



They called it the J-term in seminary, for that first month of the year as we transitioned from the fall to spring semesters: a time when we were invited to dive into some area of church specialty that may require a bit more attention for the world terrain going forward. I was fortunate that one of those years they offered a trip to the Middle East. I was fortunate enough for the possibility to read portions of Scripture in the very places where they supposedly occurred: in the Jericho's and the Capernaum's and the Sea of Galilee's and the Bethsaida's. I was fortunate enough to be eerily

close to what so many of humanity consider the spots where the world was changed forever.

However, we were also informed from the very first mention of this trip that this wouldn't just be about the tourist spots, but about meeting people who call these supposedly sacred destinations their very home. We were going to meet and engage in conversation with Israelis and Palestinians, the ones who will never be known by television cameras or internet blogs or the Christians who just want to maximize their itinerary list.

It was unfortunate to see the places where many people insist they experience this overwhelming sense of peace and inspiration and a Holy Spirit jolt; and yet, in those very places for far too many, is not only fear, but trepidation. It was unfortunate to see the faces behind the statistics that the rest of the world skims through on the bottom of television screens and on their phones. It was unfortunate to see people who do not fit the standard mold of the news story that would make it so much easier for the rest of us to pick a side and just stay there. It was unfortunate to see Israelis who desired to live alongside Palestinians and Palestinians who wish to be neighbors with Israelis, because well, they're not supposed to exist at all from our 60-second sound-byte perspective. It was unfortunate to see utter despair in the place that should elevate all the hope imaginable; but, somehow, somehow, it still does.

I remember Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, where they just completed their own version of a vacation Bible school for the local youth, and not just trying to go through Bible stories, but doing all they can to shape those children into believing in a world where Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side, no matter how much the rest of the world refuses to believe it for themselves. For the last several days of our trip, we stayed in Jerusalem, the very place where the prophet Isaiah that we heard from today, hopes there would be rejoicing to last forever. But as tensions escalated even then, there was a greater presence of the Israeli military in the streets. There was a fair share of fear to be sure, but still, somehow, somehow, this hope that didn't make any sense at all.

And what has stuck with me the most ever since is not the Jericho's or the Capernaum's or the Sea of Galilee's or the Bethsaida's, but this one night when it felt like we were in the Upper Room, where Jesus supposedly shared his last meal with his disciples before the three days that would change the world forever. But on that night, about two thousand years later, we heard from this Israeli man nearly killed by a suicide bombing. However, for some mind-boggling reason, he was part of this alliance of hundreds of organizations and hundreds of thousands of Israelis and Palestinians unbelievably insisting on working together for peace. And I still remember that one of my seminary classmates was married to an audiologist, and as were in a room with rather ancient architecture not making it easy to hear the speaker, she would place her hand over her ear, as if to keep out any distracting noise to focus on these words that didn't make any sense whatsoever. It's as if she was hearing the most awe-inspiring hope she ever experienced. Because why would he still have hope in

Jerusalem and all the Middle East when the rest of the world isn't so sure they want to travel there anymore? Why would he still have any desire for peace at all when someone on the other side tried to kill him? Why would they have any inkling towards love and compassion and grace when it seems to get them nowhere? Why would they keep on doing this work that seems to make the baby steps of progress while their respective leaders wouldn't mind wiping each other off the face of the earth?

I don't know that many would want to join the prophet Isaiah in rejoicing over Jerusalem or the Middle East at all anymore. I don't know if many believe the words from that very prophet who insisted that God would comfort Jerusalem, where it is perhaps one of the most dangerous places in all the world. I do know that humans like to pick sides and stay there and not allow for any exceptions to their rule. I know we do not always have the time or desire to dig deeper into the humanity behind the stories. I know we only have so much emotional bandwidth for our own stories close to home. I know we lose hope from time to time, and if there is any place to lose it, it is the place that the One with all the love and compassion and grace imaginable walked amongst a humanity that wasn't so sure if the Gospel would ever come to them.

Jerusalem is more than entitled to give up on any hope whatsoever, and yet, far too many have not. For some reason beyond comprehension, far too many remain committed to a peace beyond our understanding. Far too many have insisted on being there for each other when the world believes all they do is inflict harm on the other. Far too many still believe that God is alive, and not just in the tourist markers in the Jericho's and the Capernaum's and the Sea of Galilee's and the Bethsaida's, but in the depths of their weary but still strong as ever hearts. Far too many in the world have given up on them altogether, but God has not. And God never will. And no matter how much we lose heart over whatever despair may be in our own story, including the stories maybe hardly anyone else knows, no matter what, God will never give up on us. For God not only rejoices still over Jerusalem, but over all of us, as if the very hope brought to life in Jesus Christ, will never ever vanish from within us. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!