

Reading the Fifth Gospel

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Why are Presbyterians fixated on Israel?

I frequently speak to church groups about pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I speak as a pilgrim, but the conversation often turns to politics. Inevitably someone will ask about our denomination's position on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. There's no simple answer, so I always give a bit of history.

One day someone commented that we seem "fixated" on the subject, and others nodded in agreement. The word stuck with me.

Since 2004 the PCUSA has become increasingly fractious over this issue. We generate special interest groups, publications, and always overtures. Peace and justice are important, yes, but why the special focus on one place?

I think one reason—one we're often hesitant to claim—is that we feel like stakeholders in the land because of our love for Jesus and the Bible. This is true even for Christians who have never been there. Maybe our childhood eyes lingered on Jesus the Good Shepherd and we fancied ourselves as the lambs in his arms. Now our adult ears listen to the Gospel stories and we wonder if Jesus will teach us, will heal us. Like children, we long for a place close to Jesus, and so we have an inchoate longing for his land.

But instead of talking about this, we argue politics.

On Sundays we sing about Jerusalem, the eternal home, the shining city that will descend to us like a vision, like a goal. To our surprise, our spirits lift as we sing. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of the New Jerusalem at the communion table, or the soup kitchen, or the session meeting. Some instinct affirms that what we read in scripture is true: Jerusalem is our true home, and we are pilgrims traveling there.

We don't make the journey alone. We accompany Moses and the Israelites as they wander across the heat-pricked desert. We travel beside Mary and Martha as they

carry household supplies through the dusty streets. We watch Peter and James and John as they pull their fishing nets onto the rocky shore.

Why are Presbyterians so fixated on Israel? Perhaps we're fixated on the politics because we have no idea how else to approach this land.

Yet we're hardly the first generation of Jesus followers to feel a powerful pull to the Holy Land. Jerome sequestered himself in Bethlehem to do his biblical translation work. He wanted to inhabit the place that Jesus had inhabited. Presumably, the Latin Vulgate issued from a study underneath the Church of the Nativity. Jerome also offers a phrase that suggests a different way to be in relationship to this land: he calls the Holy Land the "Fifth Gospel."

Have we read this Fifth Gospel? Too often we act as if the land itself were mute, as if it sits before us like a victim, or a crime scene, or perhaps a stone-faced teacher. But a *Gospel* bears *good news*. This land can help us taste the good news, to digest and embody it. The land itself can become a character: the breeze kissing or stinging our cheeks, the waves lapping at our toes with comfort or force, the sand continually resisting our footfalls. We hear Jesus' words differently when we stand in Galilee and watch the light move over distant water. His teachings feel closer to the bone.

The Fifth Gospel still speaks. The meadow and the water and the light still issue their invitation. Jesus still uses a canvas of sand to write his lessons. He teaches with lilies and bread, with cup and yeast, with mustard seed and birds. He heals with mud and spit. It's not metaphorical. Can you smell the fish Jesus is broiling on the beach to feed us?

The phrase "the Israeli/Palestinian issue" defines a polarity. For all our talk of peace, and justice, and the kingdom of God, it comes down to these two camps to choose from. If our denomination's goal is to align with the correct camp, we have doomed ourselves to fail.

Maybe we Presbyterians need to take a pilgrim break from politics. Maybe we should pause for lunch, eat a piece of broiled fish. Maybe we should read the Fifth Gospel.

If I were attending the upcoming General Assembly, this would be my resolution:

WE CALL UPON every Presbyterian congregation to study the Holy Land as a Fifth Gospel, listening for the good news it bears to us, to the Middle East, and to the whole world, as we continue to pray daily for the peace of Jerusalem.