sermon draws on the story of Jesus at the wedding at Cana and the preacher's own recent experiences in the Holy Land to show how even in very hard circumstances we may surround ourselves with our families, hold onto our hope, and refuse to let joy slip out of our lives.

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,  
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*  
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Rev. Jerald Stinson  
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First Congregational Church  
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## Fear, Hope and the Affirmation of Life

Family – something so important in each of our lives. It is hard to define family. In some cases, it is a matter of biology – parents, children, grandchildren, siblings. Sometimes it is a matter of choice – choosing a partner of the opposite gender or same gender with whom to live, or choosing to create a family out of a group of good friends. Communities can become family.

But in whatever form we find family, it has the potential of being a group of people with whom we dare to truly be ourselves; a group of people that nurture, sustain and love one another.

The gospels don't tell us much about Jesus' family. We know he grew up in Nazareth, the child of Mary and Joseph. Joseph was a "tekton" – the Greek word for perhaps a carpenter, a craftsperson, or more likely Joseph was an unskilled day laborer.

In any case, Jesus' parents were landless peasants in a time when Israel was under Roman domination. It was hard for the poor just to survive.

Jesus became a wandering peasant sage, starting a small reform movement within the Judaism of his day, a movement proclaiming God's unconditional love which calls for justice and offers hope to those at the bottom of society.

The Gospel of John has an interesting story about Jesus set in the earliest days of his ministry:

*There was a wedding in Cana in Galilee, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, was there. Jesus and his disciples had likewise been invited to the celebration.*

*At a certain point, the wine ran out, and Jesus' mother told him, "They have no wine." Jesus replied, "Mother, what does that have to do with me. My hour has not yet come."*

*Mary instructed those waiting on tables, "Do whatever he tells you." As prescribed for Jewish ceremonial washings, there were six stone water jars on hand, each one holding between fifteen and twenty-five gallons. "Fill those jars with water," Jesus said, and the servers filled them to the brim.*

*“Now,” Jesus said, “draw some out and take it to the caterer.” They did as they were instructed. The caterer tasted the water which had been turned into wine without knowing where it had come from.*

*The caterer called the bride and groom over and remarked, “People usually serve the best wine first; then, when the guests have been drinking a while, a lesser vintage is served. What you’ve done is to keep the best wine until now.”*

Now I agree with the biblical scholars who say John’s gospel has no historical accuracy. John’s stories were created to reflect a certain theology – to show an early Christian community’s understanding of the significance of Jesus’ life.

So I don’t think Jesus really engaged in magical suspensions of nature. But I like the story’s picture of Jesus, who even amidst Roman oppression, joined in a special family celebration.

Today, let me share three experiences from my recent trip to Israel and Occupied Palestine as a member of a 23-person delegation sponsored by both Interfaith Peace Builders and The Committee to End the Occupation. This was my third trip to that troubled part of the world, and when I returned this time I was more convinced than ever that Israel’s occupation of Palestine is a horrendous form of ethnic cleansing. The suffering of the Palestinian people increases each day, and the Israeli government and its military become more callous and cruel each day.

**Now the first experience** – at the Deheisha refugee camp in Bethlehem. In 1948, when the state of Israel was created, the United Nations estimates that about 725,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes and became refugees. Today there are four and a half million Palestinian refugees.

The Deheisha camp is one of 59 camps created in 1948. There are currently 11,000 people living in the crowded camp. Two teenage camp residents took our group through the camp telling us what had happened during the second intifada, the Palestinian uprising from 2000 until 2005. Israeli soldiers came to the camp almost every night. Our guides took us to several houses where 18- or 19-year-old soldiers, instead of knocking on the door, used explosives to blow a hole in the wall and entered through that hole. They then would beat and humiliate the father in front of his children. In one of the homes they struck a child and the father pushed the soldier away. They shot and killed that father. We walked past a row of homes painted with murals showing several teenagers killed by the soldiers in the camp during those years.

Our guides told us that even now, several times a week Israeli soldiers come to

the camp to terrorize people at night.

We could feel the tension in the camp. We were tense too because we were spending the night there. That evening we met a woman named Suheir who had been born at the camp, married there, raised her family there. Suheir started a community center where camp residents can take classes and young people have access to computers.

She talked about her life, about the nightly raids. We could feel her fear, especially fear for her sons. We heard her anger at this army that comes nightly to torment. We sat awkwardly as she broke down and cried. And we wondered, would the soldiers come that night? Would they come to where we would sleep?

As we listened to this incredible woman's story, there was suddenly some loud popping sounds. Obviously some of us looked alarmed. Suheir laughed and said those were firecrackers celebrating a wedding soon to begin at the community center. From the balcony we watched the arrival of the bride and groom. People were smiling, laughing and celebrating life – probably like at that wedding in Cana that Jesus attended,.

It was almost dark – would the soldiers come? It didn't matter. A family and their friends, even amidst the terror of occupation, were going to celebrate one of life's special moments.

**The second experience.** We drove south toward Gaza. Israel has virtually sealed the border crossings; Gaza has become a prison for its residents – so we couldn't go there.

But we could and did go to Sderot, the Israeli city where 5,000 rockets from Gaza have landed over the past nine years. Israelis, and their American supporters, use Sderot and those rockets as justification for everything that is part of the occupation. Fortunately, only 28 people have died in the rocket attacks, but that doesn't excuse firing rockets at civilians, and one death is too many. We met with an Israeli social worker who described the poverty of Sderot, which is an immigrant city.

Then we met two members of an urban kibbutz – Israelis deeply committed to justice and peace. Nomika talked about feeling increasingly lonely, increasingly fragile; she never knows when the sirens will sound again. There was a bomb shelter in the building where we met – I wondered if we might have to crowd into it. Nomika's fears were similar to those of Suheir. Suheir was afraid of the soldiers who terrorized the camp; Nomika was afraid of the missiles that terrorized Sderot. Nomika said that because of their fear, people in Sderot are losing the ability to care about one another; they

are losing their empathy skills. They are becoming bitter and hateful.

So she and a few other Israeli Jews formed “The Other Voice From Sderot,” an organization that says of itself: “Up until now we have cried, called, demonstrated, and asked our leaders to do something about the insane reality in which we live. The leaders have tried every possible idea that involves violence and military force – with no success. We shoot at them and they shoot at us. We retaliate and they strike back. This is an endless, vicious cycle. Today we say: enough! It is our turn to take our destiny into our own hands and to act to stop the cycle of bloodshed. Other Voice is a grassroots group that has no political aspirations. We are citizens of the Sderot region and the Gaza region. We are interested in finding creative ways of hearing a new voice from the region and for promoting hope and non-violent actions for the benefit of those who live in Sderot and in the Gaza Strip.”

The Israeli members of New Voice engage in dialogue with ordinary citizens in Gaza; they have become friends; they care about each other. They talk on the phone, they exchange emails. They want desperately to meet face to face, even a picnic at the border crossing, but Israel refuses to let that happen.

Nomika was animated, anxious to tell us about New Voice and its hope. Another of the other founders, Eric, was more restrained. He spoke about his family, his three sons, his fear – just like Suheir’s fear for her sons in the refugee camp.

**The final experience.** The most difficult moments for our group came with our overnight visit to a farming village of 1,700 Palestinians. Arriving in Bil’in early one afternoon, we went to the home of Eyad, leader of the Popular Committee of Bil’in Against the Wall. Sitting with his wife and children, he told us about the village’s non-violent struggle against Israel’s apartheid Wall.

It started when Israel built a large illegal settlement deep within Palestine on Bil’in’s farm land. Then they took more land to build the special “settlers only” road leading from the settlement to Israel. Once the settlement was in place, Israel put a section of the apartheid wall between the settlement and Bil’in. The wall in Bil’in is in fact a series of three fences, all electrified with barbed wire on the top. Between the fences are two roads – one with sensors to record movement and the other for Israeli military vehicles. Israel claims the wall is to keep terrorists from crossing from Palestine to Israel, but 80% of the wall is deep inside Palestine, guarding the 500,000 illegal settlers.

The settlement, the wall and the settlers’ road eliminated 60% of Bil’in’s land. The people are farmers – they cannot survive without their fields and olive trees.

So the village formed the Popular Committee and sought help through the Israeli legal system. Their case was heard by Israel's Supreme Court which ruled that much of the land had to be returned to Bil'in; the wall must be moved. But Israel is a nation without a constitution, so the military said this is a security matter and they have simply disobeyed the Supreme Court.

For five years, every Friday there has been a demonstration at the wall in Bil'in. No demonstrator has ever carried a gun. The demonstrators are people from the village along with a few supportive international volunteers and Israeli activists. The Israelis respond every week with massive tear gas attacks, plus sometimes with rubber bullets or live ammunition. They also sometimes come across to beat and arrest demonstrators. 1,300 unarmed people have been injured during the demonstrations; several have been killed. A few weeks before we arrived, Eyad's cousin was killed by a rubber bullet – a metal ball surrounded by rubber. The soldier was six feet away when he shot him. Another demonstrator was killed when a tear gas canister was shot at him. 60 Bil'in teenagers have been arrested for demonstrating, kept in adult Israeli prisons for four to six months.

Bil'in has recently received considerable world attention, so the army has responded with more force. They now come into the village almost every day around 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning and arrest some of the village's young men. The night before we arrived, 200 soldiers came at 3:30, and stayed for three hours, arresting eight people, including Eyad's brother, whose arm was broken when a soldier hit him with a club.

Our group walked down the village's main road to a point close to the fences. Soldiers in a jeep inside the fences watched us and summoned help – several vehicles arrived, the soldiers lined up with their guns aimed at us and over a loudspeaker we were told twice that unless we left, "You will be hurt."

That evening members of our group stayed in the homes of leaders of the Popular Committee. Five of us stayed with a family that only spoke Arabic, so it was quite an adventure. When we got there, probably 25 adults and children were sitting outside awaiting our arrival. This was one extended family – two grandmothers, aunts, uncles, lots of children.

As it grew darker, military helicopters flew very low right over us, looking down at us. But the amazing thing to me was that the children continued playing and the adults talking and laughing, all celebrating being a family. We had brought some gifts – everyone ate the candy and the children played with the toys and crayons. Then when it was quite late, people said goodbye and returned to their various homes in the village knowing the soldiers might arrive at any time.

The soldiers didn't come that night. But they came the following night and they have come on many nights since. But the people of Bil'in won't let their oppressors drive the joy out of their lives; they won't let them break up their families.

I think those three experiences speak to two things.

**First, to the political situation in the Holy Land.** Israel will continue to try to drive the Palestinians out of their land; the harsh, unjust and often vicious occupation will go on until our nation acts. Most of the world has condemned Israel's behavior, but we, almost alone, fund their military and prop up their economy. We veto every attempt by the United Nations to hold Israel accountable to global codes of justice. And unless you and I act to stop that American support, the occupation will go on and on.

**But those three experiences speak to something else as well: to how it is we can deal with difficult times.** Many in our country are struggling right now. Not perhaps on the life-and-death level found in Bil'in, Sderot and Deheisha. But there is nevertheless real fear in the lives of those who are out of work, or whose salaries are being cut by furloughs, or for those with disabilities facing cutbacks in public assistance that will make it harder to live independently. Some here today may be facing foreclosure, bankruptcy or the possibility of becoming homeless. Some of you may be worried about your children's future. Or you may have a relative who needs help but you don't have the resources to offer that help. Or you may be worrying about a medical condition, and may not have insurance.

And I suspect the way through those difficulties is similar to what I saw in Deheisha, Sderot and Bil'in. We need to affirm and spend time with our families, however those families are defined. We need to turn for support to those families and to this, our family of faith. And those of us who are not hurting right now need to reach out to others in our families, in our church. This family of faith needs to be a place where we can trust each other enough to be honest about our fears and struggles.

Like those at the wedding in the Deheisha camp and those in that extended family sitting outside in Bil'in, we need to continue to let joy come into our lives. Suheir and Eyad and all those others won't let the soldiers take the joy out of living. Nomika and Erik will not let the missiles take compassion and empathy out of their lives. Jesus, amidst Roman oppression, still celebrated at that wedding in Cana.

And hope – we can't give up our hope. 5,000 qassam rockets, and yet those with Other Voice won't let go of their hope that the everyday folks in Gaza and Sderot can live in peace if only their governments and our government will get of the way. Suheir won't give up her hope; that's why she pushed for that community center and why she

wants people to get good educations to prepare for a new day. And Eyad won't give up; that's why he leads those folks down that road to the wall every Friday.

In dark times, whatever the cause, our faith says to us that we are loved unconditionally by God — each of us, just as we are. Knowing that we are loved by God, surrounded by family in whatever form works for us, refusing to let joy slip out of lives, we can then indeed be people of hope. Amen.