



Pastor Enno's Weekly Message

Dear Friends,

In January of 1996, I went on a tour of Jordan, Israel, and Palestine through my seminary, Lancaster Theological Seminary. Along with all the religious and historical sites, we also went to refugee camps in Jordan and in Israel, as well as visiting Tel Aviv, Shepherds Field (the only Christian majority Palestinian community in the West Bank), and the Gaza Strip. Almost 30 years ago, I remember Gaza Strip with crumbling buildings, very little vegetation (trees, grass, shrubs, flowers, gardens), and every time a Palestinian youth saw our small bus they would wave and smile. (back then, as it is now, 50% of the population was under 16 years old).

We met with one of the leaders of Gaza Strip, still under Yassir Arafat's PLO. I asked him if there were any non-military leaders like a Gandhi or M.L.K. Jr., who were trying to solve this through non-violence. He said they are under occupation (Israel controlled all territories at that time), and all they could do is fight for their independence.

In these last 30 years, Palestinians have received some independence, but in the Gaza Strip, their borders are still controlled by Israel, even their shipping lanes. They receive enough aid and help so that there isn't mass starvation and anarchy, but there have been no programs to help them rebuild their infrastructure or invest in a better future.

When I was there, we met a group of college students from South Africa who just were freed from apartheid. I asked them if they saw any differences between what happened to them and what is happening to the Palestinians. They said it was the same thing happening. President Jimmy Carter also called it apartheid in one of his books written on Middle-East Peace.

We have to remember that Israel, as a country, is relatively new. It is about 80 years old. When our country was 80 years old, we were struggling with slavery and fought the Civil War over it. Right now, in Israel, the hardline right wingers have controlled their government for quite a long time, and they have no interest in solving this problem, or working with the Palestinians to dismantle its apartheid system.

Israel has a right to existence and to defend it's borders and population, as does Palestine. I am not defending the actions of Hamas and hope that a cease-fire can come very quickly. I also hope that Israel will also begin to help the Palestinians to secure their own future and that of their youth. Without hope for a better future, Palestinians have no reason to lay down their weapons.

Peace