

FIRST AND CENTER
Pastor's Blog
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Most American Christians have no idea how the far-right evangelicals think about Israel and its Jewish and Muslim citizens. We need to know, because at the ceremony in Jerusalem marking the transfer of the US Embassy there from Tel Aviv, both clergy who offered prayers represent this group. Here's a quick primer:

- They are eager for the Temple to be rebuilt on the site of the Second Temple, which currently holds the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque, two of the holiest sites for Muslims.
- They raise millions of dollars to send to Israel and to Israeli groups advocating for this to happen.
- They are eager for this because they believe, from their reading of Biblical apocalyptic literature, that when this happens, the Second Coming will be imminent.
- They believe that when Jesus comes again, the Jews and Muslims who do not convert will be slaughtered. By God.
- They have no contact with the indigenous Christian communities in Israel, who repudiate their theology, and many of them believe there is no indigenous Christian community there (I don't know what they think happened to all those Christians in the first churches in Jerusalem!).

This is particularly important to understand because they have more access to the President of the U.S. right now than any other religious group. This small minority of Christians pushed relentlessly for the embassy to be relocated, something many American Jewish communities did not push. Since it fit the political ambitions of the current Israeli President and his party, they were happy to go along, no matter how this happened. How odd, right, that the opening and closing prayer at the Embassy dedication were given by Christian ministers and not an American rabbi?

As U.S. Christians, we need to be clear-sighted about what is going on right now in our name. I was in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Gaza, and Jordan in 1992 on a trip with UCC leaders. At random in Jerusalem, we met some of these evangelicals and heard what they said. I've read about it since then. My heart breaks at the events of this week. The Israeli government has made Gaza a ghetto for seventy years, blockading it after they returned it to the Palestinians, controlling all access of people and supplies. I saw it when Israel still occupied and governed it, and the living conditions of the people outside the Jewish settlements were appalling. The people there are hopeless, so their protest, stones against guns and drones, is desperate. The Muslim world sees what is

happening and that the U.S. threw a party in Jerusalem at an event marking the end of our effective participation in any peace talks between Israel and Palestine, proclaiming loudly that the Palestinians might as well give up because Israel is in control. That needs to happen so Jesus can come again to forcefully convert or kill the Jews and Muslims in this perversion of Christian theology. And though this represents a tiny fraction of U.S. Christian belief, the world sees the President inviting these people to this major event in Jerusalem and assume it is official American belief.

After 9/11, people often said, "Why do they hate us?" It's so critical for us to understand how the world beyond our borders experiences us through what they see and hear in official acts like this one, presided over by the President's daughter and son-in-law (who, by the way, were not elected or officially appointed to anything).

This week marks the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, a time of fasting, self-reflection, and generosity. If you know Muslims, make an effort to reach out to them this month. Our diversity in this nation gives us the possibility to be stronger for good relations together, as long as we don't allow those who operate in fear and arrogance to tear us apart. Once, our diversity was a beacon to the world of the possibility for different peoples to live and work together in peace. Can we restore the light?

~ Rev. Shelly Stackhouse,
Transitional Pastor