

For the Salvation of the World

From the series: The Human Face of God

Text: Isaiah 53:5; Luke 22:42

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Kathleen Kern is a woman who was invited to write a piece in this Jewish magazine edited by Rabbi Michael Lerner, called *Tikkun*, a bi-monthly Jewish critique of politics, culture, and society, and this issue is given over to a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the nation Israel. Kathleen Kern was invited to write because she, as a Christian, had become convinced that the Christian church had for 2000 years terribly abused the Jewish people, and she felt a tremendous burden because of the anti-Semitism that has marked our past, when we made the Jewish people Christ-killers, the kind of thinking that led in its ultimate expression in the Holocaust. And so, Kathleen Kern, a Christian, went to Israel and became part of Christian Peacemakers Team, and she came for the purpose of bringing reconciliation between the Jew and the Palestinian. She felt she could do this because she felt, having empathized with the Jewish people, she had a sense of the responsibility of the church over against the Jewish people; she felt she must first listen to them before there was anything to be said about the state of Israel or Israel's actions. And with that kind of posture, she felt she was in a position to hear the Jewish voice and to seek to bring reconciliation with the Palestinians.

While the 50th anniversary of the nation Israel is cause for celebration for Israel, it marks 50 years of tragedy for the Palestinians. This is one of the most complicated and tragic episodes in human history. Kathleen Kern was asked to write in this issue, which celebrates the 50 years of Israel, and she wrote a piece to which the Rabbi Lerner responded, "It's written with detachment; there's not any passion in it." So, she wrote back to him, re-writing the piece, saying,

So you want to know how I really feel about Israel after having worked for nearly seventeen months as a human rights activist in Hebron? You don't want the version that I give in presentations to Mennonite Churches that emphasize our conflict resolution work? You don't want the version I give Jewish friends to avoid seeing that veil of pain drop across their faces? You don't want the version that I tell the children in my household so they won't grow up thinking Israelis are bad people?

Are you so sure you want to open those doors that my rage has strained against for the past two years? Are you? ... Israel makes me want to throw things at a wall until the plaster shatters and my arms are too sore to hurl anything else. Israel makes me wish that my theology permitted me a purgatory where folks like Ariel Sharon would have to experience every bit of the pain and terror they have inflicted on their victims over the last decades. ... I have expended enormous energy to subdue my passion so that I don't repulse those who are only moderately interested in my work. She said, "When I think of what I have seen and what I have experienced of the horror visited upon the Palestinians at Hebron (that's I have seen men picking up little bits of people stuck to asphalt, walls, and trees in Jerusalem. I have seen Israeli soldiers in Hebron beckon settlers to come over and spit on terrified young men they have detained at a checkpoint. I have seen the huge grin on the face of a man holding me up by the hair with his left hand as he drew the other hand back to punch me in the ear. From the ground I watched him run away with my camera held over his head like a football, surrounded by other settlers in white shirts and black pants. They laughed and cheered as though he had made a touch down. I have been called "Nazi"; I have been spit at times too numerous to mention. I have on occasion had Miriam Levinger cackle at me, "Don't say I didn't warn you."

I have listened as countless soldiers and settlers who have never had a civil conversation with a Palestinian - let alone eaten with them, lived with them, babysat for them as I have - tell me all about what Arabs "are like." ... I have stood one too many times in front of tearful Palestinian women asking me "*Laish?* Why? Why? WHY are they doing this? What have we done?" as they nursed the bruises of their children who had been attacked by soldiers or settlers ... My bile, my tears, well up as I write.

It is better to detach ... because otherwise I think my tears, my vomit, would drown the Fertile Crescent.

Kathleen Kern is a Christian who wants to follow Jesus and went over to become a peacemaker between Israelis and Palestinians. She knows the tragedy of the Jew and she empathizes with them, and now she has experienced the tragedy of the Palestinian, and I was thinking about this when I reflected on the theme of the day, "The Salvation of the World." This magazine, *Tikkun*, the word *Tikkun* means "to heal, repair, and transform the world." It's what Krister Stendahl spoke of when he spoke of the mending of creation. It is what Jesus was about, and as I was thinking about the salvation of the world, and Jesus in the Garden, and the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, I read the story of Kathleen Kern and her awful anguish and her disillusionment, coming there with all kinds of idealism, wanting to affect reconciliation, and seeing simply more of that terrible story of human violence and the inhumanity of one to another.

That's the world into which Jesus came. That's the world that Jesus would bring salvation to, and, as he was in the Garden, he knew they were going to kill him. At his baptism he sensed he was claimed and called; he struggled with the nature of that ministry and who he really was. He clarified his vision and determined he was not a John the Baptist who was his mentor. It was not his vision to call down fire from heaven and judgment upon the earth. He said, "I have come to proclaim good news, liberation to the prisoners, sight to the blind." Jesus came with the message of grace, of the nearness of God, of the presence of the kingdom of God in the midst of the people here and now, and he knew finally he had to bring that message right to Jerusalem, and he set his face and he came, and he knew the collaboration of temple authority and imperial power would not tolerate his challenge. They would kill him.

He didn't want to die. In the Garden he said "If it would be possible, if there's another way, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but Thy will be done." And the silence from heaven was eloquent answer. There is no other way.

He must have thought about the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Maybe he even sensed that he would be that one who would die, that lamb who would go to the slaughter, that one who would bear the transgression of his people in order that his people might be healed. And so, he left the Garden to go to the cross, because he knew there was no other way for the salvation of the world, for the mending of creation, for healing and transformation than the way of love, the way of grace, the way of inclusion, the way of pointing to God full of grace Whose mercy embraces all. And they killed him.

Two thousand years later, Kathleen Kern, an idealistic Christian, goes over to affect reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians and she finds this horror going on, even to this moment. And really it's as though nothing's changed. She says she had written a book *We Are the Pharisees*. It was her testimony about the fact that we Christians have visited on the Jews all these centuries this terrible anti-Semitism, and as she reflects now, after seventeen months in Israel, she says,

... As I re-read my words today, I ask myself, "Do I still believe them? Do I still believe anything I believed before the Israeli-Palestinian conflict infected me?" I am able to rise above my rage long enough to realize that, yes, my words still hold true. Even given my experiences in Hebron, I don't think there is much I would add or change.

As a Christian white European American I want to take responsibility for the injustices in the Middle East. If I can take responsibility for what has happened, that gives me a small measure of control, right? The silence roils in my stomach. I will continue. I still believe I have an obligation to follow Jesus' command that I love my enemies. Can I love Mr. Shektman, Miriam Levinger, and the anonymous Kachniks currently threatening the

lives of my friends in Hebron? Yes, I can love them. They were not born hateful. I know - no, I am certain - that God loves them.

And so, she stays. Another lamb to the slaughter. *USA TODAY* tomorrow could have headlines, "Christian Woman Slain: Kathleen Kern Found Violated and Raped, Left for Dead Along a Ditch in the Road to Jerusalem." She would be one who would be slain because she sought to follow Jesus, the way Jesus was slain because he saw in the suffering servant the model by which salvation comes to the world. Salvation comes to the world through love that is willing to sacrifice itself. Salvation comes to the world by breaking the cycle of violence. Two thousand years and nothing has changed; it still hasn't dawned on us.

In Texas a few weeks ago we executed a woman whose life had been transformed, a woman who admitted her guilt and the horror of her crime, but who gave every evidence of the transformation of life. But we put her to death, nonetheless, because we want to keep the system intact; we want retributive justice. Finally, we want vengeance, because we don't believe the world can exist by grace and love that forgives.

Oh, it used to be so easy for me. I understood Isaiah 53 and I understood the Garden, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. As a good Lutheran theologian put it, "Jesus took the rap for me." Jesus took the rap for us. Jesus bore our sin. As Peter said, he bore our sin in his body on the tree, therefore, my sin is gone, I have a pass to heaven, and you can have one, too, if you'll join me. Believe in Jesus and join my club. You'll get to heaven, too. That's what the salvation of the world is all about. And that kind of an understanding of the salvation of the world hasn't changed a thing in 2000 years.

Jesus was not about getting me to heaven. Jesus was about transforming the world. Jesus was about breaking the cycle of violence. Jesus was about dying rather than denying that the only way the world can be saved is when we learn to love instead of hate, to forgive rather than retaliate. The only way the salvation of the world will come is when we are willing for that conviction to be lambs taken to the slaughter without the exercise of pragmatic thought or rationalization, simply loving and forgiving and absorbing and taking and loving and forgiving and absorbing and taking it again, because, until that happens, we'll continue to execute prisoners whose lives are transformed, Israelis and Palestinians will continue to blow each other up, and Americans will have to continue to build citadel fortress America, because the rest of the world is growing and it will not long tolerate our affluence leading to over-consumption, no matter how strong we are. We'll either love, or we'll die.

Will there ever come salvation to the world? Only God knows. Only God knows.

Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.