

Oh Little Town of Bethlehem...

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No matter what your religious background is, there is no arguing that Bethlehem is engrained in our psyche as the quaint town where Jesus of Nazareth was born. I like to learn and embrace all forms of religion and spirituality, but I must admit I was raised in the Christian Tradition and as child sang in the Sunday school choir such songs as "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem" and "Away in a Manger".

On a recent trip to Israel and the Palestinian Territories, I wanted to make a pilgrimage to Bethlehem, to Manger Square more precisely. Prior to my departure to Israel, I was cautioned by several people that while the West Bank is relatively safe, Bethlehem can at times be a bit on the dangerous side or at best filled with tension. As is often the case in my adventures, I disregarded warnings and was determined to visit this historic town.

After several days in Jerusalem, wandering through the historic and spiritual sites of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, I decided to make my journey to Bethlehem. My first stop was the Arab Bus station across the street from the Damascus Gate to Old Jerusalem. I was able to locate the bus to Bethlehem, which only cost 3 sheckles (about 75 cents). The bus battled through traffic south out of Jerusalem. I was not sure what to expect when I got to Bethlehem and was shocked when I found out the bus doesn't exactly go to Bethlehem. The bus stops at a "border crossing". It looked rather foreboding with a very high cement wall, guard shacks, and barbed wire fence. It brought back memories of the Berlin Wall! I entered the border crossing with no problems and crossed into the West Bank with ease. I did find it ironic as you cross the barbed wire, the fences, gates, and armed patrol to be greeted by a sign that said "Shalom…Israel Board of Tourism". As I walked through the gate and onto the other side I was now in the West Bank and in the city of Bethlehem. I was greeted by political graffiti "Power to Hezbollah"; "We are not Terrorist"; "Jesus wept for Jerusalem"; "Free Palestine".

As I walked down the path away from the gates, numerous taxi drivers positioning themselves for business greeted me. I was offered all day-guided excursions for 300 shekels. Words can't really explain the tension in the air but I struck up a conversation with a Palestinian by the name of Naif. He informed me that not many Americans had visited Bethlehem in the last 5 years and that it really was sort of unsafe for me to be wandering alone through the streets of Bethlehem. He said, "There were problems here yesterday". But back in Jerusalem I heard nothing of problems in Bethlehem. I wasn't sure if he was trying to hustle me or not, but he offered to take me to Manger Square, show me around, and get me back to the Border Crossing safely in exchange for 60 shekles (\$15)…being the budget backpacking traveler I wasn't too keen on the idea but something inside me said, "it's probably in your best interest to take Naif up on his offer".

As Naif drove toward Manger Square he pointed out Rachel's Tomb and Shepherds Field. As we got closer to Manger Square I became increasingly worried when I saw masked men running through the streets with their loaded rifles. It was a scene I had seen numerous times on CNN. Naif explained that the day before there were some problems and that there was a curfew, but Naif did not explain to me all the events from the preceding day. He simply repeated several times with a thick Arabic accent, "the situation is not good".

The Christian Arab town of Bethlehem no longer resembles the cozy Middle Eastern Village portrayed on Christmas Cards, but even worse, much of it has been bombed and otherwise damaged in recent conflicts. On the corner right by Manger Square was a store that had recently been burned and gutted.

Naif first took me to The Milk Grotto Chapel, a shrine that commemorates the lactation of the Virgin Mary. My next stop, and primary destination was The Church of the Nativity, which is one of the world's oldest functioning churches. It is built like a citadel over the cave cited by tradition as Jesus' birthplace. Entering the church requires you to stoop down through the small and short doorway. I then descended steps from the main church area into an underground chamber filled with caves, one of which is the reputed site of the birthplace of Jesus. It smashed my image of the stereotypical wooden framed manger surrounded by hay and farm animals.

After visiting the Church of the Nativity, I took a brief walk to the center of Manger Square and could not help but notice the ironic Bethlehem Peace Center. In spite of intolerance and tension in the region, I admired and respected this edifice based upon its bold statement and mission "The Center shall promote and enhance peace, democracy, religious tolerance and diversity, in the face of many hurdles.

After my exploration of two legendary Christian pilgrimage sites, I figured it was time to head back to the safe haven of Jerusalem. Naif drove me safely back to the border crossing and on our drive back to the border crossing explained the economic situation of his family, the discrimination of the Palestinian People, and the general malaise of the people of Bethlehem. "We do not say that it is an Islamic government, or a Hamas government," Naif said. "It is a Palestinian

government that has been elected by Palestinian people. We are all one people." The dwindling tourist numbers, Israeli closures and the severe limits on Palestinian work permits have sent unemployment in Bethlehem soaring to 65 percent, Naif said.

The fiscal crisis has left the Bethlehem municipality unable to pay employees' salaries for over three months.

I then passed the graffiti walls, this time with a different feeling…not so much of fear but now appreciation and a bit more understanding. I crossed back into the Israeli side with a better understanding of the complexities of what we Americans so often see on the news as a rather black and white issue and realizing that the situation is more complex and deeper than to say this side is right or that side is wrong. Again, I was proven that traveling off the beaten path or to a “less desirable” place truly expanded my horizons.

Upon arrival back to Jerusalem, I went to an internet café which was my usual way of ending each day of travel writing friends and families back home of my adventures and assuring them I was safe. As I checked my emails, a dear friend of mine in Minneapolis had sent me a warning not to go to Bethlehem. They attached an article from a reputable news source with the headlines stating: “Israeli Siege in Bethlehem At about 2:00pm in the afternoon of Monday over 100 Israeli soldiers entered the town of Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem and laid siege on a house believed to be occupied by Shareef Abu Hadeed, suspected by the Israeli authorities of being an Islamic Jihadist.” I had no idea that all this had happened just 24 hours before I was there except for the few things that Naif had alluded to. While it made the headlines in the US, I had no idea that this happened a few miles south of where I was staying in Jerusalem. I am glad I was unaware of the situation, as I may not have made the journey. While not as serious as the siege of the Church of the Nativity in 2002, it was enough to put my nerves on edge.

Bethlehem has attracted tens of thousands of pilgrims over the Christmas Holidays each year. Though with recent tensions the turn out in recent years has barely reached 10,000 pilgrims. Perhaps when tolerance, patience and understanding prevail, and the mission of the Bethlehem Peace Center is realized, a star will once again shine brightly over Bethlehem.