

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
July 9 & 10, 2016  
John Crosby  
Elemental: The Land of Israel | Genesis 12:1-3; Joshua 1:1-6**

I believe that God will tie this all together, and that this morning, God is using the baptism, Cenith's birthday, the music, our confession, and this time, to bring us a word from Him that will change our lives. We are confident of that, in part, because it was months ago when David Hammond, who preached last week, had the idea of using the elements of the earth—fire, wind, rain—to speak about the presence of God, especially in the summers. And really, months since, I was assigned the idea of talking about the land. How do we meet God on a piece of dirt? How do we sense the presence of God in the land? And I believe that God intended that this would happen this weekend. How do you meet God? How do you meet the presence of God in a way that shakes you out of your usual routine? In the earth, how does that happen on the land?

Classically, Christians have talked about this happening in two different ways. First, people have talked about the idea that there are . . . you would call them sacred places or “thin” places. They call them thin places because it seems like in those places the barrier between this world and the world of heaven is very thin. And if you go there and sit, you sense God speaking to you in special ways. We will spend much of the rest of the summer talking about thin places where God interrupts.

But I think there's another way that God speaks to us, just by our rootedness to the land itself. It is the attachment that farmers feel to the land that their grandparents and great-grandparents have sat on—through years of drought and years of plenty—and seen God at work. It's a sense of place that somebody who is inheriting their grandmother's rent-controlled apartment in New York feels for that place. It centers their world, and God meets them there. It's that place up at the lake where you know you can meet God. The land becomes special, very special, for the folks in Israel and Palestine. They feel like God has given them this land.

Our roots, our rootedness, give us a sense that we are doing life the way that God intended. When we look around and say, “Here is where I am. This is my place right now. God, be present to me,” we are, I believe, recreating what the Creator intended in Genesis 1, the beginning of the story. It says,

God blessed Adam and Eve, saying, “Be fruitful and increase in number. Fill the Earth and subdue it,” or another translation says, “Take dominion over the land,” or, “Be stewards of the land. Rule over the fish and the birds and over every living creature that moves.” [Genesis 1:28]

When we are aware of being rooted to a place on the planet, not so much owning it—it's not about a mortgage or a title—but being stewards, taking dominion of it, then we

sense the presence of God in a special way. We want to learn about the blessing of that and the conflict of that this morning, because both happen right in the land.

We want to learn about meeting God where the promise began. Because right now, in that place where the promise began, three different cultures, three different religions, Muslims, Christians, and Jews, all lay claim to the same land, and we have been talking about that this last month, how it is a matter of faith. We had a secular Jew, an Israeli Jew, come and speak to us about Jerusalem. One hundred of us went to a feast with an Islamic worshipping community to end the fast of Ramadan. We will spend the rest of the summer with two visiting scholars from Bethlehem Bible College, not because we believe that all religions are equally valid or all paths belong to the same place, but because we believe that unless we are humble enough to learn and humble enough to reach out, then we will never be peacemakers.

How does it start, this idea of connection between us and the land? Well, in Genesis 12, Genesis 15, Genesis 17, Genesis 22, all through that first book, there are places where God makes a promise to a certain person. It says this in chapter 17:

When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty. Walk before Me and be blameless, <sup>2</sup> and then I will make a covenant between us and greatly increase your numbers." <sup>3</sup> Abram fell facedown, and God said, <sup>4</sup> "This is My covenant. You will be the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer will be called Abram. Your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I'll make you very fruitful. <sup>7</sup> I will make nations of you and kings will come from you." And He says, <sup>8</sup> "The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give you this land as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you. And I will be their God." And then Abraham asks, <sup>18</sup> "Well, what about my other son, Ishmael? I already have a son by the servant girl Hagar," [whom Yohanna will talk about in a couple minutes.] <sup>20</sup> And God says, "I bless Ishmael but I establish a covenant with Abraham's Israelite descendants." [Genesis 17:1-8; 18; 20]

And it's a very peculiar promise. He promises Abraham will have all kinds of people, all kinds of land, and there is one theme to this blessing, to this promise that happens.

Look at the screen now and see the next three places where it talks about the blessing of God, in Genesis 18 and 22 and 26. Can you catch a common phrase there? It's this: "And all the nations on earth will be blessed. All the nations on earth will be blessed. I will make your descendants fruitful and all the nations on earth will be blessed." So somehow, what happens in that little plot of land, the Tigris-Euphrates river valley, is supposed to affect every place that human beings set their foot on the land. Now, imagine that Abram, who is now called Abraham, looks out at a map and sees the land that God promised. It'll probably look something like this map does. It'd be at the edge of Egypt and go well into what we call the country of Lebanon now, over into Jordan, Syria, and encompass all of Palestine as well. The land that was promised. It was promised. And then the descendants of Abraham inhabited it, but it really wasn't theirs

as a nation until after they returned from slavery in Egypt and in the time of the judges, and then the time of the kings. They created the little mini empire. But after just a couple hundred years, it was first divided and then conquered, and then the Israelites, the Jews, were scattered all over the world. Some of them still lived in Israel, but most were scattered all around the world, and this idea of a promised land goes to sleep.

Well, fast-forward to the 20th century. For about 100 years, there's been a movement called Zionism that has said, "We believe that Jews need a land of their own, where they can be protected from persecution." But it never really goes anywhere. Some of the Jews start to return to this place, but it's not until World War II and the Holocaust, the terror of the Holocaust, that the United Nation decides to recreate a state for the Jews. This state has been occupied for 2,000 years by other people, by Christians, and by Jews, certainly, but for over 1,400 years, primarily Muslims have inhabited this land.

Now, I think that this is a very intelligent group. I can do 3,000 years of history in three minutes, so here we go. First slide, just to give you a little perspective of what it looks like. This is the Middle East, the far-right side of the Mediterranean between Turkey and Egypt. That's the Middle East. Just to give you a sense of perspective, here's how big Israel is. That's inside of the state of Minnesota. It's small. You can get from the capital, Tel Aviv, to Jerusalem in less than the time it takes to drive from Stillwater to Minnetonka. It's small and it's narrow and it's conflicted. If we look at the land of Canaan again, we see a time where there were no firm borders set, and borders become very important after the Jews return from the Holocaust.

Here is a map that I think will be very helpful to you, and I can go through it quickly. Before World War II, Palestine looked like the slide on the far-left, mostly green. Green is Palestinians. Those little specks of light are where Jewish settlements happen, but it is primarily, lately the Ottoman Empire, Muslim-controlled. Then, at the end of the Second World War, 1947 or '48, the UN gives a state to the people of Israel, and it looks like what happens on the right. The Palestinians are pushed into these two separate places, and that lasts for about 20 years, '47 to '67. '67 comes a war, right? The '67 war, and as a result of that, the third slide comes. You see that it has gotten even smaller in area for the Palestinians. That's on the top right called the West Bank, because it is literally the west bank of the Jordan River going west, and then there's that strip on the Mediterranean called Gaza. That essentially, give or take five, seven percent, is what persists to this day. But look at the far-right slide. It shows the reality that even though the West Bank is Palestinian territory, it is not controlled by Palestinians except in those green spots. The West Bank is pockmarked with checkpoints and border guards and security patrols to keep bad things from happening to the Israelites, to the Jews.

The West Bank and Gaza are now literally separated by walls. Sometimes, like near Jerusalem, it is a physical wall of separation that looks like this, cuts right through Arab communities, says that a Jew cannot drive six miles, for instance, to Bethlehem. A person who was born in Bethlehem and has family in Jerusalem cannot go over there without a special pass. Our speaker today, Yohanna and his wife Dina, live in Nazareth.

The town of Nazareth is up north. You guys remember Nazareth. That's where Joseph and Mary, Jesus' parents, lived, right? They take three or four days to travel by horse down to Jerusalem. It's only seventy miles or so, but it takes not an hour and a half for Yohanna. It can take a half a day, or an entire day, or being unable to get there, because of checkpoints along the way. This cannot be the promise that God made to Abraham, right? This cannot be what it was supposed to be, but it is where we are as people of faith.

So, I have asked Yohanna and Dina Katanacho to come up and spend a little time with us. Dina is the executive director of the Arab-Israeli Bible Society, and Yohanna is a professor at Bethlehem Bible College, and they are here as our scholars in-residence this summer. We hope you will take advantage of the chance to get to know them. Same language, different culture. I had said, for instance, as we set this up, that we have a custom here in the States called an elevator talk. That means when your boss asks you how's it going and you're both in the elevator, you have till the elevator hits the bottom and you gotta be done. He doesn't want a ten-minute answer. So, I said, can we try for some elevator talks? They're trying. But it's complicated. And so, I thought we would start with Dina and say, sister, why don't you give us a two-minute answer to who you are and what you do?

**Dina:** Okay. Who am I? It's a complex one. You know, as someone who comes from the Middle East, I embody the different stereotypes to which my people have been subjected. Each time I introduce myself, many contradictory images surface in the mind of the people. Why? Because each label of my identity can be charged with a myth, and the myth can be a consequence of ignorance, wrong impressions, prejudice, et cetera. There are five labels that make up my identity. First, I am a Christian. I was born as a Christian. There are Christians in Israel. I didn't convert. The second label of my identity, I am a Palestinian, culturally. Unfortunately, Palestinians are perceived as Muslims and terrorists. That is not correct. I assure you, I am not a terrorist. I have a heart full of God, like to serve Him. The third label of my identity, I am an Arab. In the mind of the Western being, an Arab is equal to being Muslim. That's incorrect as well. Not all Arabs are Muslims. Arab predates Islam. If you read Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit came down, one of the spoken languages was Arabic. And I am an Arab Palestinian. I am not an Arab Jordanian. You know, in the Middle East, there's a lot of Arab people. I am Arab Palestinian, okay. There is Arab Jordanian, Iraqis, et cetera. The fourth label of my identity, I am an Israeli. I was born in Israel and I have Israeli citizenship. And I am a woman. You know, in the Middle East, women are the most disadvantaged sector of the community, because they are not only part of an ethno-political minority, but they are living in a patriarchal community. I am also the director of the Arab Israeli Bible Society, and I am a mom. I have three boys.

It's a very slow elevator, but it's a very complicated . . . You can see, five different identities. Why don't we ask Yohanna to answer, what should we know about you?

**Yohanna:** I'm her husband.

**John Crosby:** Good answer! [Laughs]

**Yohanna:** And I do that full-time. I am also the academic dean of Nazareth Evangelical College and a professor at Bethlehem Bible College.

**John Crosby:** Yohanna, let me start with you on this one. When you listen to the promise of God to bless the descendants of Abraham with the land, and then look at Palestine/Israel today, what are one or two images that come to your mind?

**Yohanna:** One of the images that comes to my mind is Hagar. Hagar was living in the Holy Land with the Holy Family, if you wish, Abram and Sarah, and they were supposed to be a blessing to the whole world. But Hagar, according to the Hebrew Scriptures, was actually physically abused by Sarah, and Hagar, in many ways, is similar to the Palestinian people. We live in a land called holy, we live with a group of people who claim the promises, so we are expecting the blessing, but it's not there. And many people are forced out as a result, just like Hagar. But God is the god of justice.

**Dina:** For me, the images are like, I would think that I am rejected; I am not part of the promises. I think that I will remember the catastrophe because I am a daughter of a refugee in '48. I would think of my children; the future of my children is not secure because they are not Jews, and the God that I am worshipping is a bit different. He's a loving God. He's just and does not discriminate among people.

**John Crosby:** Well, you talked about your God, the God that we know in Jesus. As Christians living in Palestine, what does the promise of Abraham mean to you?

**Yohanna:** Christ usually is the center of my understanding of Scripture, and it does mean for me to bless. And blessing, you know, I asked once my Hebrew professor, "Why don't Jews pray that God will bless the food?" Usually they say, "Blessed are thou, oh God." And he told me, because the word "bless" means to grant life. So, if you have chicken and you close your eyes and you want to pray and God answers your prayer, you have no more dinner.

**Dina:** For me, Christ is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises, and it's an opportunity for me as a Palestinian to bless my brother Jews by Christ, but not overlooking injustice.

**John Crosby:** I hope that this has whetted your appetite to come on Wednesday nights—to come to one of the dinners or lunches or breakfasts that we will have—to seek Yohanna and Dina out in the Great Room, and to learn about this incredibly complex inheritance that they are trying faithfully to live through. Thank you so very, very much.

So, how does the land, and God's promise that we are to live in the land faithfully, tie in to conflict? Obvious in the Middle East. What about here? I believe that we should learn that we are stewards of the land there; to be a blessing, to bring life. I believe that a promise of blessing is always connected to the need to be faithful, filled with faith. God's

plan is to bless all of the nations through the earth, through us, as we show faith and obedience to the one God, whatever piece of land we are standing on in the moment—Bethlehem, Hebron, North Minneapolis, Edina. Yet, that is just the start of the answer. I'd like you to believe that this can happen in the hardest of times, that you can bless people who hate you or fear you. It's hard as a person in Edina to connect with that.

So, I have a friend that I would like to talk to you for a few minutes. His name is Daoud Nassar. Daoud—David—is from Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. He also is a Palestinian. He also is a Christian. He has a piece of land there that has been in his family since the time of the Ottoman Empire. None of you have a contract signed by a representative of the Ottoman Empire, but the title on his land says that. Since 1948, he has been in a battle for his land—to keep it. The road that you see down there at the end has been cut so that access to his property is denied anybody else. He greeted us several years ago. We met him. He greeted us but couldn't take us into his living room because it wasn't big enough. The only place big enough for us—because he is not permitted to build on his land—was to meet in a cave, and we met in this cave. They are creative, industrious people, and so that cave now looks like this. They have made it into a place of hospitality. At his root, he is a farmer. Daoud is a farmer and he will speak to you and say, "I want to plant olive trees." You may not be able to understand the first sentence that he says. "I want to plant olive trees."

[Daoud Nassar Video]

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPVARk1V\\_hA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPVARk1V_hA)

We are followers of Jesus. We are, in this particular case, pro-Israel and pro-Palestine, pro-justice and pro-Jesus. It is our belief that God has given us the gift of the land to teach us how to bless other people, how to give life to other people in all of its fullness in the name of Jesus. And if the cornerstone of your house or the cornerstone of houses on the North Side, or the cornerstone here, were to have as part of it saying "We refuse to be enemies" implanted on it, then wherever the followers of Jesus live, the earth would be blessed. Let's pray.

Lord God, we have covered the gamut today, from birth to 95, from here to the North Side to the ends of the earth, and we have been reminded that You have called us to live in the land that You have put us upon; how we are to refuse to be enemies; indeed, to learn to love those regardless of race or gender or nationality or religion; to seek out people to bless. I pray, Lord God, that in this month filled with tension, You will remind us of our roots in the land that You have given us, and that we would be the people who bring the peace; that we would reach out in humility; that we would listen instead of always talking and judging and pronouncing; that we would weep with those who weep; that we would ask You to come into our midst and bring us peace, peace that the world does not understand, but peace that we so desperately need. Justice and mercy and peace. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.