

### Advent in Israel-Palestine

In November 2014 God invited me to take a road trip. Okay, it wasn't God, exactly. [Picture #1, Maynard, Tom, Carol] It was Maynard Knepp, who spoke here last Sunday. And it was much more than a road trip. He invited me to participate in an MCC "Come and See" Tour to Israel-Palestine. All my expenses would be paid, since I had been there before, and since he needed someone to serve as a "Tour Chaplain." How could I say no?

[#2, group in restaurant] This is our group, on our first evening there. We're having supper in a cozy restaurant in Nativity Square, Bethlehem. That's right, the Bethlehem. And the Nativity Square, literally a stone's throw from the celebrated birthplace of Jesus. You might recognize the woman in the lower right corner. That's Ruth Harder, Keith and Judy's daughter, who was one of the trip participants. We were in Israel-Palestine a full twelve days, and let me just say that we "came, and saw," and learned a lot. This morning I want to tell you about just one of those days.

On the road from Nazareth to Jerusalem (that's right, the Nazareth, and the Jerusalem!), we stopped to visit and learn about one of MCC's partner organizations, "The Palestine Hydrology Group." Hydrology being a fancy name for water. [#3, well] This group works with local farmers in the Jordan River Valley, helping provide them with access to water. In the occupied West Bank, the illegal Israeli settlements control virtually all of the available water sources. So the Palestinian Hydrology Group (or PHG) began building wells for the farmers. But as soon as they would build one, the Israeli military would come in and destroy it. PHG would build it again, and the military would destroy it again. So the PHG began working alongside Palestinian attorneys, who were able to obtain legal protection for the wells.

Our next visit was to be at a remote Bedouin village whom the PHG assists. The Bedouins, you may know, are a nomadic group who live in tents rather than houses. The problem was, this particular village was now surrounded by an Israeli military firing range [#4, firing sign], making the lives of these Bedouins even more precarious than they already were. Remember: this is in the West Bank, which technically (and legally) belongs to the Palestinian Authority, not the State of Israel. But remember that all of the West Bank is illegally occupied by the Israeli military. [#5, sign] (It's ironic that his sign makes it explicit that this is Palestinian territory. Whereas the other sign said, sorry, this belongs to the Israeli military.)

In order to get to the village, we had to disembark from our bus, and walk about a mile down a rocky, dusty road. [#6, group walking] After we had walked maybe 100 yards or so, we heard shouting behind us. We turned and saw four fully armed Israeli soldiers, waving at us to come back. [#7, army truck] "You are not allowed on this land," they told us. "It belongs to the Israeli military." Our bus driver, a Palestinian man who happened to speak modern Hebrew, explained to the soldiers why we were there. [#8, soldiers] (By the way, we weren't supposed to take pictures of them. I nervously took this one by holding my phone at my hip.) Our guide from PHG began making phone calls, including one to the "Governate," a branch of the Palestinian Authority. One hour later, the soldiers received the call we were waiting for, and finally, they told us we could continue. [#6, group walking]

[#9, tent] Here we are in one of the Bedouin tents, drinking strong Arabic coffee. (By the way, this tent was for the men only; the women were in another tent.) The leader of the village is explaining to us that this is what life is like for them every day: constantly at the whim of the Israeli military and their weaponry. Three times a month, the military forces them to leave their village for several days at a time, so they can conduct military exercises. The leader has a flock of 200 sheep [#11, sheep], and it's not so easy to just take them into the mountains for several days. (You may

have heard the Bedouins mentioned in the news recently. The Israeli military has been destroying a number of their villages.)

The next day, which was a Sunday, after attending a Lutheran church in the Old City of Jerusalem, we met with a Jewish Rabbi. [#12, rabbi] Like many current Israeli citizens, he was originally American, but moved to Israel after it was declared a Jewish State. He told us about his passion for Israel. In his view, the Jewish people are intended to be a beacon of the goodness and righteousness of God. And in order to be able to do that most fully and effectively, he said, they must have their own state. He told us about the centrality in Jewish faith of “ethical monotheism.” Which is a fancy way of talking about God’s desire for justice. And I thought, “right on, that’s the essence of my Christian faith!” So, I told him about our visit to the Bedouin village the day before. About the Palestinian farmers’ water sources being destroyed by the military. About the farmers being forced to leave their village and move into the mountains three times a month so the military can conduct training exercises. About their children losing limbs or even lives from unexploded ordinance. What are the ethics of that? I asked him. He didn’t have an answer. He seemed taken aback. As if he didn’t know that these kinds of things were actually happening. He eventually acknowledged that what I described to him may in fact be unethical, and wrong.

[#13, sheep] What does Advent look like in Israel-Palestine today? How might the words we heard this morning from the prophet Isaiah and the writer of Psalm 80 speak to those that live there—words which both Palestinian Christians and Israeli Jews would consider Scripture? [Isaiah 64:1-2] Who today is pleading with God to tear open the heavens and come down...to make his name known to his adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at his presence? Who today are the Lord’s adversaries?

[Psalm 80:1-2] Who today is asking the Shepherd of Israel to shine forth, to stir up his might, and come to save them? Keeping in mind that the “Israel” of Isaiah and the psalmist is something very different than the modern day State of Israel. [Psalm 80:4-7] Who today is asking God, “How long will you be angry with your people’s prayers? . . . You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

[Isaiah 64:5-9] And who today is or should be confessing their sin, saying “we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away”? Who, in Israel-Palestine today, is in need of restoration, and saving? And who is in need of forgiveness? Perhaps everyone, in their own ways?

Finally, what does Advent look like for us in the United States of America? Whose restoration and salvation are we pleading for? The Palestinian people’s? Israel’s? Our own, as we struggle mightily not just with the pandemic, but with racial injustice and political divisiveness? Whose forgiveness are we praying for—we who claim to care about justice, but who nevertheless support the Israeli military with \$3.8 billion a year? While meanwhile, we have plenty injustices of our own?

Please pray with me. “O come, thou Wisdom from on high, and order all things far and nigh. To us the path of knowledge show, and cause us in thy ways to go.” Amen.

Let’s sing our Advent hymn of response [O come, O come, Immanuel].