

Then and Now

Adult Advocacy Advent 2006

Why do advocacy during Advent?

During Advent we tend to picture the Bethlehem of Jesus' time. We see an inn with no vacancies and a cozy cave where gentle, warm animals share their quaint eating trough with Jesus. The scene sparkles with our desire for a familiar Christmas setting 'with hearts all aglow.'

I visited Bethlehem in June, 2004 with both Mennonite Central Committee and Christian Peacemaker Teams. Towering walls and militarized fences now encircle Bethlehem, turning the 4,000-year-old city into a virtual prison for its 160,000 Palestinian citizens—both Christian and Muslim. As in Mary and Joseph's time, the land is occupied and registration with an occupying government is a constant requirement.

I stayed overnight in a refugee camp, which is actually a permanent city housing thousands of people piled on top of each other, with one entrance and very little sunlight.

Bethlehem, which lies in the West Bank, will soon have only three gates to the outside world, all controlled by the Israeli army. I could travel freely on a U.S. passport; the Christian community mediators I visited could not go to Jerusalem even to celebrate Easter. During Advent 2005 one mediator sent a compelling visual of his life: the three wise men trying to dig under the wall to follow the star to baby Jesus. Who wants to hear this truth at Christmas?

We do, if we have chosen to follow the Jesus whose birth terrified Herod, whose words berated the Pharisees, who cleaned out a house of worship because it reeked of injustice. We do, if we choose to worship a risen king, not a myth of a silent night. We do, if we choose to love as Jesus came to teach us to love.

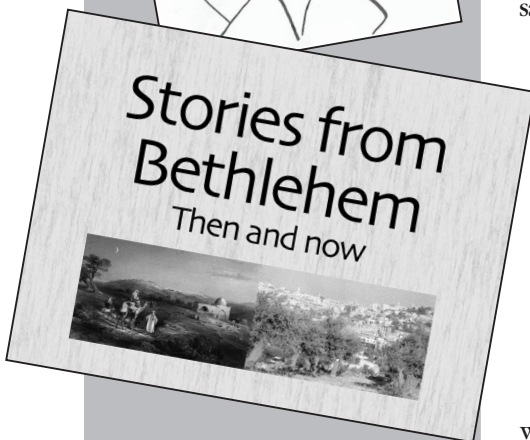
This advent, through children's "Then and Now" PowerPoints and your own advocacy, we invite you to join us as we learn about people who lived when Jesus was born and who live in Bethlehem today. We invite you to worship a risen Christ, who cares how we live and worship and who invites us to do justice, especially during our cozy season of Advent.

Unemployment is 60% in Bethlehem and many people have turned to crafts to earn desperately needed income for their families. Your congregation and/or individual families might choose to purchase olive wood crèche sets from Ten Thousand Villages, www.tenthousandvillages.com, adding one piece each Advent Sunday. Perhaps the stories of carpenters who can't sell their wares, shepherds separated from their sheep and children living without peace will return each year when the crèche set comes out for advent.

May Christ bless you with the need to tell the whole story this Advent.

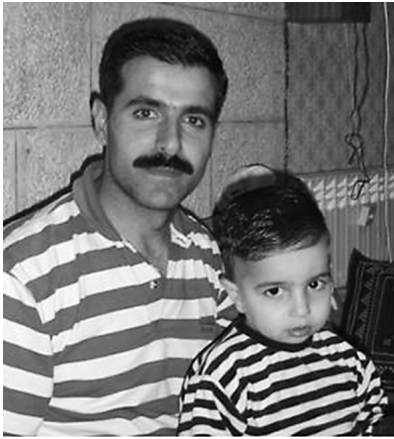


Susan Mark Landis, peace advocate, Mennonite Church USA



Profile:

A Palestinian Olive Wood Artisan, Issa Mousleh



Beit Sahour, a town inside the Bethlehem district, is historically known as the place where the angel appeared to the shepherds, telling them to go up to Bethlehem and see the miracle of the first Christmas. In fact, Beit Sahour means, “House of Vigilance,” stemming from the night watch of the shepherds.

Vigilant describes the work and life of Ten Thousand Village olive wood producer and Palestinian Christian, Issa Mousleh. “Issa” is an Arabic name that means “Jesus.” Like Jesus, Issa became a carpenter just like his father. Issa began working with olive wood alongside his mother and sisters when he was just eleven years old. Today Issa is the father of three boys of his own and works hard to carry on the family business.

Also like Jesus, Issa lives under foreign occupation of his homeland. Thus, the political situation of his community is inevitably tied to the economic situation of Palestine. The general unemployment rate falls between 60-70% and continues to take its toll on the community. For someone like Issa, stable work in the face of such economic hardship is a gift.

But the work is not just about making money. Rather Issa sees it as an opportunity to support people in his community. The benefits of his relationship with Ten Thousand Villages extend well beyond his own family to the people from whom he purchases raw materials for his carvings and the workers he pays.

When talking about his work with Ten Thousand Villages, Issa describes himself as “spoiled.” He remarks that the working relationship, regularity of orders, and dependable payments make him wish that the other buyers that he works with would operate similarly. He often experiences difficulties working with those customers who cannot pay their debts on time, waiting months for payments. However, he feels better off than most local artisans, their families and the factories that produce their products.

Issa feels that the occupation of Palestine is not simply about land, material or money, but about instilling fear into the minds of people and killing the spirit between them. Issa feels that as a Christian he cannot hate anyone and declares that the spirit of Jesus, of Christmas, is the true power against any occupier.

Issa’s message to North American buyers: “I’m happy that the Holy Land means something to you still. The Christmas spirit is important when you are happy to buy and give these products from Beit Sahour. I am happy to feed that spirit.”



You may buy olive wood crafts at your local Ten Thousand Villages shop or on the web:

www.tenthousandvillages.com



Prayer request

- The complicated situation of the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians needs our prayers. As you hear news from the area, pray for all people involved, keeping justice and peace central. Pray for your own understanding as you learn both history and current relationships.
- Rev. Naim Ateek, who founded Sabeel (see below), asks that we support Palestinian Christians through prayer. “We no longer have hope,” he sighed to a Christian Peacemaker Team delegation. “You must be our hope, and pray that hope returns to us.”

Advocacy Suggestions

*Find more prayers, information and resources on the web:
www.MennoniteUSA.org/peace*

1. Invest in the severely depressed Palestinian economy by purchasing gifts produced by Palestinian artisans at Ten Thousand Villages <http://www.tenthousandvillages.com/> or by ordering other products through Open Bethlehem, <http://www.openbethlehem.org/>
2. Write letters to your national legislators, urging an approach to the Middle East conflict which will build peace and security for all peoples.
3. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper requesting a balanced perspective on its Middle East coverage, and especially urging that longstanding injustices be addressed. For suggestions on letter writing, see <http://www.mcc.org/us/washington/advocacy.html>
4. Become a member of the Friends of Sabeel. Sabeel is a grassroots and ecumenical Palestinian center which promotes theological reflection and nonviolent action for a just peace in the Middle East. www.sabeel.org, www.sabeel.ca and www.fosna.org.
5. Learn about and support the work of Zochrot. Zochrot is a grassroots Israeli organization which educates Israeli society about how the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 impacted Palestinian life. Zochrot encourages the remembrance and acknowledgement of past injustices, as a necessary step towards the building of a society where Israelis and Palestinians live alongside one another in peace. <http://www.nakbainhebrew.org/index.php?lang=english>
6. Learn to know people in your community—Jews, Christians and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians—who have a close connection to Israel and Palestine. Listen to their stories. Seek out a variety of perspectives.
7. Directly support the people of Bethlehem through the Shepherd Society of the Bethlehem Bible College. The society provides both urgent and long-term development aid for families, including family partnering. See Resources on their web site www.bethlehembiblecollege.edu.
8. Participate in a learning tour or delegation to the Middle East. Mennonite Church, Mennonite Central Committee and Christian Peacemaker Teams provide regular opportunities for North Americans who wish to deepen their understanding of the region.
9. Organize a Middle East study group that meets to learn about the history and present context of Israel and Palestine.
10. Learn about Christian Zionism in North America and the impact it is having on the Middle East. Find out how Palestinian Christians experience this theology.



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