

# Letters from Overseas

## Thom Davies Writes from Palestine and Israel

December 2011

Tonight, December 24, I will have the opportunity to pray in Bethlehem for Christmas Eve. In so many ways, for a Christian, this is the opportunity of a lifetime. For over 40 years, I have attended or presided at Christmas Eve services in which the ancient story of the birth of Jesus is retold.

The story is full of good news. Angels who proclaim "Do not be afraid." A young man, Joseph, struggling to do the right thing for his bride. A young Jewish woman, Mary, successfully giving birth to her first-born child. The baby who is named Emmanuel, which means "God with us." And every year, Christians have the audacity to suggest that the arrival of this baby, Jesus Christ, means peace on earth, goodwill to all.



The story is also full of tragedy. The young couple is living in a country that is occupied by Rome, a foreign military power. They are forced to be away from home by government edict. There is no room for Mary and Joseph in the inn, and the birth of their child happens in an animal stable. And then within a chapter of this familiar story, the Bible tells of many innocents being killed and Mary, Joseph, and their child fleeing as refugees to a foreign country.

Each year at Christmas story I've sung the Christmas carols and have developed a sense of what Bethlehem should be: "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie." But I've been in Bethlehem twice in the last two weeks, and it is not still, or quiet, or peaceful. Rather Bethlehem is still a place of military occupation, a place of home demolitions, and a place with its own overcrowded refugee camps.

Tragically as you approach Checkpoint 300, a heavily armed gate in the eight-metre-high separation wall between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, the Israeli soldiers, and men and women no older than Mary and Joseph, proclaim the same message as the innkeeper—"no room."

This year both the tragedy and occasionally the good news of this story are all around me. For the last month I have been a volunteer with the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). This program was created by the World Council of Churches in response to a request from the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem for a group of internationals to come to the West Bank and experience daily life under Israeli occupation.

As an ecumenical accompanier (EA), my role is to provide protective presence to a vulnerable community, to monitor and report human rights abuses, and to support Palestinians and Israelis working together for peace.

Yanoun, the village where I'm living, looks peaceful enough most of the time and it would be easy to wonder why this tiny village needs the presence of internationals to offer protective presence. Unfortunately, after several years of intimidation by Israeli settlers from the illegal Israeli settlement of Itamar, land was stolen, homes were entered, people were threatened and beaten, property and crops were destroyed, and the villagers were forced to flee in 2002.

Shortly after the residents of Yanoun fled, Israeli peace activists and internationals moved into the village, providing a protective presence that allowed villagers to slowly

move back to their homes. The EAPPI has provided this protective presence in the village of Yanoun since 2003.

Last Monday would be a good example of our work. Early Monday morning, we received notice that the village of Asiral al-Qibliya had had an incident of settler violence overnight. This village was one of five we visited in the last week which involved Israeli settler violence. Reuters notes that attacks by settlers against Palestinian property in the West Bank have risen by 57 percent in the first seven months of 2011 compared with the same period last year ([www.trust.org/alertnet/news/factbox-facts-about-price-tag-attacks-blamed-on-jewish-settlers](http://www.trust.org/alertnet/news/factbox-facts-about-price-tag-attacks-blamed-on-jewish-settlers)). Many of these are what are known as “price tag” attacks. A “price tag,” according to the *New York Times*, is when a group of Israeli settlers “exact a price from local Palestinians or from the Israeli security forces for any action taken against their settlement enterprise.”

Asira al-Qibliya has approximately 3,000 residents and is located between the settlements of Yitzhar and Bracha, which, unfortunately, are well known for their violent behavior toward local Palestinians. That morning we interviewed over 20 individuals for over four hours. We visited seven homes that were vandalized and had tea with seven different groups of people.

We were told that about 1:00 a.m., somewhere between 40 and 150 settlers came into the village. The number was hard to estimate because most of the victims believed a large group of settlers split up and attacked each of the seven homes simultaneously. The smallest number we heard of was 40 attackers.

We were told that the settlers arrived with masks on their faces and with the support of Israeli Defense Forces, who appeared to do nothing to prevent the attack. For about 30 minutes, settlers threw rocks through windows in homes and vehicles, broke into one home, attempted to burn a car, and successfully generated significant fear among the Palestinian families who were attacked. (*The damage was documented with photographs.*)

We were told that after about 30 minutes, Palestinian men from other parts of the village started to arrive and the victims began to come out of their homes to resist the attack. As the settlers fell back, the Israeli Defense Forces used tear gas and what are called sound bombs and light bombs to protect their retreat.

Two pregnant women were sent to the hospital just after the attack ended and one was delivered by Caesarian before morning. The families told us that both mother and child were doing well.

Many of the people we talked to were still in shock, some were afraid, some were angry; almost all were frustrated because they didn't know where to turn for help. I was very impressed with two brave Israelis—a man and woman from Yesh Din, an Israeli not-for-profit organization that takes concrete action against the constant human rights abuses inflicted on the Palestinian population in the occupied Palestinian Territory. Given the events of the previous evening, this was a hostile crowd—but the two members of Yes Din patiently took statements from everyone who would talk to them. Their goal, as I understand it, was to listen, look for evidence, and attempt to build a case so that criminal charges could be laid.

We sat with one victim who served us tea in a living room with broken glass and rocks strewn across the floor. He said, “The problem is not the window; I can buy a new window. The problem is I live here. This is my home, my family, my children. My children know that they stole my land; now my children know they can invade my

home. My main concern is my children. How will they be after 20 years of these attacks?"

According to Christian tradition, Jesus was born 50 kilometres down the road in Bethlehem, a city that was at that time occupied by the Romans. Now Bethlehem is controlled by another occupying country: Israel. If Jesus was born in Bethlehem today, he would be a Palestinian. He would be raised in a home that was under threat of home demolition. He would not be able to go to Jerusalem to work or to pray without a permit—which is difficult to obtain, especially for young men. If he was able to obtain a permit, he would have to line up for 90–120 minutes each morning at Checkpoint 300 with the other 2,800 men and women who begin lining up before 4:00 a.m.

Life under occupation was difficult for Jews of the first century, and is difficult for Palestinians now.

People tell me that this conflict is complicated, and in some way it is. I have no significant insights that might lead to the reduction of violence and fear and move both sides toward peace. At another level, I'm convinced that it is not complicated at all. It is simply the occupation. I am not questioning Israel's right to exist, but I am convinced that the illegal occupation of the West Bank by Israel must end.

I will be here for two more months and tonight, when I gather with others to celebrate Christmas Eve in Bethlehem, I will pray. I will pray for a just peace: a peace that will guarantee security, equality before the law, freedom of movement for all, for both Palestinians and Israelis who live in the West Bank and Israel. I will pray for peace and encouragement in the hearts of those who seek peace in this corner of the world. I will pray that men and women on both sides of this issue can move from rigid ideological positions to a place where they can see the humanity and suffering of those they call enemy.

If you are foolish enough (or courageous enough) to on occasion pray, I invite you to join me. I don't think it matters very much whether you call the sacred presence G\_d, or Allah, or Holy Trinity, or Creator—for the One above, behind, and beneath each of our traditions, is One and calls each of us to work for a just and lasting peace.

Thom Davies

*A version of this letter was published in The Hamilton Spectator, December 24, 2011.*

---

To learn more, visit Thom's blog at Thom In Palestine (<http://thominpalestine.wordpress.com>), or view photos of EAPPI work taken by United Church accompaniers (<http://unitedchurch.smugmug.com/IsraelPalestine>).

Thom works for The United Church of Canada as an ecumenical accompanier serving on the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) ([www.eappi.org](http://www.eappi.org)). The views contained herein are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of his employer (The United Church of Canada) or the World Council of Churches.



The United Church of Canada, 3250 Bloor St. West, Toronto, ON M8X 2Y4  
1-800-268-3781 or 416-231-7680 ext. 4017; [pip@united-church.ca](mailto:pip@united-church.ca)