

A Pilgrimage in Palestine

March 2019

The Path of Abraham, Friend of God.

Masar Ibrahim, al Khalil



“Please tell everyone who will listen. We are good people.”

Michael Clifford & Penelope Guntermann

“Cancel that trip to Palestine, it is a dangerous place. If you do go be careful to not talk politics.”

“Make sure you give the other side a fair hearing too. “

“Here, your bag is large”, says the man who steps off the bus with us late at night as we approach the checkpoint in Bethlehem. “Let me carry your bag for you. This checkpoint is a long walk”.

“Please take some of my fruit. It is yours.” “But you are a shop owner. You should let us pay you”, we say. “No please, it is my honor.”

“What is your life like here in Palestine and can I record your answer?” we ask.

“I’d rather not say. I want to travel to the US and would not want the Israeli authorities to see it because then I would have a problem.”

“What is your life like in Palestine?” “We are in prison.

“What is your life like in Palestine?” “Please tell everyone who will listen. We are good people.”

“My permit to travel to Jerusalem for a medical appointment lasted from 5AM today until 7PM. I am required to be back by dark. Besides, my brother told me that you are staying in his house and I wanted to make sure I met you.”





“Today’s hike is 20 kilometers” says our guide. “We will go through 5 villages and encounter Roman and Byzantine ruins in 2 places. All of the way is hilly. We will only briefly encounter flat places which will be very muddy. I will make you tea along the way and have brought food to cook for you. Please carry some of the tomatoes. They are heavy.”

This is what happens when you walk hundreds of miles in a small country which is occupied by a major military power, is predominantly Muslim, and which lives out the hospitality of

Abraham who received the three strangers under the tree. People talk to you. Sometimes you have a translator. Sometimes that translator is Google. Sometimes it is pictures and gestures. The expressions on our faces perhaps said, “We will listen. Please tell us your stories”. They did. Again and again.

We talked to no major spokesman for the Palestinian government. We listened to more than a hundred spokespeople. We listened to the sheep, the goats, the shepherd, the guide, the children, each other. Our core group was 8 to 9 depending on the phase of the walk. Three of us were couples. Three were singles. A German professor. A French Canadian tech expert. A Belgian woman who traveled for the love of it. We ranged from 55 to 72 years in age. They were all strong hikers! Fortunately, the group not only got along, each person in their core supported each other person. When Michael began to hike again after injuring his ankle, a group member said, “I will carry your pack this morning.” Another said, “I will carry it this afternoon”. They all loved to laugh. Each had a heart for the Palestinian people as well as for the others in the group. The guides were strong, and sensitive and knowledgeable. Each guide took us for a few days only, as they were selected to guide for the regions in which they lived.



Some of the guides literally pointed to their homes or to the hillside on which they grew up. They were not agents of a viewpoint. They were agents of a life lived under Occupation. One said, “See that fence. It is electrified. It cuts my uncle off from his olive trees. Sometimes young boys throw mud at the fence and the army comes to investigate. Some have been shot”. Another (a Greek Orthodox Christian) said, looking out from the “Shepherds Fields” in Bethlehem, “See that hill behind those buildings?” A huge Israeli settlement loomed there. “I grew up running around on those hills. We cut our Christmas greens from our trees there.

Fifteen years ago Israel confiscated the hill. My family was displaced. Now there are all these houses with a wall around them. It is illegal for me to go there". Was this a political statement or an expression of grief and anger over a loss that can't be reversed? Can those be separated?

We stayed in a home in a refugee camp in Jericho with a wonderful young couple. As we drove around the center of "town" Penelope realized that she had *passed by* this *camp* 35 years earlier *in a tour bus* and seen tents and cardboard shanties. Hundreds of people with nowhere to go. Now there were permanent houses. The people are still here. It was unsettling for her. They are still here until.... The homes look quite nice. Our young man we stayed with was proud of what he was providing for his family. He was also angry and resentful of the Occupation. He gets up at 3AM to cross the checkpoint to go to Israel to work because he can make four times the amount of money per month than he can in Palestine. He is clearly in a bind. He took the day off so he could be with us. How much did that cost him? He let us sleep till noon. He drove us up to a high place, not to tempt us but to show us Jericho as it spread out before us. Israeli citizens are not allowed to go into Jericho. It is dangerous, a sign says. Our friend tells us, "We cannot stay long. There is an Israeli military post above us and we are not allowed here."



We stayed in the home where these children live. Two years ago, within sight of their home, Israeli Settlers came in the middle of the night and set fire to a house where the family was sleeping. As the family fled, the Settlers waited for them and killed them as they ran out. The baby died in the fire. No one has been brought to justice.



The children next door



Burning house



There are Bedouin camps in Jordan, where we visited Petra after our hike. They are for tourists and have souvenir shops in the dining halls. The Bedouin camps we stayed at in Palestine were the homes of Bedouin shepherds; the place where we gathered and ate had canvas walls, and cushions on the floor. There were no souvenir shops. The women of the camps prepared our food. Some of the squat toilet outhouses were down a rocky muddy slope and the solar power only lasted till 3AM. The rooster started early. At one camp, there was a sign on the quarters where we

slept saying this location was being monitored by an international organization to prevent forced relocations. The Bedouin leader at this camp was working on his master's degree in sustainable development. What was to be learned here about hope in the face of overwhelming power? Is education a form of resistance? For how many generations do you need to graze the same rocky land before you are safe from losing it in an instant?



Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, the pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, where we worshipped in Arabic, spoke to a group which was traveling with the Lutheran Bishop of Hungary. "We are invisible", he said. "Thousands of settlers move into the West Bank from Israel every year. They confiscate our lands and cut us off from our farms. They move in and there is no place for us. Please go home and tell people. More Israeli settlers in the West Bank will not hasten the advent of the Messiah. Go home and tell people. The historic ratio of 10% of Palestine being Christian is down to 3%. Our Muslim neighbors are not openly hostile to us but all the economics of daily life favor the majority. Go home and tell people. We are disappearing".

We had dinner with Pastor Ashraf Tannous, pastor of two Lutheran congregations near Bethlehem. When we asked what we could do to help, he said, "Bring people here to see and to meet us." The next morning at his church we met Daniella, an international observer, who took us to demolished homes of Palestinians in the village of Walaja. She had personally witnessed some of the midnight destructions by the Israeli military. She said, "We will not change the whole situation, but each small witness may be a part of bringing change to this troubled region."





You cannot rotate the kaleidoscope here without seeing and hearing the same thing over and over. There was no official spokesman. There were only spokespeople. There was only what we saw with our own eyes.

Yet amid encountering all this, we have never experienced such graciousness and hospitality and generosity. You don't question strangers here, you welcome them. You serve

and take care of them and ask questions later. You see them passing by and leave your house to call them to coffee, tea and refreshments. This happened over and over.

Penelope asked over and over, "Where do you find hope?" What she heard was "we hope for something better for our children." She never did get an answer to her question.

Oh, yes. By the way. We hiked. Penelope completed all but about 10 of the 190 miles. Michael, having sprained an ankle, recovered and completed about 110. Heavy rains made the wildflowers beautiful. Some nights required five blankets. Palestinians often don't heat their homes.

We walked in two Testaments. We walked where Abraham lived, in Hebron. We passed through Amos' birthplace. We wandered Samaria, the land of outcasts. We visited one of several places where Moses was buried. We were delayed on our walk several times because the flock of sheep had to move before there was room on the trail. No one was in a hurry. We visited the church in Nablus built over what might have been Jacob's well where Jesus met the Samaritan woman and the church in Burqin where one of the ten lepers returned to give thanks. Here, this priest was murdered by a Settler as he went about his duties. We know that Jesus had to have traversed the Jordan valley somewhere near where we walked.



We spent only a part of one day in Israel. We spent the rest of the time in Palestine, The West Bank, Occupied Territory, The Holy Land.

We invite you to engage us in conversation in both formal and informal settings about these people and about their lives or even about visiting Palestine yourself. They taught us that there are so many ways to resist oppression if you

are determined to look for them. They taught us that it is not necessary to be demoralized just because a situation is hopeless. These people are very much alive. These people plant gardens in the face of eviction and displacement. These people are determined to never give up their struggle for dignity or for their land. Can we take a lesson from such courage? Could they possibly be an inspiration to us? Could they possibly be our teachers even as we advocate for them in their powerlessness? Join us in living with the many contradictions presented by this complex land and its resilient people.

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