



Voices *from the South*

HIGHLIGHTING VOICES FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH WHO PROVIDE ALTERNATIVES TO THE DOMINANT PARADIGMS OF POWER, DISTRIBUTION, AND DEVELOPMENT.

As the Christmas season begins in many parts of the world, hearts and minds turn to the Palestinian city of Bethlehem: the focal geographic point of the Christmas narrative. Yet today, this not-so-little town is sieged by a tightening separation wall, checkpoints, and a system of control brought on by the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine.

In this month's "Voices from the South," Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb of Kairos Palestine offers his reflections on Christmas, the current facts on the ground, and a call to work for peace and justice in the region.

This text, as well as other weekly reflections on Christmas in the Holy Land, can be found in Kairos Palestine's "Christmas Alert 2012," available at www.kairospalestine.ps.



Bethlehem, Palestine

Christmas, Peace, and the Wall The Segregation Wall and Checkpoints in and around Bethlehem

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A few years ago while traveling in China, I was asked by a student in one of the schools: "What if Jesus was to be born today?"

I replied: "If Jesus were to be born this year, he would not be born in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph might not be allowed to enter from the checkpoint, and so too the Magi, while the shepherds will be stuck inside the walls and can't leave their little town. Jesus might have been born on the checkpoint like so many

Palestinian children while the Magi and shepherds would be on both sides of the wall."

Am I confusing you with the "nice" Christmas story? Christmas has become a "nice" feast of "a sort of peace" that no one really can fully describe. In fact, it is kind of a "cheap peace", which is something to preach about when one is not well prepared, or a bit of wishful thinking, when one is not ready to do much. Christmas has become a season for "joyful peace talkers," rather than "blessed peacemakers".

In our Palestinian context, "peace

talk" is often a good recipe for managing the conflict rather than resolving it. As the world continues to talk peace, Israel continues to build the wall and while Christians continue singing "O little town of Bethlehem", Israel makes sure that this town stays as little as possible. As little as a two square miles open air prison surrounded with walls, fences and trenches with no future expansion possibilities whatsoever.

No one understood peace as did St. Paul. He, a former Jewish leader, a zealot, a persecutor, and a hard liner, committed himself to making sure that a wall of separation was built and kept



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between his community and its enemies. He was ready to attack and even terrorize whoever dared to question the importance of this wall for the security of his community.

However, this same radical person was radically transformed. He had a unique encounter that made him discover the real meaning of peace, and he described it as “breaking down dividing walls of hostility.” (Ephesians 2, 14) From that moment, the zealot Saul became the passionate apostle Paul. His great discovery was that if God himself in Christ has broken the walls of hostility between the human and the divine, then there is no place for walls between peoples, tribes, cultures and nations. For his conviction, he was ready to pay a heavy price.

At a time when a wall of hostility has been built around our little town, we all need to commit ourselves anew to breaking down all walls of hatred and hostilities, be they concrete walls or ideological, racial, political, social, and economical ones. From the hometown of Christ, we have no other message this year but that of St. Paul: “For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us”. ■

Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb is the Pastor of the Christmas Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. He is the president of the Diyar Consortium and the President of the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan & The Holy Land.

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REV. DR. MITRI RAHEB

An overview of the current situation in Bethlehem:

In 2002, the construction of the Segregation Wall started west of Jenin. The wall is still under construction and when completed, its length will total approximately 774 kilometres. The route of the wall is in no accordance with the so called “Green Line”, cutting deep into the occupied West Bank.

Overall, the Segregation Wall in the Bethlehem Governorate will end up amputating some 159,793 dunums (159.8 km²) of lands behind the Wall, and threatens crucial supply areas containing artesian wells and main water basins that provide Bethlehem Governorate with water as the path of the Wall is designed to enfold the groundwater locations within Bethlehem.

Bethlehem Governorate is chained with all sorts of Israeli checkpoints or obstructions to indicate all forms used by the Israeli Army to restrict the Palestinian’s movement.

Prior to the year 2000, Bethlehem Governorate had only two permanent checkpoints located at the outskirts of the Governorate, on the entry points to Jerusalem. The obstructions multiplied over the past 12 years to 35 different forms of obstructions.

The consequences of these actions on the economy of Bethlehem have been devastating; businesses have been forced to close and unemployment has increased to unprecedented levels, particularly the

Status of the Israeli Segregation Wall in Bethlehem Governorate

Wall Status	Length
Existing Sections	30.5 km
Planned Sections	39 km
Under Construction Sections	5.5 km
Total Wall Length	75 km

tourism sector, which is a major source of livelihood for many of the Bethlehem’s residents.

For more info, visit www.ochaopt.org.