

Christmas in Bethlehem: A time of needed hope for Palestinian Christians

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Under a stained-glass window depicting the angel's joyful tidings of Jesus's birth, candles flickered and a Christmas tree twinkled with red lights as worshipers at Bethlehem Christmas Lutheran Church, nestled just off a narrow cobblestone road, joined in singing traditional Christmas songs in Arabic.

"We are very happy; Christmas means a lot to us," said Sami, a Bethlehem native who now lives in Jerusalem and sometimes has trouble getting home through the Israeli checkpoint. "All these songs help us hope that we will overcome."

Bethlehem today hardly resembles the pastoral little town described in the Bible as Jesus's birthplace.

It still has shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, but the fields are shrinking as both Bethlehem and nearby Israeli settlements steadily expand. The woolly backs of sheep can sometimes be seen jouncing along the busy streets, competing with honking taxis and souvenir hawkers desperate for business. The church bells still ring out on Sundays, but many more heed the Muslim call to prayer that rings out five times a day.

There is indeed much for Palestinian Christians to overcome, from their struggle to end Israeli occupation to growing concerns about Islamist threats in the region. Many of them however say these trials make Jesus's words and works resonate more fully.

Muslims, a growing majority, join in festivities

"The challenges make me pray more," said Ingjerd Grimstad Bandak, a Norwegian woman attending the Lutheran service with her Palestinian husband and their two daughters. "It's also a good exercise in forgiveness . . . to see everyone is created in the image of God—also your political enemies."

“What I always want,” adds her husband, Nicola Bandak, “is that this land should be able to fit everyone.”

Many Muslims flock to Bethlehem’s Manger Square along with local Christians to see the towering Christmas tree bedecked with shiny balls and lights, enjoying the festive spirit and posing for photos.

“As Christians and Muslims we are brothers, we’d like to participate and make them feel like here we are one,” said Jamal Shahateet, who came from the southern West Bank city of Hebron with his wife and 10-year-old daughter. “Coming here makes them feel we respect their holidays. They respect our holidays as well.”

Christians made up 82 percent of Bethlehem's population in 1948, but today they are no more than 22 percent, according to Vera Baboun, the mayor of the town. Some Christians feel increasingly uncomfortable among the Muslim majority.

“Bethlehem is very much different,” Sami said. “In the past, I remember Muslims and Christians lived more in harmony, and no one thought about being fanatic.”

A plea for tolerance

Mitri Raheb, pastor of the Lutheran church, sees Christians as having an important role to play throughout the Arab world, where many ancient Christian communities from Egypt to Iraq have been forced to flee in the face of Islamist violence.

“God is calling us to act on His behalf and to bring equality, to bring tolerance, to strengthen the pluralistic society and to proclaim the good news to the people who need it most,” said Raheb, who also serves as president of the synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and The Holy Land. “There are so many people here who need to hear this message.”

But Christians are struggling to maintain a presence in the Middle East.

Nicola Bandak, whose ancestors hailed from Christian tribes in the Arabian peninsula and settled here more than 1,000 years ago, said he and his wife are headed to Norway for two or three years to establish his Norwegian citizenship so that the family will have a place to go should the situation here erupt.

After the service, Raheb approaches the Bandaks to say goodbye. They promise to keep in touch via e-mail and Facebook until their return.

While the Bandaks insist they will return, many Christians have left for good because of the political situation or economic challenges, especially in the tourism industry.

Tourism up, revenues down

Though overall visits and spending are up, many tourists—especially Americans—prefer to stay in Jerusalem, which means their dollars go mainly into Israeli pockets. They tend to hire Israeli guides, since only 42 of the 350 Palestinian guides licensed by the Palestinian Authority have Israeli permits to go to Jerusalem, where tour groups start their day.

In Bethlehem, tourists spend money chiefly on souvenirs rather than on Palestinian hotels, restaurants, or transportation. Only a select few shopkeepers get a share of that income, since most guides arrange to funnel all their passengers into a single store, in exchange for a commission of about 30 percent.

Several days before Christmas, when business should be at its peak, Catholic shopkeeper Louis Michel is playing solitaire on his computer.

“I used to make \$500 a day, and now nothing—maybe 75 shekels a day (about \$20),” he said, surrounded by olive wood crèches and rosary beads.

Fadi Kattan, an adviser to the PA Ministry of Tourism, said Palestinian tourism revenues of \$460 million could nearly quadruple if the Israeli occupation were lifted.

Such calculations vary widely, however. A UN World Tourism Organization report this year calculated that tourism receipts in the Palestinian sector have tripled to \$755 million since 2000, but could grow even more if Israel eased visa restrictions for hundreds of millions of Muslims in the region.

Raheb sees faith in the message of Jesus as providing a deeper moral and spiritual authority for ending Israel’s occupation.

“What Jesus and our people truly have in common is that Jesus was born under occupation,” he said. “And yet the Roman Empire was not able to silence his message. . . . The message that Jesus brought proved to be much more powerful than the power of the empire.”