



# No Peace for Bethlehem

Palestinian  
Christians  
face another  
year without  
Christmas

**L**AST DECEMBER, I took my teenage children Anna and Matthew to the Holy Land for Christmas, where we joined a camel caravan reenactment of the Journey of the Magi. The pilgrimage began in Ur of the Chaldees (from Genesis 11:31), 370 kilometers southeast of Baghdad. We joined the caravan a few days before Christmas as it crossed the Jordan and entered Jericho. We traveled up the desert hills of Judea on our way to Bethlehem.

There were few, if any, tourists in the Holy Land, due to the second Pales-

tinian intifada, which started in September 2000. Bethlehem was under a strict curfew and military siege. Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Holy Land lived with increasing insecurity from terrorist bombings and military assaults. We left Chicago with prayers that there might be a brief moment of peace for Christmas, but it seemed doubtful. Palestinian Christians and Muslims decided that they could not celebrate Christmas that December. Instead, it would be a time of mourning.

Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, was just ending as we arrived.

During the journey we tried not to eat during the daylight hours, out of respect for the Muslims in the caravan. Following a trail that historians believe the Magi followed to avoid King Herod and his army, we entered Ubadiyya, a largely Muslim suburb of Bethlehem, on December 23. We passed an Israeli military training area that had been shelling Ubadiyya and nearby Beit Sahour (Shepherd's Field) for three months, and waved to the Israeli army who sat on their tanks. They seemed bewildered by a camel caravan of some thirty pilgrims walking or riding, holding banners that read, "The Journey

sion moved up the hill to Bethlehem. The large banner in front of us read, "Jesus weeps for the Palestinians." Arabic Christmas carols boomed out of the van leading the procession. As we looked around, men, women, and children were out on their balconies or in front of their homes, waving and cheering us on. As darkness fell, we looked behind us and saw an endless parade of people marching behind us with torches.

During the march, I talked with an old friend, Dr. Ghassan Andoni. He had been planning the march for several months, never knowing if it would

said, "Dad, this is awesome. This is Christmas."

Prospects for Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem this year appear to be grim to non-existent. For a second consecutive year, the Israeli army and Palestinians are locked in a war of attrition in the Holy Land. More than thirty Palestinians and one Israeli soldier were killed in less than a week this past October. Unemployment in Bethlehem is now over 60 percent as tourism is virtually nonexistent.

After the September 11 tragedy in the United States, hopes for renewed peace negotiations in the Holy Land

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of the Magi 2000" and "We Come in the Name of the Prince of Peace." Anna and Matthew felt a new sense of courage once we passed through the tense zone.

After sunset, we heard the call to prayer from the minarets of Ubadiyya, and were welcomed into the municipal building to share the evening meal that broke the daily fast on the last day of Ramadan. The mayor, a Muslim, welcomed our group, a mixture of American, British, and Palestinian Christians, as one of the first signs of peace he had seen in ninety days.

On Christmas Day we assembled in mid-afternoon to begin our last leg of the journey, from Shepherd's Field to Manger Square in Bethlehem. It was cold and raining. During a damp worship service in the Cave of the Shepherds, Matthew leaned over to me and said, "This doesn't really feel like Christmas." I reminded him that at the time of Jesus' birth, the Roman army had occupied Palestine, and the situation appeared grim and without hope.

"We need to find hope in God and in the power of Christ to believe when there is nothing but darkness," I told him, but it had little effect. We mounted our camels and slowly the proces-

sion indeed take place. "Once the intifada started we thought we would cancel it," he said. "You must realize that we have had nothing to celebrate this year as we have been shelled daily by the Israelis."

I asked him how many people he thought were walking with us. He answered, "Well over 8,000." Hearing this, Matthew looked back again, and

were revived. U.S. President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced their support for a Palestinian state. But soon afterwards, Israeli soldiers assassinated Mustafa Zibri, a leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The PFLP then assassinated Rehavam Zeevi, Israel's minister of tourism.

On October 19, Israeli tanks and



The Journey of the Magi caravan traveled from Ur of the Chaldees to Bethlehem, Christmas 2000.

soldiers occupied five Palestinian cities, including Bethlehem. During the fighting that followed, more than thirty Palestinians were killed. One of the people killed was Johnny Thaljiya, a seventeen-year-old high-school student who lived just off Manger Square with his family.

Johnny was an altar boy at the Church of the Nativity, a Greek Ortho-

Lutheran Church wrote the following after Johnny's funeral: "Over the last thirteen months of the intifada, Palestinians have been trying to comfort themselves with the belief that Bethlehem was a safe place, that the Israeli forces would never attack at the center of the city, the very place remembered as the birthplace of Christ. No one would have thought that someone

For the first time in its history, the Christmas Lutheran Church canceled worship services because it was too dangerous for congregants to leave their homes. Sadly, that same Sunday morning, two other congregations were bombed by Israeli shelling. One worshiper was gunned down by a sniper as he exited a church.

What can Christians in North

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dox church that is one the oldest Christian churches in the Holy Land. According to *The New York Times*, Johnny was walking with his four-year-old cousin when he was shot and killed by a sniper.

could be shot on Manger Square...."

Raheb recalled the Pope John Paul's remarks during his historic visit to Bethlehem in March 2000: "Today we look back to one moment two thousand years ago, but in spirit we embrace

America do for our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land? St. Paul reminds us that when one part of the body of Christ is suffering, we all suffer. Perhaps the response is prayer—a fervent prayer of Christian solidarity and encouragement for these Christian sisters and brothers who think of themselves as "the forgotten faithful." Everyone can pray for the safety, survival, and witness of these indigenous Christians, whose history dates back to the day of Pentecost in the Holy Land. The Washington, DC-based Churches for Middle East Peace organizes prayer vigils throughout the United States—each state takes a specific day of the month for educational opportunities and prayers on behalf of the Christians of the Holy Land.

Other Christian groups have organized peace delegations or pilgrimages to encourage Christians in the

Holy Land at a time when tourism is absent. There are several types of delegations being organized at this time under the theme of visiting the "living stones" of the Holy Land. Too often, Christians visit the dead stones—holy sites and archeological digs—and make no connection with the living church. There is an urgent need for churches to go on prayerful pilgrimages and to



**ABOVE:** The Greek Orthodox monastery of Mar Saba, outside Bethlehem  
**RIGHT:** The author pictured with his children and Peter Thiep, a Sudanese student from North Park University, who also took part in the caravan



His father, Theophanis, told *The Washington Post*: "From a young age he was always at the church, always willing to help. He was loving toward every human being, a gift he received from God." Johnny's dream was to go to seminary and become a priest, ministering in Bethlehem.

Violet Raheb, director of women's ministries at Bethlehem's Christmas

all time. We celebrate one newborn child, but we embrace all men and women everywhere. Today, from Manger Square, we cry out to every time and place, and to every person, "Peace be with you. Do not be afraid".... Unbelievably, a year and a half later, these words now seem little more than a dream, as people are captive to fear in that same place."

worship and have fellowship with the Palestinian Christians. There is also a need for those who would be willing to come as international observers and monitors of the human rights situation. For information about both these programs, contact Mark Brown of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Office for Governmental Affairs at 202-626-7932.

A number of North American and European congregations have developed sister-church relationships with the Christians in the Holy Land. The



**Journey of the Magi caravan enters Bethlehem after 99 days of traveling.**

Covenant Church of Sweden has been involved in such partnerships for two decades, and has established the Swedish Center at Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem to help coordinate visits and partnerships. My own congregation in Evanston, Illinois, has partnered with the Christmas Lutheran Church and found the experience to be as much of a blessing to us as it is to them.

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, we received an inspiring pastoral letter from Mitri Raheb, pastor of the Christmas Lutheran Church. He reminded us that while a handful of misguided Palestinian youth may have danced in the streets on September 11, most Palestinians were shocked and condemned the attacks. Palestinians know the meaning of victimization at the hands of terrorists, as they have been under its spell for over fifty years. Pastor Raheb's congregation prayed for Christ's reconciling presence to guide

## Is There Any Room in the Holy Land for Christians?

PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN leaders fear that the continued violence in the Holy Land will result in a new wave of emigration from the troubled region. In 1948, 98 percent of residents of Bethlehem and its suburbs Beit Jala and Beit Sahour were Christian. Twenty percent of the total population of Palestine was Christian. That number had dropped to 13 percent by 1967. By the early 1990s, according to a study by Bernard Sabella of Bethlehem University, the Christian population in the Holy Land was only 2.1 percent. That figure has continued to drop, and Christian leaders fear that their community is one generation from extinction in the West Bank and Gaza Strip—in the very land where Jesus was born and later conducted most of his ministry.

Many Palestinian Christians have emigrated to North or South America, Europe, or Australia. There are now more Christians from Bethlehem living in South America than in Bethlehem itself.

us during these difficult days. We are reminded that sister church relationships are reciprocal, and in this instance, perhaps the Christians of Palestine have more to teach us about suffering love in the midst of terrorism than we realize.

A fourth response is education in our churches, schools, and institutions. Few of us know the story of Palestinian Christianity. We need to go behind the scenes to investigate this virtually unknown Christian community and then consider the peace and justice issues that threaten their very existence today.

In these times of global terrorism and insecurity, God is at work, reminding us of the power of Jesus, who walked the Via Dolorosa with full knowledge of the suffering he would face and with trust in the God who is sovereign over all circumstances. As our Christian Palestinian friends remind us, the cross is a sign of God's presence and a sign of hope at times when we have only dark clouds of gloom and a steady erosion of peace each day.

The pronouncement "Emmanuel," God is with us, is more than a Christmas card greeting or theological principle. It is at the heart of the Christian

message. There is no circumstance that can overcome the light of the good news of God's entering human history as a vulnerable baby who became a refugee under another military occupation and was eventually tortured and put to death for unjustifiable political reasons. As Palestinian Christians walk their Via Dolorosa, we can join them and lend mutual encouragement in this resurrection faith, and perhaps learn what it means to discover new horizons of Christian faith in difficult times. □

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### RECOMMENDED READING

*Dying in the Land of Promise: Palestine and Palestinian Christianity from Pentecost-2000* Don Wagner, Center for Middle Eastern Studies at North Park University, (773) 244-5786

*The Body and the Blood: The Holy Land at the Turn of a New Millennium*, Charles Sennott