

Bethlehem Then and Now



Advent mini-meditations from Mennonite Church Manitoba's working group on Palestine and Israel.

Photo: Mural in the Shepherds' Field Chapel near Bethlehem

1. The angel's announcement and justice



Painting of the angel's visit to Mary, Church of the Annunciation, a prominent holy site and tourist attraction in Nazareth, Israel.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." --Mary, in Luke 1:46-47

As a young woman, Mary was so amazed that God had chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, that she sang this song of praise. Mary was from Nazareth, a humble Jewish village in the hinterlands of Galilee, on the margins of religious and political power. Like Bethlehem and Jerusalem, Nazareth was under the firm military control of the Roman Empire. Today, 2,000 years later, Nazareth is a bustling town in northern Israel, where Christians, Muslims, and Jews live side by side. But like Mary, its citizens experience the struggles of ethnic discrimination and inequality. At this time of year, Christians remember Mary's proclamation that God has "scattered the proud... and lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:51-52).

God of peace, at this time of year we rejoice in the coming of Jesus, our Messiah and Saviour. With Mary we hold to your promise of the day when the lowly will be lifted up, with equal dignity. Amen

2. The “city of David” and olive oil



Zatoun Olive oil is produced by West Bank farmers and marketed internationally as a fair trade reminder to pray and work for peace in Palestine and Israel. See: <https://zatoun.com/>

*Samuel took the horn of oil, and **anointed** [David].--1 Sam. 16:13*

The gospel of Luke tells how Mary and Joseph had to travel from their home in Nazareth to their ancestral village of Bethlehem, to be registered by the Roman occupiers of the land. Bethlehem was known as “the city of David,” where, a thousand years earlier, the prophet Samuel had anointed David with olive oil, to become king. The child Jesus was called “son of David” and “the anointed one.” Today, olive oil is the main agricultural product of the Bethlehem area. It is used for cooking, soap, and cosmetics. But many farmers have seen their olive orchards destroyed as Israel expands its West Bank settlements and extends the separation barrier in the Palestinian territories. One way we can draw attention to this injustice is to purchase Palestinian fair trade olive oil products at Ten Thousand Villages or CommonWord, remembering that the olive branch is also an international symbol of peace!

Lord, during this Advent we remember the olive growers of Palestine, along with other vulnerable farmers around the world, who experience loss and injustice. May your peace and mercy reign in our hearts and in our world. Amen

3. Traveling to Bethlehem



Part of the wall that separates Israel from the Palestinian territory of the West Bank.

All went to their own towns to be registered. --Luke 2:3

When Emperor Augustus decreed that the people of the land return to their ancestral towns to be registered for tax, Mary and Joseph journeyed from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem, a village just south of Jerusalem in the region of Judea---a three-day walk. It was an arduous journey. Mary was advanced in her pregnancy. The countryside was hilly and rocky, and the road rugged. Today, despite the conveniences of modern transportation, travel between Nazareth and Bethlehem is difficult for Israelis and Palestinians. Nazareth is in Israel, and Bethlehem is in the West Bank, a Palestinian territory that has been under the military occupation of Israel for 51 years. Israelis are barred from traveling in the West Bank, and Palestinians may enter Israel only with permits, which are often difficult to obtain. At numerous checkpoints at borders and on roads, Palestinian travelers often experience humiliation and fear.

God of justice, we recognize freedom of movement as a hallmark of human dignity. Hasten the day when all people, including Israelis and Palestinians, move freely within their own land without fear. Amen.

4. Shepherds and pastureland



Boy tending his sheep near Bethlehem, 2016.

In that region there were shepherds...keeping watch over their flock by night.” --Luke 2:8

The first people to learn about Jesus’ birth were the shepherds tending their sheep in the fields below Bethlehem. Shepherds were hard-working people who often experienced discrimination from the larger society. Today in the hills and valleys around Bethlehem, shepherds still tend their flocks, trying to maintain a livelihood that has sustained them for generations. But pastureland is diminishing as Israeli settlements continue to expand in the area and in other parts of the West Bank, occupied by Israel’s military since 1967. Violence, confiscation of pastureland for settlements, military installations, and enemy stereotypes feed the tension and suspicion that exists between Israelis and Palestinians.

Shepherd God, as we hear the angels’ promise of “peace on earth,” we hear your call to pray and work for peace and security for all people, including Jews, Christians, and Moslems living in the land of Jesus’ birth. Amen.

5. Magi, gifts, and tourism



[The wise men] offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.—
Matthew 2:11

At Christmas, we remember how the magi from far away followed the star to Bethlehem, where they paid homage to the Christ child. Their gifts inspire our own spirit of generosity in this season. Today, especially in December and January, thousands of foreigners come from all over the world to visit Bethlehem. They buy locally made gifts—olive-wood Nativity sets, olive oil soap, and glass dishware. Many people in Bethlehem depend on the souvenir industry for their livelihood. But in recent years, the economy has been depressed. The violence that sometimes erupts between Israelis and Palestinians has kept many tourists away. Israeli policies have hampered Palestinian entrepreneurship, resulting in the emigration of many business people. Since many business owners were Christian, the presence and witness of the church in the West Bank have likewise suffered.

God of giving and generosity, we hold in our hearts the people and the church in Palestine. In their loss and their vulnerability, may they cling to the hope promised by the birth of Jesus. Amen

6. King Herod and the children



Photos of families affected by military raids of West Bank homes. Over 700 Palestinian minors a year are held in Israeli prisons.

The Lord appeared to Joseph...and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt...for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him"-- Matthew 2:19-20

King Herod was so troubled by the magi's visit to the Christ child that he had all the baby boys of Bethlehem murdered. Joseph and Mary, however, escaped to Egypt with Jesus and stayed there until the danger had passed. Today, tourists can visit the Church of the Nativity and other Bethlehem sites associated with the birth of Jesus. But Bethlehem has also experienced violence in recent years. The sounds of gunfire and the threat of night raids cause children to fear. According to No Way to Treat a Child (www.nwttac.canada.dci-palestine.org/) hundreds of children each year are arrested by Israeli soldiers for stone-throwing and other acts of resistance. Many are held in detention without proper access to their parents. Meanwhile in Israel, Jewish children also grow up in fear, thinking that Palestinians hate them and are a threat to their security.

Lord, during this season of joy, we also remember the children living in Palestine and Israel and other conflict zones around the world. May they experience the security and safety promised by the Child of Bethlehem. Amen