

March 11, 2018 – 4th Sunday in Lent, Country Focus: Palestine
Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 3:14-21; Numbers 21:4-9

Part I My Time in Palestine *Emma Heidorn*

Good morning. I'm Emma – daughter of Dave and Liz, and occasional attendee of IPLC. I want to share with you all a bit about my experiences working and living in Palestine. In 2014, I packed up a duffel bag, booked a one-way flight to Tel Aviv and took an incredible leap of faith. Wanting to travel in the Middle East, learn more Arabic, and have a grand and romanticized adventure, I signed up for a 3-month teaching gig in Nablus, a city in the north of the West Bank of Palestine. I knew very little about Israel, Palestine, the conflict, the occupation or any of the history of the place – except, really, for Sunday school bible stories. My Arabic was sufficient for ordering a coffee, and little else. Yet, I had very few other life plans and figured myself ready for anything.

Three months turned into two years, and it is very difficult to describe the effect this place called Palestine had on me. But, I will try.

The Palestine we see in the news is full of fighting, riots, tanks, stone-throwing and powerful men sitting in fruitless peace meetings. Those images may be true, but they are not the whole picture. Palestine is also crowded markets, colorful cities, endless hills, kids walking to school, a falafel shop on every corner, picking olives in September, 4am calls to prayer, taxi drivers yelling at each other warmly, Friday afternoon picnics with family (and families that adopt lonely Americans), the best coffee in the world and the most generous people I have ever met. Nablus very quickly became a home for me. Moving through the city felt – and still feels – like second nature. I taught two years of rambunctious and outrageous 2nd graders who never failed to make me laugh (and, admittedly, cry – they could be brutal). I directed two school musicals – Willy Wonka and Annie. I still consider it my life's greatest achievement to have gotten a cast of thirty 4th, 5th and 6th grade second-language learners to dance in unison. I became a part of a truly beautiful community of teachers and learners, Americans and Palestinians.

I also began to understand the incredible effect the conflict was having on my students and their mental health. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank is present and felt at every moment. During school hours, Israeli jets drop sound bombs over the city. During recess, jets fly low and loud. Students' family members are arrested by Israeli forces. For the first three months, I taught 3rd through 8th grade girls after school in a village outside of Nablus. On some days, the girls who lived on the edge of the village, next to the Israeli settlement, were too afraid to come to class because Israeli soldiers decided to patrol the path just outside their homes that day. To travel anywhere in the West Bank, every Palestinian car must go through a series of checkpoints and it was common for soldiers to close the checkpoints in and out of the city. Imagine this being your reality. Imagine this being your childhood.

So, knowing that I wanted to dedicate my work to my students and their experiences, I decided to return to Chicago to study social work. This past summer, as part of my fieldwork, I returned to Palestine for three months and I worked with a YMCA program in Bethlehem which provides mental health and rehabilitation services to Palestinians affected by the violence in various ways – children who had spent time in Israeli prisons, families who had lost loved ones, individuals injured in conflict. For the most part, I was a bystander, watching and learning. And, when I think about people doing God's work – work so crucial, emotionally exhausting and entirely selfless – I think of the Palestinian social workers I shadowed in the field.

I became close with one colleague named Issa, a very kind and very goofy man. Issa constantly had a cigarette in hand, pontificating in broken English about philosophy, God (he is a Christian) and his love of Oprah. I would follow him through refugee camps and villages in and around Bethlehem – Aida, Dheisheh, Tuqua, Beit Sahour - on house visits, emergency interventions, meetings with clients. One day, Issa and I visited a mother in Dheisheh camp who had just lost her son during an IDF raid. He was 14. Afterward, in the taxi-ride back to the office – myself feeling incredibly exhausted and emotional – I asked Issa how he handles this work. He said, very simply and seriously, “This work is my resistance.”

While living in Nablus, I also became friends with a woman named Nadeen. She is in her 80s, and was born in Nablus – before Israel became Israel and the conflict became a conflict. My friends and I would sit with her on her porch, drinking coffee, eating cake and listening to her stories for hours. She lives at the bottom of a street called Rafidiya, and walks – slowly but surely – up the street to her church every Sunday. She has never missed a Sunday, throughout war, occupation and two Intifadas (uprisings). And, as she walks up the hill to her church, the call to prayer sounds and the city’s Muslims move toward their mosques or lay down their prayer rugs toward Mecca. This movement towards church, toward the masjid, toward fellow faith-holders, toward God, toward Allah - it still mesmerizes me. Despite everything, people have faith.

I will openly admit that I constantly question my faith in God, something I am sure will be a life-long struggle. Yet, the people I have worked with, the children I have taught and everyone I have learned from in Palestine have shown me the incredible beauty of resiliency, of resistance, and of finding and holding faith amidst darkness. And, I feel incredibly lucky to have met them.

Part II God Loved the World

Pastor Erin Bouman

I was so glad that today, Girl Scout Sunday, our special Lenten guest speaker was a young woman. I’m sure Emma’s parents can remember when she was the age of our Scouts. Now listen to her. Thank you Emma, for sharing your experiences with us today. This Lenten focus on the church around the world is spearheaded by our Sunday School. If you’ve happened to see the impressive, country-specific take home sheets that the Sunday School children get each week you may have seen that there is Bible verse listed at the top, a theme verse for the series. Even if you haven’t seen the sheets, you just might know that verse, it’s perhaps the most famous verse in the entire Bible, and it’s in today’s gospel reading: John 3:16: “God so loved the world...”

It’s a well-known verse, but the context in which it occurs may not be. It may have even sounded a little odd, hearing the verses before it, John 3:14: Why is Jesus talking about lifting up snakes in the wilderness? Today’s first reading offers some contextual background for Jesus’ allusion: God had led the people of Israel out of Egypt, God had rescued them from bondage—but it wasn’t all that long before the new place they were seemed pretty bad, too. You have to admire the thoroughness of their wilderness complaints, “There’s no food here,” they say. “And we hate it, the food, that we have complained we don’t have.”

We could laugh at this—if we didn’t also find ourselves saying similar things. We could laugh, if we didn’t also find ourselves facing critical dangers—threat of and actual death—because of our own foolishness. We could laugh—if we weren’t weeping at all that perishes around us, and in us, because of us. The text says the Lord sent the poisonous snakes. People say things like that when the pain of life is too great to bear. People say things like that when

forces greater than ourselves conspire, with us, against ourselves; when freedom is a wilderness; when we set out on emancipation by way of impatience, inconsistency, inconstancy, complaint.

We know that story: we know the bewilderment of being human. We know that wilderness story—as did the first person who ever heard John 3:16. That person was a teacher of Israel. That famous verse takes place in the middle of a conversation that Jesus has with someone well-versed in the Jewish history, a history in which God saved a people in need of yet more saving: people who were hungry and ill; people who were lost and confused, people who were irritated and irritating, people who were miserable with life and desperate for more of it.

That's who God saved, and saves. What's what we hear in John 3:16, that salvation is for that kind of people, for the kind of people that we all are. That particularly Jewish wilderness story—of a sign of death, lifted high—becomes universal in the cross, in the Christ, for this reason: love. For God so loves Israel and Palestine, Hungary and Swaziland, China and Japan, and the United States, and so much more. God so loved the world.