

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
June 26, 2020
Seeing the story through God's Wide Lens
Jer 31:15-17, Is 41:18, Psalm 137:1-4, 7-9 selected

Jeremiah 31:15-17

Thus says the LORD: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. Thus says the LORD: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the LORD: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the LORD: your children shall come back to their own country.

Psalm 137:1-4, 7-9 selected

By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows* there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion! 'How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? Remember, O LORD... the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!' ... Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

Isaiah 41:18

I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys: I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.

Devotion

The readings today are in chronological order. The prophet Jeremiah wrote at the beginning of the Babylonian exile. The Babylonians used the ancient Israelite city of Ramah as a deportation center to corral the Israelites prior to taking them into captivity.¹ Jeremiah uses a dramatic metaphor to describe this devastating tragedy. Rachel, the matriarch of the Hebrew people is weeping, refusing to be comforted, for her children “are no more.” Yet, in the midst of this devastation Jeremiah holds on to God's hope; return will be the reward for their labors in exile.

Psalm 137, written during the exile, expresses a very different emotional tone from depression or hope. Instead we hear anger at treatment received at the hand of captors who expected them to entertain them! The anger turns to yearning for vengeance and retribution in words that are seldom, if ever, read in worship.

The passage of Isaiah was written near the end of the exile. It expresses a return to God's promise of hope and future, after oppression, exile, disruption and separation in relationship with each other and with God.

Like the ancient city of Ramah, Ramallah is located north of Jerusalem. Originally an Arab Christian city, years of forced emigration to due to occupation and economic devastation have resulted in a remnant of God's people who are primarily Muslim. The names of the two cities are based on the Hebrew root word, "height."² Ramallah means "God's height." Today we will hear an amazing story of 150 years of hope and future in Ramallah, "God's height."

The Hebrew Testament was written as a description of the journey of the Israelites and their relationship with God, each other and the people living around and with them. It is from the perspective of those authors.

But what would happen if we read it from God's perspective? What happens if we switch some of the names and countries of the characters? How does seeing the Bible and the history of all of God's people through God's wide lens change how we interpret the stories, who is included in the family of God, and how we support, share and live in harmony with them?

Notes on Presentation by Adrian Moody

The Ramallah Friends School began as a girls school with 15 students in 1869. A 14 year old girl asked a visiting Quaker couple to help with education because there was no education for girls. In 1901 a boys school started on a second campus. The school was in the middle of nowhere. In 1918 the new building was being used as a hospital first by Turkish and then British troupes. The area was stone, stone and more stone. But Now the school is 3 minutes from the center of town, with Ramallah on one side of the road and Alberi on the other, 1400 students, became co-educational in the late 1990s, K-12th grade and it is very green. There are 700 students where the girl's school was started- k-5th grade, and 700 on the boy's school site- 6th-12th grade. The Quaker testimonies are posted on signs on both campuses, There is a field, track, ampitheatre, cafeteria, radio station and chemistry labs in the two buildings. The students enter the gates to a different green space- it is like a bubble of environment and experience.

The children enter school at age 4- 100 per year and most stay 14 years so it is a community- a home. A student leaves occasionally- last year 1/1400 left. Because no students leave, they must enter at kindergarten or they cannot get in. They receive 180 applications and can only accept 100. There are no exams or qualifications to get it, the family must just commit to support the mission of the school. Ramallah is now only 5% Christian. There are only 3 Quakers in the area so it is a challenge to be a Quaker school. Most of the teachers are Palestinian with only a few international teachers because it is hard to get a visa.

² Wikipedia, Ramallah

Last year was the 150th anniversary of the school. Being a Quaker school means a great deal- it affects everything we do. We made a decision two years ago to spend a year reacquainting people because there were many different perspectives on what being a Quaker and Quaker school meant. We put the testimonies around the campus and reinstated silent meetings which hadn't been done at the school of 20-30 years. We alternate silent meeting with meeting for business in the Quaker manner. It has been a great opportunity to examine what we are doing and why we are doing it. We brought it into the classroom and it has been hard- a real change- but good to rediscover what it meant to be founded as a Quaker school and how we live that today.

The school is about peace. We are under occupation here. We are surrounded by violence, walls, guns and check points. The West Bank gets shut down on a regular basis. This is an uncertain place. Everything is political so we have to ask how we bring Quaker values- Quakers always believe there is a way to peace. We believe that on both sides of the wall there are families who care about their children and something better in the future. So we don't talk about the conflicts, we talk about peace.

There is the Living letters program and Friends come for three months to work with us. "Nothing embodies Quaker peace better than Quaker bodies!" We don't have anyone here now because of the pandemic but it is important for the Quakers to come and help at the Quaker school. We appreciate that they bring books for the middle school library in their suitcases. The Israeli government does not allow us to order and have books delivered.

Last year we planted 150 trees in honor of the 150 year anniversary. Every class planted their own tree. This is not just about greening the environment but about creating connection and history as the students return every year and in forty years and see their tree. We are partnered with Friends United meeting and this year the connection has been felt very strongly. We also buried a time capsule and the children and teachers put items in to be opened in 25 years when we celebrate 175 years because we understand we have no idea what the world is going to look like by then.

Ramallah is large buildings of concrete and stone and not much green. Because of the Accord with areas A, B and C we can build only in one area and so what was once a village has become very crowded. Going from the school to the meetinghouse is a 6 minute walk. Driving takes 45 minutes because of traffic. It takes an hour to go the 9 kilometers to Jerusalem because of the wall and check points between Israel and Palestine. Going through one check point can take two hours. The green line is the separation. We cannot go to Gaza at all. Because I am Australian I can go back and forth but people on the school staff cannot because it is a land under occupation with strict regulations. They have different permits.

Jericho is the only city in the world that has been under continuous occupation by someone for 5000 years. Every place there are beautiful and historical sites including where Jesus walked and that is wonderful.

The meetinghouse is a little building in the midst of very large buildings. This is the reality we see every day. There are guns everywhere; soldiers with automatic guns with their fingers on the trigger. The cement wall is 30 feet tall and surrounds the whole area with gun towers and barbed wire the same as a prison. Violence breaks out just down the road from the school all the time. It affects the people. It affects the children. They can't sleep because they don't know what will happen. But the school is where they can go to be normal. Outside the school gate is not normal.

Last year a soldier was shot. Every night for two months there were incursions even though the Israeli soldiers are not allowed to come into Ramallah. They were trying to all the camera footage. They came to the school but he told them he didn't know which server had the record or the wifi password. They weren't happy. There heavy personnel vehicles rumbling down the streets every night. That's what it is like here.

The school is creating real and lasting change- one way is supporting students who have learning disabilities. In this region disabilities are seen as a curse from God. The school supported one student who has cerebral palsy by going to his home until he strong enough to come to school. He is a 1975 alumni who is now the mayor of Alberi and his grandchildren are students at the school. There are 100 students at the school who are in mainstream programs. This is the only school that can accommodate learning support students and that is because Quakers support the school.

Mohammad is a guard at the school for 26 years. He is a refugee from the Amari camp established in 1949 and overcrowded and has no water or sanitation. They have much less than even the Palestinians and cannot get out of the camp. He would never have been able to get his kids into private school. In 1998 the an school decided to offer the opportunity for children of the operations staff to come to the school. His oldest daughter just graduated and the first in the family to go to college and is studying to be a teacher. This is the Quaker testimony of equality! Another student is a lecturer at Swarthmore College on peace. He brings students to visit the school every year.

We are in a difficult place but we have an unparalleled opportunity – sanctuary of green and peace. We are part of the International Bacclaureate program and colleges come to recruit our students from all over the world. The pass rate for the IB exam is 78% but we have a 98% pass rate! I know that when there is a peace process it will be our students who are there at the table. We talk about be sustainability, peace, leadership and equality with the students and they

take that into the community. They treasure the school and want it to be around for a long term. While most of the students are Muslim, their parents want them to come here. Not just for the quality education but also because the Quaker values and testimonies are very attractive and the school is not about converting but trying to be an example of them.

We are not planning to expand the school because we don't have the capacity to add more children and would need more buildings and when we can't have the whole community together that changes the dynamic. The girls are treated the same as the boys. Some wear head coverings or may wear them in the community but most don't at the school. The parents know we are liberal, progressive. We promote female leadership in staff, administration and in student groups. If we have only one space for a student we will preference a girl over a boy because it is important in this region where girls are not empowered.

The average tuition is \$3,700 per year. It is the least expensive IB school in the world. We have \$100,000 designated for scholarships.

About Adrian Moody

Adrian Moody began as Head of Ramallah Friends School on August 1, 2017. Adrian follows Joyce Ajlouny, who served for thirteen years before taking up the post of General Secretary of the American Friends Service Committee.

Adrian came to the Friends School with an extensive background in international education, having served in school leadership positions in Australia, New Zealand, Tanzania, Thailand, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, and India. His depth of experience with the International Baccalaureate and his masters-level specialization in teacher assessment will allow him to shepherd implementation of the RFS Board's new strategic plan which focuses on strengthening academic programs. His professional expertise in management of large multi-campus schools will facilitate a thorough analysis of long-term financial and physical needs and the development of strategies for sustainability.

A committed Roman Catholic with a master's degree in theology, Adrian feels deeply called to the particular witness of a Friends School under occupation. He says: "I am drawn to RFS for so many reasons. It has a long history of shared communities. It has a strong academic program and is able to offer its students wonderful opportunities. But RFS is not just a school – it is much more than that. I look at RFS and I see that the grace of God is working within this community. I see God carrying us all on a journey, together through moments of success and challenges which strengthen our lives and our bonds with each other and God."

Adrian, an Australian national, and his wife Gillian, a New Zealander, are enjoying their new life in Ramallah. Their teenage daughter, who recently

graduated from boarding school in New Zealand, has been able to spend several vacations with her parents.

Adrian serves as a member of the FUM Field Staff, with his salary, benefits and expenses covered through designated donations to FUM. In order to prevent a gap in leadership and to facilitate a smooth hand-over as Joyce leaves the school, a generous FUM supporter has provided transitional funding to allow Adrian to begin without delay. As FUM and Adrian work together to build his support community, these funds will be repaid. Join Adrian's team of support.