

**“Keep Awake”**

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I know that a number of you have been to the Holy Land. The first time I went was in February 1995, and I went as part of a delegation of pastors from a number of different denominations. We went and saw all of the sights. We saw Bethlehem, and we went to Jericho and Jerusalem. We went to the Sea of Galilee. I liked the quiet parts of Israel more than the cities.

While we were there, I met a number of pastors - but most of them were older - and I was in my early- to mid-thirties. There was one other pastor, and she and I were about the same age, and we would visit from time to time.

One day she said, “We have a free day and I have made arrangements...” (She was with the United Church of Christ.) And, she said, “I have made arrangements, and I’m feeling a little uncomfortable going over there alone with missionaries in the UCC, in east Jerusalem.” Now, we didn’t ask permission because we didn’t think we would get it. (Children, do as I say - not as I do.) [Laughter.] So, on our free day we snuck across into east Jerusalem - and east Jerusalem is the Muslim side of Jerusalem. It happened to be on a Sunday morning, so we went to St. George’s Anglican Church. It is a Palestinian Christian congregation, and many people believe that Palestinians are all Muslims - and they are not. At one time over 10% of all Muslim people in the Holy Land in the Middle East were Christian. The first Christians were Melkite Christians from Bethlehem.

My adjunct professor at McCormick Seminary when I was there was a Melkite Christian. His family dates back to the time of Christ in that area of Nazareth. He is now the archbishop of Galilee – Haifa - in the Middle East, in that area of Israel. Sadly, in 1995, probably 6-8% of Palestinians were Christian - now it’s down to less than 1%. They felt they had to flee.

But, on that moment and at that time in February of 1995, we were sitting in St. George’s beautiful cathedral-like Church, hearing the minister speak in Latin and then in English - back and forth - so we would get the whole sermon. He was talking about peace and what that means - that it’s not something that Jesus will just do to you, but what Jesus will call you to do. It was beautiful.

At the end of the service, the missionaries that called my friend and I made arrangements so that the two of us could meet with the pastor and a number of the Elders of that congregation. We sat down together, and I wrote it all out in a journal. (I was looking at it this week. It was fun to go back.) But, they talked about different issues and their fear of the declining Christian community and Palestine. They talked about the continual brutalization of the Jewish people against, not only all Palestinians, but even the Christian Palestinians. Then one of them turned to me, in this moment of clarity, and he said, “*Why*, why do Christians in America ignore us? *Why* do they care more about the Jewish community, than they do their brothers and sisters who are Christian in the same place?” And I couldn’t answer. I wished I had an answer, but it probably wouldn’t have been enough anyway. Maybe just asking it with Americans in the room was enough.

His questions haunt me. Then this week, when I try to give you a nice, cute, little sermon about Christmas, so you all feel groovy and good; [laughter] I keep getting sucked into all that is happening right now.

This week the White House came out with a statement saying we are going to move and affirm that now the capital of Israel is no longer in Tel Aviv. We are going to move it to Jerusalem, and we are going to move the [U.S.] Embassy. I need to talk to you about that because it is more than just a political thing. Sometimes people get frustrated because I talk about politics, but the problem is, is that politics is now talking about religion. This is more than just a statement about moving an Embassy or picking the Jews over the Palestinians. What frightens me is that this is a religious action - and not just political. And, I want to explain that to you, so you understand that we are being represented as Christians in a way that I don't think most of us believe. I certainly do not. So, bear with me for just a minute.

There is a group of Christians who believe in both Premillennialism (and I will explain that with you briefly) and also with Dispensationalism. Now, "Pre"millennialism is the belief that comes from the New Testament that when Jesus comes again "pre" (just as Jesus comes), there is going to be a 1,000 year reign, but those who are faithful, because if it is "pre" the Millennial - "pre" the 1,000 years, at the beginning of the 1,000-year period - the faithful, the good Christians are going to be whisked up to Heaven.

I had a Presbyterian minister in St. Cloud, Minnesota, who scared the living daylights out of my 14-year-old self. [He] showed this movie of all of these people driving down the road and then Jesus, in a Premillennialist way, carted them all up to Heaven, and cars were crashing - because they had all left their cars driving down the highway. All of the heathens were getting run into, because they were still on earth. [Laughter.] A husband was shaving. [and] he was gone. His wife was looking for him. [Laughter.] She must have been one heck of a heathen because she didn't get to go. [Laughter.]

It scared the Jesus out of me, really. That is Premillennialism. In that 1,000 years, if you took it literally from Revelation, all of those people would go to Heaven. Then there would be a 1,000-year reign, where there would be tribulation, and evil would take over the world - in that case, the devil, and back and forth.

Well, right before the end of the 1,000-year reign, according to the Dispensationalists, the Jews - because they were originally the chosen people of the Old Testament - God would forgive them, and many of them would get to go to Heaven. They acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the Messiah; they get to go, and there would be a new Heaven and a new earth. But for everyone else, they would just cease to exist or, more than likely, go to hell, including the Muslims.

The Vice President of the United States, Mike Pence, is Dispensationalist Premillennialist. Many people, but not all, but many who are Baptist, many of whom, but not all are Pentecostal or charismatic; a number of non-denominational churches have this Dispensational Premillennialist [way of thinking].

Now, what triggers, for the Dispensationalist and the Premillennialists, the beginning of the 1,000-year reign, is when the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is restored, and it is truly that - or the one true God takes control again.

Now, if you remember, on the Temple Mount (that is the place where God's Holy Temple - the Holy of Holies is), many Jews will not go on the Temple Mount because somewhere on that Temple Mount the Holy of Holies once stood - either with the first temple that was destroyed and rebuilt in 586 BCE, or in the second temple when it was destroyed in 70 CE.

One of those two places had the Holy of Holies in it, and a good, faithful Jewish person would not go up there, because they would not think of standing on the Holy of Holies where God resided. That is also the place, on the Temple Mount, where the Muslims believe Mohammed ascended into Heaven. So, you have a problem. So, for these Dispensationalist Premillennialists, they believe that if we can get the Dome of the rock off of there - which was finished in 692 CE - if they can get that off of there, if they can get rid of the Al Aqsa Mosque which is also on, I believe, the south side of the Temple Mount, get those two things off, then Christ can come again, and the 1,000-year reign will begin. And the Christians will drop their razors, and crash their cars, and go into Heaven, and the Jews will have to suffer for about 990-some years, but they will get to go to Heaven.

Now why I'm sharing all of this with you is, when religion and politics mix and if you are making decisions based on religion, political decisions based on religion, you will try to take the power away from the Muslim community; slowly chipping away at it so that, in time, you can move them out of Jerusalem even though they believe that is where the Palestinian capital is, as well.

If you can move them out then - slowly - you can get rid of that Mosque. You can get rid of that Dome on the Rock and then Jesus can come.

That is not what the Presbyterian Church (USA) believes. In fact, since we have been a denomination of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the General Assembly has even said that that understanding is both hostile and evil, because it tears away the fabric of what it means to be inclusive and loving of all people.

More than that, it states that we can manipulate the mind of God. That if we can act to tear down that Mosque, and take away the Dome of the Rock, then we can force Christ to come again. That is idolatry. If we can manipulate the mind and heart and will of God to bring about the second coming of God. Yet, that is what is happening when the Administration, who has been very vocal about saying they believe this, is trying to make steps to take back Jerusalem for the Jewish community.

This is so important because it defines who we are as Christians. Many of us have a hard time understanding it. I had to do quite a bit of study just to get up on it myself, and, I thought, if I have to work this hard at it, probably some of you need a little brushing up on it too. [Laughter.] And, why it is so important is because, when you listen to the media, they say "Christians" or "Evangelicals" believe this. Well, that is not true. Not all of us Christians. Many Christians do not believe that and do not want to try to manipulate the will of God to force Jesus Christ to come again. We hear and believe that it is not; nor can we know the time or day.

Secondly, we do not believe that God is going to destroy an entire segment of people that God created, who has the same Father Abraham. You cannot bring peace through hatred, and you cannot bring Christ again by political manipulation, yet that is what is happening right now.

And so, when you hear relatives over Christmas talking about [how] we need to bring Christ into the Holy Land, [how] we need to get the rock out so we can have Christ come again. If you have some of those [folks] over during the holiday, usually you are trying not to bring it up. But if they force the conversation, the answer is, "No, you cannot force and manipulate God into doing anything." The beautiful part of Christmas is knowing that Christ came for *all* people, and that peace can only happen when we are peaceful with *all* - not just those we agree with on every subject.

So, when you are watching the news and you are seeing Bethlehem in flames and you are seeing the fight and the rage, you need to be concerned about how the decisions are being made, and what religious beliefs are trying to be acted out; because the hurt and damage they are doing in the Holy Land - our and their Holy Land - could take dozens, if not hundreds of years to fix, and they are going down a road that I do not believe God wants them to go down.

So please today, as we begin this time moving toward Christmas, that we pray for the Holy Land, that we pray for our leaders and everyone else's leaders, and we begin our prayers with peace - and not manipulation. That we begin our prayers saying, "*Thy* will be done Lord God Almighty," not, "I've got a great plan to help you, God," because God doesn't need our manipulation. God needs our love, our support, and the peace that surpasses all understanding - and we get that through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.