

# Bethlehem Then and Now



Advent Mini-Meditations from  
Mennonite Church Canada Palestine-Israel  
Network

**For Advent 2024**



(originally created in 2018 by MC Canada PIN  
(<https://www.mennonitechurch.ca/pin>) and now updated to reflect  
current realities in Palestine, including Gaza)

Photo: Mural in the Shepherds' Field Chapel near Bethlehem

## 1. The angel's announcement and justice



Painting of the angel's visit to Mary, Church of the Annunciation, a prominent holy site and tourist attraction in Nazareth, Israel.

*"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." --Mary, in Luke 1:46-47*

As a young woman, Mary was so amazed that God had chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, that she sang this song of praise. Mary was from Nazareth, a humble Jewish village in the hinterlands of Galilee, on the margins of religious and political power. Like Bethlehem and Jerusalem, Nazareth was under the firm military control of the Roman Empire. Today, 2,000 years later, Nazareth is a bustling town in northern Israel, where Christians, Muslims, and Jews live side by side. But like Mary, its citizens experience the struggles of ethnic discrimination and inequality.

Since October 7, 2023, Nazareth has been a target of rocket fire from Hezbollah militants in response to Israeli military actions in Gaza and Lebanon, increasing existing tensions between Palestinian and Jewish Israelis. At this time of year, Christians remember Mary's proclamation that God has "scattered the proud... and lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:51-52).

*God of peace, at this time of year we rejoice in the coming of Jesus, our Messiah and Saviour. With Mary, we hold to your promise of the day when the lowly will be lifted up, with equal dignity. Amen*

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**([www.mennonitechurch.ca/pin](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/pin)) for reflections from PIN members who visited Bethlehem, November 17 to 26 this year.**

## 2. The “city of David” and olive oil



Zatoun olive oil is produced by West Bank farmers and marketed internationally as a fair trade reminder to pray and work for peace in Palestine and Israel. See: <https://zatoun.com/>

*Samuel took the horn of oil and **anointed** [David]. —1 Sam. 16:13*

The gospel of Luke tells how Mary and Joseph had to travel from their home in Nazareth to their ancestral village of Bethlehem, to be registered by the Roman occupiers of the land. Bethlehem was known as “the city of David,” where, a thousand years earlier, the prophet Samuel had anointed David with olive oil, to become king. The child Jesus was called “son of David” and “the anointed one.”

Today, olive oil is the main agricultural product of the Bethlehem area. It is used for cooking, soap, and cosmetics. But many farmers have seen their olive orchards destroyed as Israel expands its West Bank settlements and extends the separation barrier in the Palestinian territories. The violence from extremist settlers attacking Palestinian homes and orchards in the Bethlehem area and elsewhere in the West Bank has increased dramatically since October 7, 2023. One way we can draw attention to this injustice and to support Palestinian farmers is to purchase and promote Palestinian fair trade olive oil products (see link above or order through CommonWord ([www.commonword.ca](http://www.commonword.ca))). Remember, the olive branch is also an international symbol of peace!

*Lord, during this Advent we remember the olive growers of Palestine, along with other vulnerable farmers around the world, who experience loss and injustice. May your peace and mercy reign in our hearts and in our world. Amen*

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### 3. Traveling to Bethlehem



Part of the wall that separates Israel from the Palestinian territory of the West Bank.

*All went to their own towns to be registered. —Luke 2:3*

When Emperor Augustus decreed that the people of the land return to their ancestral towns to be registered for tax, Mary and Joseph journeyed from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem, a village just south of Jerusalem in the region of Judea---a three-day walk. It was an arduous journey. Mary was advanced in her pregnancy. The countryside was hilly and rocky, and the road rugged. Today, despite the conveniences of modern transportation, travel between Nazareth and Bethlehem is difficult for Israelis and Palestinians. Nazareth is in Israel, and Bethlehem is in the West Bank, a Palestinian territory that has been under the military occupation of Israel for 57 years. Israelis are discouraged from traveling in the West Bank, and Palestinians may enter Israel only with permits, which are often difficult to obtain.

Since October 7, 2023, Israeli military checkpoints within the West Bank have increased in number, and Palestinian permits to enter Israel for work and family visits have been severely curtailed, creating economic and emotional hardship. At numerous checkpoints at borders and on roads, Palestinian travelers often experience humiliation and fear.

*God of justice, we recognize freedom of movement as a hallmark of human dignity. Hasten the day when all people, including Israelis and Palestinians, move freely within their own land without fear. Amen.*

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#### 4. Shepherds and pastureland



Boy tending his sheep near Bethlehem

*In that region there were shepherds...keeping watch over their flock by night.” --Luke 2:8*

The first people to learn about Jesus’ birth were the shepherds tending their sheep in the fields below Bethlehem. Shepherds were hard-working people who often experienced discrimination from the larger society. Today, in the hills and valleys around Bethlehem, shepherds still tend their flocks, trying to maintain a livelihood that has sustained them for generations. But pastureland is diminishing as Israeli settlements continue to expand in the area and in other parts of the West Bank, occupied by Israel’s military since 1967.

Since October 7, 2023, shepherding communities in the Hebron Hills south of Bethlehem have experienced unprecedented violence from Israeli settlers wanting to expand their own settlements in contravention of international law. Israeli military forces have often been complicit in the violence and land theft. Violence, confiscation of pastureland for settlements, military installations, and enemy stereotypes feed the tension and suspicion that exists between Israelis and Palestinians.

*Shepherd God, as we hear the angels’ promise of “peace on earth,” we hear your call to pray and work for peace and security for all people, including Jews, Christians, and Moslems living in the land of Jesus’ birth. Amen.*

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## 5. Magi, gifts, and tourism



*[The Magi] offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*  
—Matthew 2:11

At Christmas, we remember how the magi from far away followed the star to Bethlehem, where they paid homage to the Christ child. Their gifts inspire our own spirit of generosity in this season. Typically, thousands of foreigners from all over the world visit Bethlehem, especially in December and January. They buy locally made gifts—olive-wood Nativity sets, olive oil soap, and glass dishware. Many people in Bethlehem depend on the souvenir industry for their livelihoods. But in recent years, the economy has been depressed. The violence that sometimes erupts between Israelis and Palestinians has kept many tourists away. Israeli policies have hampered Palestinian entrepreneurship, resulting in the emigration of many businesspeople. Since many business owners were Christian, the presence and witness of the church in the West Bank have likewise suffered.

These realities have only been heightened in the past year. As the war on Gaza erupted in the fall of 2023, Christians in Bethlehem expressed their lament by cancelling Christmas celebrations. Rev. Munther Isaac of the Christmas Lutheran Church preached a powerful message that God becomes incarnate, even under the rubble of human conflict. The creche scene at his church showed baby Jesus among a pile of broken concrete blocks.

*God of giving and generosity, we hold in our hearts the people and the church in Palestine. In their loss and their vulnerability, may they cling to the hope promised by the birth of Jesus. Amen*

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## 6. King Herod and the children



Faces of Gaza's children.

*The Lord appeared to Joseph...and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt...for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." —Matthew 2:19-20*

King Herod was so troubled by the magi's visit to the Christ child that he had all the baby boys of Bethlehem murdered. Joseph and Mary, however, escaped to Egypt with Jesus and stayed there until the danger had passed. Contemporary Bethlehem has also experienced violence. The sounds of gunfire and the threat of night raids cause children to fear. Hundreds of children each year are arrested by Israeli soldiers for stone-throwing and other acts of resistance. Meanwhile in Israel, Jewish children also grow up in fear, thinking that Palestinians hate them and are a threat to their security.

Since Israel's military assault on Gaza and the West Bank began in October 2023, Palestinian children have been disproportionately impacted by the violence. Official statistics report that more than 14,000 children in Gaza have been killed, with many more injured, displaced, and separated from family members. Almost all of Gaza's children are malnourished, and many are threatened with starvation, because humanitarian aid has been withheld or blocked. In the West Bank, 169 children have been killed by Israeli forces.

*"A voice was heard in Ramah, / wailing and loud lamentation-- / Rachel weeping for her children, / because they are no more" (Matthew 2:18).*

*Lord, during this season of joy, we also remember the children living and dying in Palestine and Israel. We pray that the slaughter and dehumanization may cease. May children experience the security and safety promised by the Child of Bethlehem. Amen*

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