

Nothing is Not Complex
A Pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine
June 2013 | with The Telos Group
Reflections by Rev. Bill Haley

Blogging Israel/Palestine

In brief, this Friday I'm heading off to Israel/Palestine co-leading as chaplain a strange pilgrimage of sorts, and will be blogging as much as I'm able, and would love for you to follow along as you're able at [Coracle's blog](#). That's the short story, here's the back story.

A while back I sent out an email about how Coracle is about **spiritual formation AND Kingdom action**. In fact, we're all about the mutually shaping power and need of both of these phrases, held together. This pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine is a sweet spot for Coracle for it so clearly involves both.

This trip, in partnership with [The Telos Group](#), is designed to expose participants to the realities of those living in the Holy Land—Israelis and Palestinians equally—in an attempt to move beyond overly simplistic answers (knee-jerk Zionism or knee-jerk anti-Israelism) to one of the most complex political situations in the world, one that has profound human and individual consequences. Ever since my first trip there in 1995, I've sought solutions that are 'pro-human', and Telos is all about that, so we're delighted to be partnering together. And I'm delighted to be doing this with a dear friend, Todd Deatherage.

But it's also a pilgrimage in the sense of "a journey with God, to find God, together." I'll be offering spiritual reflections along the way for the group, leading our daily prayers, offering the Eucharist, and helping our little band keep attentive to God while we see some of the harder realities in God's world. And I'll be writing...

Auschwitz, Amsterdam, Alissar, and the Land

By virtue of growing up around those committed to Dispensational theology, into my twenties I had a pretty simple view of the Holy Land that was formed simply by breathing the air. I'm not claiming they're truths, but it went something like this:

- The Jewish people who live in the State of Israel are entitled to this land, to live on it exclusive of others, because God gave it to them in the first place.
- The creation of the State of Israel was a really handy way for the Christian God to bring the Jews 'back to the land' in order to fulfill apocalyptic prophecy which is but within a generation away from being realized. The creation of the State of Israel was important politically, but much more so religiously, heralding the beginning some how of the ending.

- For those who lived in the Holy Land prior to the creation of the State of Israel, if there *were* actually that many...well, that's too bad for them, but I guess they're Muslim anyways so maybe they'd be more content in a more Islamic country. The Jews were just being given back what was theirs in the first place, too bad for those whose ancestors took it from them.
- American support—politically and militarily—of Israel was really important because the Jews staying on the land was really important to God's plan for the second coming of Christ, so we must support Israel any way we can and any way they want.

I didn't really have any reason to think other than this, or differently than this.

But then I began to travel, first to Europe, and to meet people. And things became more painful, and more complex. And then I traveled to the Land itself—the Holy Land, the Promised Land, Land of Jesus, Land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, contested Land. And things became much more painful and much much more complex.

So a few unadorned memories of what began to shape my thoughts on the Middle East, specifically Israel and Palestine.

1989—Auschwitz, Poland: Seeing this holy, awful place was when the horror of the Holocaust landed. Rooms with piles of human hair, greyed by Zyklon B. Rooms with piles of eyeglasses. Rooms with piles of prosthetic limbs. It created in me a visceral reaction wanting defense and protection of the Jewish people, a sense that has never gone away and which is not hard to tap into.

1994—Amsterdam: I went to the house of beautiful teenaged girl, murdered, Anne Frank. I climbed inside the famous Hiding Place of the 'righteous Gentile' Corrie Ten Boom, whose family was slaughtered. I'll never forget the quiet, unadorned memorial somewhere in the city that had a plaque of few words and simple statistics that said it all: In 1939, there were 140,000 Jews living in Holland, in 1945 there were 35,000 left.

1994—Alissar in Amsterdam: I had never actually met a Palestinian until I met Alissar at Youth With A Mission. And I was shocked to learn that she was a Christian, and that many Palestinians were Christians. And I also heard first hand of when she was a little girl how her family was forced from their home and land that had been in their family for generations, and how she was not allowed to return to her own homeland, where she grew up, her own homeland. In words from my journal then, "She is a wonderful woman, with much pain in her heart. She cannot go back to Palestine, for she was kicked out, along with the rest of the Palestinians." And thus I saw that there was another side to this story, and that the story was not ultimately about religion, but actual humans.

1995—Jerusalem and Israel and the West Bank: Six weeks. Seeing the plight of the Palestinians for the first time, and not even as up close as I could have but what I saw was outrageous enough, crippling. Seeing the real threats to Israel from all sides—Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iran, from within ones own borders. And seeing at Yad Vashem the letter from the United States during World War II denying entry to Jews fleeing Hitler.

I walked away from those experiences way back then, almost 18 years ago to the day, with a position that I still affirm and have carried with me ever since: That the true solutions to this holy place bitterly contested for millennia will be honestly pro-Israeli AND pro-Palestinian, simply pro-Human. From my journal in 1995, "This is about treating people fairly and as humans"—Jews and Palestinians, Israelis and Christians, Muslims and Arabs all. Simplistic to be sure.

For this trip then, this pilgrimage, I've got three questions I'm hoping for more clarity on, among other to be sure that will come up along the way.

- 1) What's the best way forward in this place that is indeed most pro-Human and honors the stories and concerns that are all very real for the people who live here?
- 2) What are the steps in that direction?
- 3) What then is the called for action?

Dale Hanson Bourke has written a supremely helpful primer on these things, called "[The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](#)". In it she introduces us to Robi, who will have the last word in this post. Dale writes, "One of my first encounters was with an Israeli woman named Robi Damelin who had lost her son David in the conflict. Now part of an organization that brings together Palestinians and Israelis that have lost family members, Robi advises well-meaning people around the world: 'Don't be pro-Israeli. Don't be pro-Palestinian. Be pro-peace...'" This is the mission of [The Telos Group](#), with whom I'm with, and I couldn't be more glad about that.

Yes, pro-Human. Pro-Imago Dei, in each and every one.

On Pilgrimage Wherever We Are

"Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion." (Psalm 84.5,7, NIV)

It's common for folks to come to the Holy Land to Israel/Palestine for spiritual purposes, and common for folks to go for humanitarian purposes. It's much less common for folks to go for those two reasons at the same time. And so this is a strange pilgrimage, and 'pilgrimage' is the right word.

Very simply, a pilgrimage is a journey undertaken for spiritual purposes, as I like to put it, "a journey with God, to meet God, together." What I love about this particular trip is that while we'll journey with our hearts wide open to the reality of God, we'll also journey with our eyes wide open to the reality of God's world, beautiful and very broken as it is, 'bloody-ing' as it can be.

NT Wright has written a book specifically on pilgrimage, and even more specifically on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, called [The Way of the Lord](#) (also available at Hearts and Minds Books). He speaks of three purposes of pilgrimage: to teach us, so that we can pray, and a way of discipleship. And he writes,

"When we go on pilgrimage today, we do not go in order to comment on or criticize other people for their inability to solve political problems. God knows we can't solve our own, which are much smaller and less rooted in history. Of course, we will grieve over injustice, oppression, and violence wherever it occurs and whoever instigates it; but in a highly complex situation it behoves us to go with our eyes and ears open, ready to learn rather than to condemn. But as pilgrims, we go above all, to pray..."

"Our vocation as Christians includes the vocation to be in prayer at the place where the world is in pain. We are to stand or kneel at the place where the world, particularly our brother and sister

Christians, are in pain and need... We are called, in other words, to become in ourselves places where the living, loving and grieving God can be present at the places of in pain in his world and among his children. We are called to discover the other side of pilgrimage: not only to go somewhere else to find God in a new way, but to go somewhere else *to bring God in a new way to that place.*”

The heart of Jesuit spirituality via St. Ignatius is “finding God in all things”. Not just finding God in the easy and pleasant things, but even and perhaps especially in the hard and painful things. This morning in Jerusalem it’s been a gift to find God at The American Colony Hotel, in the comfort of a clean room and good food and lovely gardens that foreshadow the day when heaven and earth are one and people and earth live in mutual care to the benefit of both. It will be easy to find God in the Eucharist in a few moments at St. George’s Anglican Cathedral, and then easy to find him while praying the Stations of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa this afternoon. Then tomorrow we will go to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial of Israel. And soon we’ll find ourselves in a Palestinian refuge in Nablus. And we’ll find God in these places too, grieving as we grieve. And in all these places we’ll pray, praying for ourselves, for this place, for these people, for our world.

In preparing for this journey I wrote to the other members of this group, my fellow pilgrims, “Let’s approach our approaching trip as journey with God, expectant for God then watchful and aware and attentive. I’m sure none of us has any idea how God will actually meet us. So, we’ll pray, and we’ll see! Let us each conscientiously be ‘opening to God and inviting him in’ as we approach starting our trip. This can be as simple as ‘God, whatever you want to do in me on this trip...do it.’”

A person doesn’t have to go to Jerusalem to be on pilgrimage, or to live conscientiously open to God and inviting him in. One doesn’t have to go to the Middle East to be in prayer in the places where the world is in pain. One doesn’t have to come to the Holy Land to discover the other side of pilgrimage and bring God in a new way to whichever place you find yourself in.

As we’re over here on pilgrimage, how can wherever you are today be a place of pilgrimage for you?

A Heart So Full It Might Break

How much can a heart hold? It would be one thing if the only potent thing in a day were sorrow, or if the only potent thing in a day was wonder...but both is hard to do in a day. And yet, when you spend a morning in the Israeli memorial, Yad Vashem, and the afternoon on the Mount of Olives and Garden of Gethsemane, that’s deep grief and great awe come together. Mix in learning about contemporary life in Israel with real people of the land, in this case Jews, to start the day and finish the day, that’s quite a potent mix indeed. Add to this my first glimpse of the Separation Barrier, a concrete wall 28 feet tall which when done will stretch 441 miles, dividing the land and separating peoples. All this combines into It’s a powerful potion that reminds me why I love this land Israel so much, and her people, all of them.

The Mount of Olives is a holy place, evidenced by the Jewish tombs, and Christian, and Muslim, that are a dominant feature from the hillside itself into the Kidron Valley and right up to the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. We started at the top, at Bethphage, overlooking Bethany (cut off by the barrier

that wasn't there when I was first here 18 years ago) and beyond that into the wilderness that leads down to the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea. Bethany, where Jesus rested his head at the home of Mary and Martha, and where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Bethphage, the highpoint on the Mount of Olives before descending into Jerusalem was where Jesus said to his disciples, "Go fetch me a donkey" and began his Triumphal Entry. We reflected there on Jesus the man and Jesus the Messiah, and his conscientious willingness to fulfill his vocation to the very end, reading Matthew 21.

Then we walked down the hillside, down a path that likely would have been the one used by Jesus himself on his way into Jerusalem, stopping at the Church of Dominus Flevit ('the Lord wept' in Latin) where he is said to have stopped and wept over Jerusalem, longing that her people would "know the things that make for peace" (Luke 19). It's not hard to imagine Jesus still weeping for this city, still longing.

Then further down to the Garden of Gethsemane. "Father, not my will but yours be done". And then back up the Mount of Olives up to a church that early as the 4th century was thought to be the site of Jesus' ascension. Today we'll go to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher which fills in the story between the Garden and the Mount.

The most obvious feeling one gets when taking a walk like this, the most simple, and at the same time the most profound, is "Jesus was real...this is where he walked. Had I been here 2000 years ago, I would have seen him." As St. John said of Jesus: we heard him, we have seen him with our own eyes, we looked up on him, and have touched him. (1 John 1.1)

The dominant word so far ringing in my heart in Jerusalem is "Incarnation".

Incarnation into what? Into a world of sin and blood and horror and hell. The preferred Hebrew word for the Holocaust is "Shoah", which means 'catastrophe'. The new museum opened in 2005, and it is a stunning place for what it is, how it is designed, and what it memorializes. There's too much to write about, and it's too soon. I thought I knew a little bit about the Holocaust, but this visit only made me realize how little I actually know. More importantly, for as much (and it is much) deep grief and overpowering sorrow I felt on my visit to Auschwitz 25 years ago and felt again and again many times since, it is nothing compared to grief and sorrow to actually be felt. One holds on like a lifeline to some of the last words of Betsy Ten Boom, shared with her sister Corrie before dying in the Ravensbruck concentration camp at the end of 1944, "Corrie, you must live, and tell the world that God's love is deeper than this evil."

Betsy was named by Israel (along with Corrie and her father) as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations", non-Jews who helped save Jewish lives during World War II. They are commemorated in the gardens at Yad Vashem with a tree, and their number is now close to 25,000. What makes a "Righteous Among the Nation"? It is simple. It is non-Jew who helped save the life of one Jew during the Holocaust. Just one life. Just one person. Because each and every person has infinite value, every individual man, woman, or child matters. Each one of the 6 million murdered in the Holocaust. Each one alive today.

I left thinking, "I want to be a righteous among the nations", meaning, I want to be one who loves the people, the *ones*, I encounter, with sacrificial love and courage, whatever that may mean.

At the end of the day, we shared a lovely dinner with 5 orthodox Jews, talking about many things. I got to interact much with Debbie and Yeshua, American Jews who have settled in Israel. I said to them, holding the tears back while reflecting on a remarkable day and 25 years of a heart broken by the Holocaust, "For many years and still today I'm just so relieved that the State of Israel exists."

Later in the conversation, after talking about Jewish life here and some theology and Palestinians and faith and much more besides, I said, “Nothing here is not complex.” To which Yeshua simply replied, “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Today we meet with a Muslim sheik....

Palestine and Bethlehem

This past Monday on this strange pilgrimage, we were exposed to the perspectives of some of the Jews living in Jerusalem. Tuesday, we were exposed to the perspectives of some Palestinians living in Jerusalem and the West Bank. We saw their realities through several stories personally told, a driving tour of Jerusalem with a lecture explaining what we were seeing, and a site visit in the West Bank just outside Bethlehem. More on that later.

Even simple travel in the Holy Land brings a mixture of emotions. You’re on your way to see the site of the greatest event in human history, the incarnation of the very creator of this world, but to get to it, you have skirt then go through a 28 foot high concrete wall, called the Security Wall by Israelis who put it there and the Separation Barrier by the Palestinians who live there. In that I haven’t been here since 1995, before the second Palestinian Intifadah, I expected a landscape changed by Israeli settlements and this wall, and indeed the landscape is altered in a way that seems to cement permanent division between Israelis and Palestians and between Palestinians and themselves.

So at site of the Jesus’ birth, the Church of the Nativity, one at the same time thanks God for sending Jesus and pleads for the Prince of Peace to bring peace, and justice, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. Even while adjusting to that evidence however (no small emotional feat), there are some signs of hope, even if the signs themselves who speak don’t feel all that hopeful. Those speaking signs are some Palestinian Christians who we met.

In the afternoon we met with [Rev. Mitri Raheb](#), pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church, aptly named. Beyond the normal pastoral activities one would expect, he has also spearheaded a remarkable cultural resurgence in Bethlehem, so lunch with him was held in restaurant that doubles as an art gallery in a cultural center run by the church that was made possible by a grant from the Government of Finland. In Mitri’s words, “Around here, too much politics, too much religion, not enough culture.” To enable folks in the United States to be constructively engaged in Palestinian issues and specifically Bethlehem, Mitri started [Bright Stars of Bethlehem](#).

Earlier we had met with [Sami Awad](#) of The Holy Land Trust. His life is both normal and abnormal. The tragic story of his own family’s experience in the Old City in 1948 is not uncommon, including displacement and the death of his grandfather, who was shot by an Israeli sniper while raising a white flag on the roof of his home. And his mother resettled in Bethlehem to raise 7 children.

What is different about Sami is the heritage he inherits from his family of peacemaking and non-violence. His own mother forbade the family from pursuing information on who it was who shot her husband for fear of revenge taking, for her commitment to pacifism arose from her conviction that peacemaking is the greatest thing you can do as a Christian.

And then Sami’s uncle, Mubarak Awad, often called “the Arab Ghandi”. His story is briefly told [here](#), but in short throughout the 70s and 80s Mubarak Awad was Palestine’s leading voice and activist for non-violent resistance in the tradition of Martin Luther King, Mahatma Ghandi, and of course Jesus. What is too sad to contemplate and hard to explain is why then in 1987 Mubarak was arrested and

deported from the Holy Land, never allowed to return. But he was, and since then and even now is a professor at American University.

Sami wondered why one peace activist committed to non-violence would inspire such a response from such a powerful country, and he set off down the path of his grandmother and uncle.

Fast forward some years, and Sami's own commitment to non-violence has resulted in the [Holy Land Trust](#), a remarkable organization. In their own words, "Through a commitment to the principles of nonviolence, Holy Land Trust aspires to strengthen and empower the peoples of the Holy Land to engage in spiritual, pragmatic and strategic paths that will end all forms of oppression. We create the space for the healing of the historic wounds in order to transform communities and build a future that makes the Holy Land a global model for understanding, respect, justice, equality and peace." Through organizing activities and programs around their core values—Nonviolence, Leadership, and Healing & Transformation—Holy Land Trust is a beacon of light in beautiful city with a dark story with darkening skies.

Not only did I appreciate their commitment to activism, but there is also a deep commitment to contemplation, that is, the spiritual practices that uphold tangible engagement. So there is an entire room, and training, devoted to silence and meditation and other interior spiritual disciplines.

Sami was asked by one of the members of our group what he thought would be the best thing that could come of our visit. He told us the worst thing that could come when it comes to experiencing Israel and Palestine like we are. He said, "The worst thing that could happen on this trip is for you to leave biased in one direction or the other." A hard trick to pull off, but a very worthy goal, and more than worthy, critically important.

It's the purpose of these trips sponsored by The Telos Group, to enable other to land where they have, to be ["genuinely pro-Israeli, pro-Palestinian, pro-American, and pro-peace, all at the same time."](#) That's where I've been for a long time and trying to stay, sometimes in spite of what I'm seeing on this trip, in all directions. It's not easy.

I've Not Been Here Before

I came to the Holy Land first in 1995, but I've not here before.

Then it was for six weeks of study, first an Old Testament course focusing on the Jews and then a course on Jesus' Palestine and the Gospels. We had an early lecture or two on contemporary (for 1995) issues, and then for the rest of the time we focused on what we were there for: Biblical study. And it was fantastic.

The purpose of this trip is in significant part to see the contemporary issues (for 2013), and it's a completely different landscape, literally and figuratively, than I knew existed. Figuratively, I had a vague, remnant sense of some of the dynamics and realities in the non-flannel graph Israel, but they were nothing compared to the reality that is here, especially since the Second Intifada of 2000-2007 and especially since the failure of peace talks since then. And literally, with the settlements and the wall and population increase, the actual landscape here is different than I've seen before.

So, this is my first trip to Israel, for the second time.

A High Wire Act In High Winds

We've seen the pictures of someone crossing Niagara Falls on a tightrope, or crossing between two skyscrapers in the same way. That's never easy, especially when swirling winds seek to blow you in either direction. When the wind blows from one side, the thing to do is to conscientiously compensate by leaning back the other way.

If you're in the Holy Land trying to be pro-human and pro-peace, and we are, this is a constant effort, especially on a day like today. Today (Thursday) we visited first with Jewish settlers in Shiloh, and immediately from there to the Balata Refugee Camp in Nablus. These are about the two most extreme situations in this conflict, evidenced as easily by how this region is referred to by its name. One perspective calls this part of the land "Judea and Samaria" and the other calls it "the West Bank and Palestine", and both perspectives are compelling.

Visiting with the settlers (4 Americans and 1 Israeli) was like visiting Northern California in set-up and vibe. It was impressive and lovely, and built with hard effort under difficult circumstances. The American Jews have been in Israel for over two decades, in Shiloh itself for a little less. One said they came "with our bodies to make a difference and to make a statement". The statement is not hard to parse: this is the land of the Jews in the State of Israel, as it was, ought to be, and will be. The feeling for them has been one of 'coming home'

They've created a beautiful life here, lived in a constant state of being under actual threat or at least legitimate fear of threat. Not to mention having stones thrown at their cars or being shot at during the Second Intifada between 2000 and 2007 and fearing suicide bombers (780 Israelis were killed by those bombs in that time...no one here was not effected), just two years some Palestinian youths from not too far from here entered one of the settlements not too far from here under the cover of night and stabbed to death a whole Jewish family in their sleep, including a 3 month old baby.

It was not hard to empathize with these settlers. One came for and has experienced the clean-aided freedom to "Be Jewish". That's not hard to appreciate and even applaud. Another said, "My children are able to read their Bible in it's native tongue". That too is deeply understandable and laudable.

The most striking sentiment in contrast to every Palestinian we've met was not only optimism on the part of these Israelis, but excited hope. In the words, deep from the heart, of one of the settler's, "Israel is a great country and we've got a great future."

We got in the bus and traveled for a few short minutes to Nablus, one of the few areas in Israel that is under 'complete' control of the Palestinians both for civic administration and security. In the heart of it is the Balata Refugee Camp, administered by the UN as it has been since just after the war in 1948. We met with Mahmoud, who runs the Jaffa Cultural Center. Why is it named this, a reference to a coastal town in the middle of Judean mountains? Because Mahmoud's family was relocated from Jaffa in 1948, a place he hopes to return to but has no expectation of ever being able to. Mahmoud was born in Balata.

After that war, the UN set up refuge camps across the West Bank, a simple 1 kilometer square. When this one started, it was 5000 Palestinians living in tents. When it became clear the camps were not going to go away anytime soon, permanent houses began to be built, along with some infrastructure improvements. Now there are 28,000 people living in Balata, in that same 1 kilometer square. This percentage is not unlike the larger statistic of the crisis and question of the Palestinian question of refugees. In 1948 there were 750,000 of them who ended up in Palestine, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. Now, there are over 5 million. Kids happen.

The current situation is grim. 80% of the people in Balata live under the poverty line. 60% of the people living here are under the age of 18. There's a current unemployment rate of 45%. It's no wonder that under these conditions hope is constricted, killed, and turned into hatred that then manifests itself in violence to others or to one's self. Recently there's been a sharp rise in Balata of suicides among teenagers.

Both Intifadas started in Balata. Many suicide bombers have come from here. And the Israeli crackdown here has been sharp (during the Second Intifada 246 Palestinians from this one camp were killed) and at times prolonged. The cycle of violence and poverty is not hard to see.

It is encouraging to see the work of the Jaffa Cultural Center with its arts, athletics, and education programs for the people of Balata and especially the youth. They provide some counseling and psychological help as well. But their good work is pretty slim in comparison to the larger situation and its trajectory. Mahmoud said that in the last 6 or 7 years things are getting worse and going downhill. In his words, "What's going to happen I don't know, but I do know it's going to get worse and will explode. But I don't know when."

We closed our day with one of more beautiful and hopeful things we've seen in the West Bank, a visit to the village of Taybeh to see the [Taybeh Brewing Company](#) which, against all odds, has stayed in business through the many years of so much conflict. Like most of the rest of the town, its founders, two brothers who returned to Palestine from Boston, are Christians. Their business as well as civic leadership has changed a town, such that it feels like a place of shalom.

In Jesus' day, Taybeh was called Ephraim, and it was here that he came with his disciples, when Jerusalem was no longer safe, to rest before a gathering storm and great conflict (John 11.54). The parallels between then and now feel a bit too close.

"We Refuse to Be Enemies"

The Jewish experience of life has often been marked by catastrophe and never been easy, save for a few peaceful decades here and there or the century of Solomon 3,000 years ago. But the last 80 years have been nothing but horrendous. Human language fails to convey the grief of it, and the outrage it inspires in any sane heart. A short list of the lowlights include all the events leading into World War II—the Holocaust—being attacked by the surrounding Muslim world in 1948 *and* 1967 *and* 1973—the First Intifada—the Second Intifada—and still being on the receiving end of rockets from Gaza and still immediately surrounded by several massive Arab countries that do not recognize Israel's right to even exist, and not far from several countries that if they could, would commit another genocide of the Jewish people.

I absolutely affirm the right of the State of Israel to exist, and as I've written in these blogs, am utterly relieved that it does. These reasons are less theologically driven as much as driven for humanitarian reasons and political ones. But they run deep, and have not been changed by this most recent trip.

I love Israel, but I've also learned that that does not preclude me from loving Palestinians. Both have legitimate claims and stories to tell. These claims are not reconcilable, but should be heard. And I'm beginning to understand that to truly be a friend to one requires being a friend to the other.

I spent last Tuesday alternating between shaking my head in disbelief and grief, stunned, angry, silent, or wanting to cry, or in not infrequent moments some combination of these emotions. By the end of the day I just had to take a walk and pray.

To write accurately and comprehensively about the living conditions and treatment of the Palestinians after the first 'seeing' is impossible, that is, to accurately relay in words what is real about this on the face. And it is outrageous, in the etymological sense of the word: it inspires outrage. So much of the day was spent speechless, not a state to which I'm accustomed.

After a brief tour of the Old City, we met in the Arab Quarter with a Muslim sheik, a teacher of Islam who lectures week by week at the Dome of the Rock. His family has lived in Palestine for many generations. His lecture to us ranged from the history of Jerusalem, Islamic perspectives on Jesus and the Jews and Christians, September 11, the history of Mohammed and Islam, the current situation in Palestine and Jerusalem, and his own family's story over the last 65 years. It was fascinating and helpful, particularly to get what seems to be a somewhat representative view of the Sunni Muslim perspective on many of these things. Some things he said were encouraging, some were deeply disturbing, illustrating all too well Israel's concern about the Muslim world that surrounds it, and all gave really helpful insight not only to a Muslim perspective but also a Palestinian perspective, all shared with a generous spirit.

There was already enough in this Palestinians' story to heat the blood, but then we took a driving tour of the area to be exposed first hand to the ethnic and political lay of the land of Jerusalem, the Settlements, the Separation Barrier (or Security Wall, depending on what side of it you're on), and planned construction for more settlements. This was offered by a (Jewish) representative of [Ir-Amim](#), translated "City of Nations", who, while he was telling about what what we were seeing, would also share about the many and various difficulties of the Palestinian people living here.

The list of oppressive laws and conditions operative in East Jerusalem and the West Bank (and Gaza) is long and multi-faceted, touching every facet of life for the Palestinian residents of this land. They include: Water access and running water, Food access, Taxation and withholding of tax revenue, Sanitation, Education, Borders, Access to Electricity, Transportation, Seizure of property, Building prohibitions, Land seizure, Demolition orders. Unattainable building codes, Impossible permitting processes, Shockingly different standards for land appropriation, the Separation Barrier, Status of residency and citizenship, and much more. There's not an area of Palestinian life that is not touched by Israeli regulations.

The stories and examples, which are common and standard, are hard to believe. At first exposure it seems there is a comprehensive and effective system to keep the Palestinians tightly under the thumb. It seems unjust, oppressive, subjective, even cruel, even dehumanizing. It takes the breath away. It kept on getting worse, evoking a sense of "Really? There's more?" And there was, and is. Between a rock and a hard place is the landscape here, especially for the Palestinians.

Then we drove out of Jerusalem up to a hilltop not far from Bethlehem, to the [Tent of Nations](#), a hundred acre farm owned by the Nassar family since 1916. Their story is as troubling (again, breathtaking) as it is amazing and inspiring (also breathtaking). I highly recommend [this video](#) about their story and project. They are a Palestinian family surrounded by Israeli settlements and constant threat to their livelihood and land. Incidentally, they are Christians, Lutherans to be more specific. Despite all they've endured and continue to endure, the motto of their project and they live by it is "We Refuse to Be Enemies". That, and "Never Give Up Hope".

No answers, no claim to understanding, just what we saw. “Nothing Here is Not Complex” indeed. But a lot of shock, and a lot of sorrow. Some times (many times) silence is the only, and right response, until you know what to say. I don’t yet.

In an earlier blog I mentioned a dinner conversation with some Orthodox Jews who moved from America to live in Jerusalem. From that post: “I said to them, holding the tears back while reflecting on a remarkable day and 25 years of a heart broken by the Holocaust, ‘For many years and still today I’m just so relieved that the State of Israel exists.’” I went on to say to them, “But at the same time I so deeply want the Jewish people to live into the dignity of the Jewish tradition, and the way the Palestinians are being treated is not that.” I guess we’re all still waiting for the solution that combines security for Israel and dignity for the Palestinians. May it not be undiscovered before Messiah comes. This why we pray, because such solutions seem to evade human grasp. We need help. We need God. It is ironic the land of the Faiths of Abraham, of all lands, so evidently need the intervention from the God of Abraham to bring peace. Fitting, perhaps.

Our day had started in the Old City, right inside the Sheep Gate, at the pool of Bethesda. It was here in John 5 that Jesus comes to the pool and sees a man who had been unable to walk for 38 years. And Jesus healed him, and he walked. Miracles happened in this Holy Land and her capital, the “City of Peace”.

And miracles still can happen, though God evidently prefers to use human hands to do his work, and work his miracles too.

Resilience: React by Creating

“Trauma”. That’s one word that has floated often to the surface of my brain while being here, along with “Grim” and “Cruel”. But there is another, more hopeful word, “Resilience”.

Israel and Palestine are lands of many examples of remarkable resilience against much trauma. Since 1948, the peoples of both lands have been responding to trauma, and unfortunately not simply historical of which there is so so much but trauma that is still ongoing and active, very much in the present. The people of both lands experience some sort of corporate Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and unfortunately Present-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

But there are stories of resilience. *Definition: re-sil-ience Noun: 1. The ability to recover from illness, change, or misfortune; buoyancy.*

First: the whole State of Israel demonstrates this. It’s development since 1948 is nothing short of breathtaking and stunning. It is simply amazing to see what these people have carved out of rocky land and in what circumstances. It is awesome, hard to believe, admirable and inspiring. Little about what Israel has done to build, rebuild, develop, and protect their land doesn’t demand a superlative. Israelis have every right to be proud (on this count).

Then second: Daoud Nassar, a Palestinian highlighted in an earlier post with the [Tent of Nations](#), learned a long time ago to react positively to negative things. It’s not only a wise discipline, but a matter of survival. It’s deep wisdom that. Take the energy that is generated by anger, sorrow, frustration, and fear, and channel it into something constructive, in Daoud’s case, quite literally. Every time something significantly bad happens, like last year when those living in Gaza started another rocket offensive prompting a major response of military force from Israel, Daoud puts his hand to work. In that case, he

carved another underground cistern out of the rock, by hand. He's done that before, and many of the construction projects on the land have as their inspiration destruction within the Land.

And third: Nablus, also in the West Bank, is the home of the Balata Refugee Camp. During the Second Intifada, like many other Palestinian cities, the residents of Nablus were put under all-day curfew (essentially house arrest) for days, even weeks at a time. At Balata, the longest curfew lasted for 100 days. Next door to Balata within a Greek Orthodox Church is the biblical site of Jacob's Well, where Jesus talked to the Samaritan Woman in John 4. To visit it is a profound experience, for you know that 2000 years ago, Jesus stood right where you're standing and drank water from that same well.

Father Justinus, an Orthodox priest there and also an architect and painter/iconographer, took advantage of the imposed curfews to undertake a massive painting project, putting large paintings of biblical scenes and icons on the walls. There were too many to count. Twenty? Maybe there were thirty paintings 8 feet by 10 feet or 6 feet by 4 feet, and each one of them gorgeous modern renditions of sacred scenes or saints in iconic style. He was forced to remain inside, so he took that opportunity to respond by creating. And the effect is one of the luminous churches I've ever been in, not only because of the beauty of the artwork, but even more so because of the story behind it.

Here's the take away for all of us, considering the resilience of Daoud, Father Justinus, and the Israelis. Respond to destruction with construction. React by creating. Let negative developments lead to positive responses. And those creations become all the more beautiful precisely because of the context from which they are born.

Highlight of a Priest's Life

For this priest, there were many moments on this pilgrimage to the Holy Land I'll never forget and feel deeply blessed to have been given. Among them:

- leading the Stations of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa
- teaching the Bible in Jerusalem, Samaria, and on the Sea of Galilee
- celebrating the Eucharist overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem where Jesus instituted the sacrament, and on the Mount of Beatitudes overlooking the Sea of Galilee
- leading a brief prayer to God of thanks for the Incarnation while touching the very site of the Incarnation in Bethlehem
- and leading morning prayers and devotionals throughout the Holy Land.

And I was not alone. All this was done with a band of brothers, fellow-pilgrims: Todd Deatherage, Stu G, David Gungor, John Huckins, Aaron Niequist, Troy Hatfield, Scott Hodges, and Brian Wurzell.

We set out "on a journey with God, to find God, together"...and we did. Thanks be to God!

A Shortened Trip and One Last Post

Good News : Bad News. The good news is I trust I'll be able to do this trip again, and complete it. The bad news is I wasn't able to complete it, and missed meeting some dear and meaningful people in Israel. Keep reading and you'll find out what happened, but first, what did I miss?

The Telos Group does a remarkable job of presenting both sides of the complicated situation in the Holy Land. And had I been able to stay the final two days I would have been able to meet and tell more of the stories of Israelis and Jews. Saturday and Sunday's meetings included meeting some

Jewish men and women in Tel Aviv including an environmental activist, a retired General from the Israeli Defense Force working for peace, other Israelis well informed in policy issues, an Israeli mother who lost a child to Palestinian violence, and some more. I would have liked to have met them and tell their stories here in this blog, lest this chronicle come across lopsided, and to do justice to all who live here.

There is no lopsided in the Holy Land that leads towards the path for peace. Both sides matter deeply, both sides of the story, both Israelis and Palestinians, all human beings with their own individual stories, and each one matters, and all of them matter.

So, I'll have to come back another year to have these Saturday and Sunday meetings. As it turned out....

Early Friday morning while in Ramallah, as grace would have it I was on my computer when I received a Skype video call from my wife in tears. She had just returned from the emergency room back home with her father, who had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer that had spread to his liver and spleen. I was able to leave for home at the earliest possibility, and arrived in the Shenandoah Valley just after noon on Saturday. We appreciate your prayers for Bill Scherer and our family. Tests and doctors appointments begin in earnest tomorrow morning.

From the realities of the larger world to the reality our our little world, and my heart cries **“Maranatha!”** and **“Lord have mercy.”** for both.

This strange pilgrimage to the Holy Land rocks the soul and dazes the brain and calls for constructive action. The latter will be a thing of prayer in the coming months, as will prayers for peace in Israel and Palestine. Two images of two walls, taken on the same day, sum up the trip. Thanks for following along.

