

An Advent guide with reflections on Palestine/Israel



Each week during Advent read firsthand accounts from recently returned Ecumenical Accompaniers (EAs) of their experiences during their deployment with the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel ([WCC-EAPPI](#)). Along with their stories and photos are bible readings, further resources and prayers to offer. We encourage you to use these prayers and reflections for your own Advent journey and to share with others.

EAs deploy for three-month placements, living alongside vulnerable Palestinian communities and bear witness to the communities' suffering. They work alongside an international Christian network standing in solidarity with people of all faiths, building the foundations for justice and peace in Palestine and Israel.

Together at this exceptionally challenging time let us journey alongside people in the Holy Land who are suffering today in the land which embeds the footsteps of Jesus.

This is not an official EAPPI document. Opinions expressed herein represent the opinions of the EAs involved and do not necessarily represent the views of the EAPPI program or the World Council of Churches.

This resource is produced by the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network ([PIEN](#)) with assistance from returned EA Rev Dr Helen Richmond. PIEN is a network of Australian Christians and supporters who are seeking a lasting peace in Palestine and Israel.

My name is **Louis Walsh**. After retiring from a career in civil engineering, I was fortunate to be offered a position as an Ecumenical Accompanier (EA) under the EAPPI programme from June to September 2023. I took on this deployment to contribute to a peaceful solution to the Israeli / Palestinian conflict and to further my lifelong love of middle eastern culture and history and the Arabic language.



***Ecumenical
Accompaniers
in Hebron old
town***

In June 2023 I started my role in Hebron, the second largest city in the West Bank after Jerusalem and a city with a population similar to that of Hobart. On 6th July my EA colleague Sarah and I had the privilege of escorting a delegation of Australian federal politicians around the souk and environs of the Ibrahimi Mosque and through the 'closed military zone' prohibited to Palestinians. We were able to explain to the delegates the effects of the occupation on the lives of ordinary Hebronites:

- Settler violence and the impact of Israeli military operations;
- Access restrictions and their effect on economic life;
- Changing demographics;
- Social isolation;
- Lack of access to education;
- Lack of access to health services;
- Restricted access to worship;
- Poor municipal services (including water and sanitation) and the destruction of urban heritage.



***Weekly
settler
incursion
into the
Hebron
souk***

As space constraints prevent me from addressing these comprehensively, I will only relate two incidences of violence that we investigated.

On 30 June 2023 an Arabic-speaking colleague and I talked to a group of about eight Palestinian youths in the Khalet Hador area. Three of these (all in the same class) had been imprisoned by the Israelis as eleven-year-old children. One, who had been charged with throwing a Molotov cocktail, did not admit guilt but was imprisoned for five years under administrative detention. This child had been shot in the leg at the time of his arrest. Another youth (who was merely present with him at the time of the alleged offence) was also jailed for five years administrative detention. The third, who was also not directly involved, was given two and a half years detention. This last youth showed us the wound from a bullet which passed through his right knee. He sustained this wound at the time of his arrest.

At about 10pm on Sunday 16 July 2023 Abdullah, a 15-year-old Palestinian boy, was walking uphill along the footpath of Prayers Road when he was struck deliberately from behind by a car travelling in the same direction. The car was driven by an Israeli settler who departed the scene. The incident occurred within 200m of the family house and in full view of the adjacent Al Salaymeh military checkpoint. When Israeli soldiers arrived, they initially denied that the settler had struck the child with his car. When the boy's father persuaded police to look at Israeli CCTV footage of the incident, the authorities refused to identify the settler involved in the incident.

Abdullah's arm had been injured by the impact and an Israeli ambulance was called. The Israeli paramedics checked Abdullah's blood pressure and a Palestinian ambulance was called to bring him to hospital. The Palestinian ambulance arrived 30 minutes later but was obstructed by settlers and had to turn back. It returned an hour later and was finally able to take Abdullah to hospital.

After witnessing similar incidences of human rights violations in Hebron and elsewhere in the West Bank, I returned to Australia on 15 September 2023. Since then, I have been processing what I witnessed during my deployment. The recent attacks on Israeli are appalling, and the subsequent attacks on civilian populations in Gaza have been heartbreaking. Now more than ever Australia must help push for a permanent just peace so that all people in the area can live their lives without the threat of violence.

My name is **Monica Keily**. I am the granddaughter of a Jewish Auschwitz survivor, and I deployed to East Jerusalem as an Ecumenical Accompanier in 2018 and 2022. I shudder at the ongoing and escalating persecution of Palestinians by the state of Israel, which is often incorrectly asserted in the name of all Jewish people.

During both deployments, I saw first-hand manifestations of state-inflicted racial violence and supremacist ideology. During my deployment, I witnessed first-hand countless human rights abuses. These included child arrests, punitive home demolitions, settler violence, indiscriminate police and military brutality.

While the situation in Jerusalem and the West Bank was very dire in my first deployment in 2018, it was significantly more tense and with greater levels of violence from settlers and soldiers in 2022. This trend is associated with the extreme Israeli government currently in place, which emboldens radical settlers to take direct action against Palestinian civilians.

The number of human rights violations in Jerusalem was spiking in 2022, but has since gotten even worse. During my deployment, I remember how it felt to hold a sweat-drenched, terrified Palestinian two-year-old boy as he breathed quickly into the nape of my neck. He had been tossed, airborne, along a gravel path by soldiers intent on demolishing his home without notice. Palestinians have been dehumanized through the rhetoric of the occupation to the point where this behaviour by Israeli soldiers is not unusual. It was heart breaking to listen to Palestinian families talk about their sons and daughters lost to a brutal and very current military occupation in the occupied Palestinian Territories.

From Jan-Mar 2023, 79 structures were targeted for demolition in East Jerusalem alone. I saw Palestinian children who dismantled, like practiced clockwork, a temporary kindergarten which was donated by the EU and erected on Vatican land in the failed hope of deterring its demolition.

I remember being alarmed as I realized that a Palestinian man with Down Syndrome did not understand soldiers' commands as he walked down the wrong lane at a checkpoint, and witnessed the soldiers bully and abuse him for this lack of understanding.

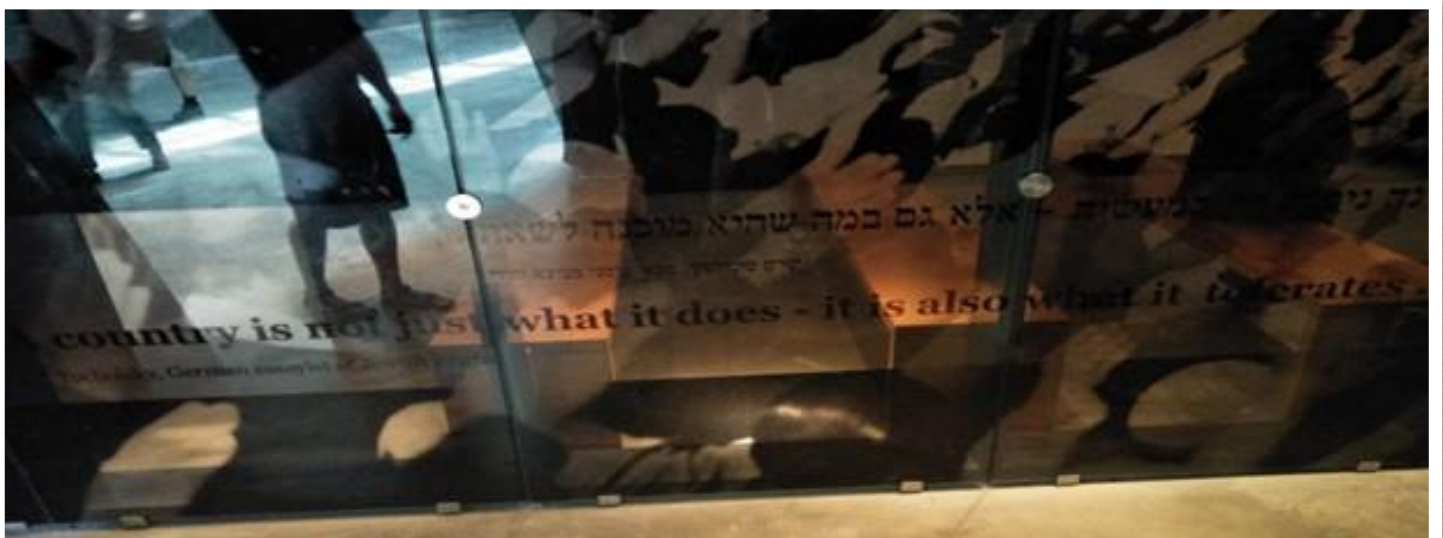


Photo taken at the entrance to Yad Vashem, Jerusalem; it reads: "A country is not just what it does - it is also what it tolerates"

Bible Reading: Mark 13:24 -37

The Coming of the Son of Man

'But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The Necessity for Watchfulness

'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Further Reflection

What strikes you most in the stories shared?

Read through them again and ask yourself these questions:

'What if it were me?' 'What if I was the one experiencing or witnessing these human rights violations?

What message would you want people in Australia to understand?

Prayer

God, this Advent as we prepare for the coming of Jesus, we remember your gift of peace for the world.

Hear our prayer for the people of the Holy Land.

Hold in your care and protection those who live with uncertainty and fear.

We remember Palestinian people of the Occupied Territories, the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem who have waited too long for recognition, justice and freedom.

Living under a brutal occupation, they are censored, criminalised and punished while the world seems to ignore their suffering and fails to act.

Be with those who know too well the frustration of waiting...

Waiting for a permit.

Waiting in queues and at checkpoints.

Waiting for a curfew to be lifted.

Waiting for the bulldozers to come that will destroy their home, business, school, or mosque.

Waiting for news that a child who has thrown stones has not been shot with live bullets.

Waiting to know where their husband or wife, son or daughter is being held without charge in military detention.

Waiting for the bombing to stop long enough to bury their loved ones.

God who waits with all who suffer, may we wait and pray.

as we envisage a different world that is possible.

Come soon Lord Jesus and set your people free. Amen

Week 2: 10th December 2023

My name is **Helen Richmond** and I am a Uniting church minister. A few months ago, I spent three months deployed in Bethlehem as an Ecumenical Accompanier, as part of a program which started 20 years ago when churches of the Holy Land appealed to World Council of Churches (WCC) to send international observers to provide protective presence for vulnerable communities and to witness the situation there.



Photo: Jubbet ad-Dhib school before it was demolished

It was an intense time. Every evening was spent writing up incidents of violence and abuse being directed at Palestinian people including children. One heartbreaking incident was seeing the demolition of Jubbet ad-Dhib school (see photograph), one of a number of schools in Area C which had requested EAPPI to provide protective presence. Sadly this didn't make a difference when 50 Israeli soldiers sealed off the area and the bulldozers came in. Staff and students of the school continued to hold classes in small groups under the olive trees.

This was one of 152 incidents in the Bethlehem Governance area our group reported and each is painful to remember. Our team saw Palestinian farmers' olive trees that had been vandalised, cut down or burnt by Israeli settlers, and shepherds in Kisan harassed by Israeli settlers and soldiers making them feel there is no future for their children specially when their school, mosque and homes have demolition orders. We visited communities who had their water supply arbitrarily cut off by occupation authorities. We reported on terrifying night raids and arrests in Bethlehem's refugee camps and in villages and towns across the region especially those near Israeli settlements. We witnessed intimidation of children going to school and reported on the tragic killing of a student by Israeli soldiers. A child holding a Palestinian flag in 'Ayda refugee camp had a sniper bullet shoot their hand. We witnessed people suffering under relentless human rights violations of the occupation including the random 'flying checkpoints' that make movement in and out of communities difficult, home demolitions, and confiscation of equipment. We reported on incidents of families losing their livelihoods, the demolition of a restaurant, a chicken shed, three mechanic workshops and agricultural buildings. The occupation means living with constant uncertainty and stress. Returning to Australia I feel a sense of responsibility to share what I witnessed.

We also met many remarkable people, Palestinians and Israelis who are working for peace and justice who show determination, resilience, and hopefulness despite the dire situation they face. This is demonstrated by the Nasser family. At their request we regularly visited their farm, 'Tent of Nations', offering protective presence and solidarity. Mostly they asked that we share their story with others, because it is similar to many stories of what farming communities face in Area C in the West Bank. This family show unbelievable courage in the face of overwhelming obstacles, ever encroaching settlements and costly legal and personal battles to gain recognition of their land.

Interview with Daoud Nasser recorded September 2022 by Amos Trust

Daoud, like many Palestinian Christians wish to stay in the land of their birth as part of a community of Indigenous Christians in the Holy Land still faithfully witnessing and serving despite the hardships but they are being pushed out. They wonder if the rest of the world hears their cries. Friends in Palestine report increasing violence by settlers and soldiers. One small community I visited, Qanoob, no longer remains after settlers cut off their water supply, stole their sheep and burnt their tents. Out of sight, out of mind another Palestinian community pushed off their land.

I am a community worker and law student from Meanjin, Brisbane. I deployed to the Jordan Valley as an Ecumenical Accompanier from August to November 2022 and travelled extensively through Israel and the West Bank. I observed ample prospects for peacebuilding: Palestinian communities committed to nonviolence and coexistence; Israeli civil society working to advance peace and human rights. I saw substantial investment in peacebuilding and humanitarian initiatives from foreign States and international civil society. This bona fide peacebuilding, however, creaks under constant pressure applied by hardliners who wield violence and hatred to dispossess, humiliate and violate human rights.



A shepherd and his flock weave through military compounds (right) and the illegal settlement of Hemdat (top left). Jack Gibney

The Jordan Valley is a substantial portion of the West Bank and is almost entirely designated as “Area C” under Israeli security and administrative control. Its sheer size, fertile fields and rich aquifers bestow substantial potential for agricultural development and economic activity, and it is a critical component of any functional future Palestinian State. The Palestinians who live on these lands include refugees from homelands in now-Israel and indigenous Bedouins. They are hardworking people with deep connections to the land on which they live and work.

I became well acquainted with one community situated near the illegal settlements and military compounds of Hemdat and Ro'i. Several Palestinian families have lived there for generations eking an honest living working herds through hilly pastures. In recent years Settlers have used the neighbouring illegal settlements to establish outposts and expand their own agricultural operations into land owned by Palestinians. Zionist groups provide the manpower and funding for these operations, while the Israeli military emboldens them by providing escorts and the threat and use of force.



Sheep graze around anti-vehicle mines near the illegal settlement of Hemdat. Jack Gibney

Even when unmolested during pastoral work, these Palestinians manage substantial dangers from unexploded ordinances scattered by the IDF, which I observed to include mortar shells, anti-vehicle mines, and hand grenades. Most families that we spoke with in these communities reported having lost at least one family member to UXO. They are routinely scattered throughout their fields and children frequently mistake UXO for toys. On 10 October I learned of the latest victim—a boy of about 10—who picked up UXO left in his family's field while shepherding.



A group of armed Settlers persist with blocking the community's access road, despite the presence of IDF and Israeli Police. Jack Gibney.

In September I was accompanying a shepherd from the area when we were approached and menaced by Settlers. We were assaulted by the Settlers who pushed and shoved us as we nonviolently retreated, focusing on the women in our group who they forced to the ground on several occasions using blows to the back of the shoulders, knees and calves. Once back in the community tensions were high as several cars of armed Settlers drove into the village and blocked its only exit for several hours. Police, soldiers, and Israeli Human Rights Activists eventually arrived but the situation took hours to defuse. The Settlers returned to harass the family at all times of the night and day over the following weeks. Parents expressed deep sorrow over the trauma such circumstances imposed on their children.

My experience illustrated the critical role that the international community has in the peace process in Israel and Palestine. It is when the international community looks the other way that the worst evils arise, and when it instead insists on adherence to the protection of human rights and the promotion of peacebuilding that humanity prevails. Sincerely **Jack Gibney**

Bible Reading: Mark 1: 1-8

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight”’,

so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the straps of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

Additional Resource

Read this article [‘A painter, a poet, a novelist: the artists being killed in Gaza’](#)

What impacts you most in the stories shared or in this article?

Prayer

God, we remember those who raise their voices, who cry out in the wilderness. May they be heard and not silenced. Our stories today remind us of shepherding communities in the Jordan Valley and farming families like the Tent of all Nations in the Bethlehem Governance area where people struggle to stay on their land.

Strengthen the voices of those who advocate for their rights.
Save them from being pushed off their land or having their houses and livelihoods demolished.

Thank you for those who, like John who cried out in the wilderness, herald your kingdom, even when it appears that injustice prevails. Through their efforts they shine a light on what needs to change and speak up for vulnerable communities. Help us to raise our voices too.

We remember those who at great personal cost bring to the world’s attention the suffering of those whose humanity is being denied who are being unjustly treated. Some like Shireen Abu Akleh have paid the ultimate price for speaking truth to power. With sadness we remember many journalists, UN staff, artists, poets, musicians and human rights workers in Gaza who have lost their lives. Through faith we believe their voices still reverberate and others take up the song, that we join in singing this Advent, ‘Freedom is coming, O yes I know’.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who showed us that love poured out is never in vain.

Amen



Me observing the ploughing, along with one of the settlers' dogs



Israeli youth from Avigayil outpost using sheep to vandalise Palestinian crops



Children from Isfey al Fauqa showing us their new school



The destroyed school of Isfey al Fauqa 2 days later.

My name is **Kim Jennings**. I spent 3 months in the South Hebron Hills as an Ecumenical Accompanier, returning home in February 2023. I am a neurological physiotherapist working in Melbourne. The first photo is of me supporting a Palestinian farmer who wanted to plant barley on his land to feed his animals. Unfortunately, there was an illegal outpost built on the edge of his land, Avigayil (recently promoted to a settlement by the current Israeli Government). On this day settlers arrived with their dogs to frighten the Palestinian farmers and the EAs. The settlers swarmed the farmers tractors and tried to damage them. The army arrived and did nothing to the settlers but stopped the tractors from ploughing for an hour, eventually allowing the ploughing to occur. This was a good day as on most other occasions the farmers were denied the opportunity to resume ploughing their land. The window for ploughing and planting in this desert region is really tight. We watched the IDF disrupt ploughing constantly, by multiple means, often confiscating the farmers' tractors and keeping them for weeks to months on the army base or in the settlements. The Palestinian farmers were then charged around 300 Sheckles a day for "storage", but the army controlled when the tractor would be released and therefore how much "storage" payment was required. If they wanted their tractor returned, they had to pay the fine although they had done nothing to warrant the confiscation. Tractors were always returned when it was too late to plough. Farmers reported that tractors stored on settlements were often returned with sugar in the engine.

Once the barley started to grow, we witnessed Israeli youth from the outpost trespassing on this land almost daily, with their goats and sheep, destroying the young barley. The farmers were helpless to stop it. When they tried to fence their crops, the army stopped them. The army made 10 men sit for two hours in the cold and then sent them all home despite them having a permit to fence. If the farmers confronted the youth, carloads of settlers arrived. We attended Palestinian farmers who had been hospitalised with fractured ribs, head injuries and general bruising. One was an old man in his 70's recovering from cardiac surgery. The Israeli forces are specifically there to protect the settlers (and are often settlers themselves). That is their mandate. The Palestinians can call the police, but the policeman is also a settler. We met one local farmer who had been shot by settlers. The farmer spent 7 months in hospital having his stomach reconstructed. No charges have ever been laid.

We visited the Isfey al Fauqa school in Masafer Yatta, donated by members of the European Union. The children were able to write their names in my notebook in both Arabic and English. They were excited about their new school. Two days later the IDF came with their bulldozer (driven by a local settler) and destroyed the school. They threw stun grenades into the classroom amongst the 22 primary school children attending classes. You can see some of the children in the photo. Twice the EU replaced the building with tents, but on both occasions the IDF returned and destroyed the tents. Now the children walk 6km to the closest alternative school. The IDF confiscates cars of Palestinians driven in the "Firing Zone" of Masafer Yatta (but notably, not those of settlers) so the children have to walk. The children told us that most days the soldiers harass them whilst they walk. Sometimes the soldiers tell them to go home. They said that they pretend to go home but then sneak around the other side of the mountain and get themselves to school. Senator Wong, these stories are the tip of the iceberg from my three months in the South Hebron hills where I witnessed a whole village being gassed by the IDF, stun grenades thrown directly at civilians, reporters targeted with gas, and multiple other atrocities. These people are mainly Bedouin farmers just trying to live quietly on their land. It has been horrific to witness the hopeless situation of the Palestinian community.

I am a retired SAPOL Police Superintendent **Andrew Telfer** and I first deployed in 2019 on a three month deployment in Hebron in the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). I was alarmed by the parallel legal systems in occupied West Bank, with one law for Palestinians and another for the Israeli settlers. This is an issue close to my heart as a former police officer.

In November 2022 I returned to the Holy Land with EAPPI and after spending a further three months in East Jerusalem, returned to Australia in February 2023. It was a privilege to be able to extend my understanding of the daily experiences faced by Palestinian people living under Israeli Occupation. It was also an emotional time learning of the increased human rights violations occurring as a result of the Occupation – the escalation of building demolitions and land seizures, the increasing harassment of Palestinians by some of the illegal Israeli settlers in Jerusalem and the West Bank, the devastating number of Palestinians dying as a result of Israeli military actions, and more.



This photo was taken in front of the entrance to a Palestinian home at Beit Ijza where our team had been invited by community leaders. The Palestinian family living in this home had farmed the surrounding land for many years. A few years ago, after a harvest and when the ground was bare, Israeli settlers took aerial photographs of the land and convinced Israeli authorities that it was not being worked.

The second photo, taken closer to the house, shows that it is now surrounded, on 3 sides, by an Israeli settlement which was built after the farming land was seized. Initially, the family could only enter or leave their house by ringing the IDF to have them open the gate. A fence was built along the driveway but had to be made higher because settlers were throwing items at the family, including the children, in an effort to force them to leave their house.



The number of Palestinian buildings being demolished or seized by Israeli authorities continues to climb with 959 properties demolished or seized across the Occupied Palestinian Territories in 2022. That's an average of 2.6 properties every day of the year! 246 structures were in East Jerusalem and 411 persons, including 203 children, were displaced as a result. Close to the house in Beit Ijza a new road has been built to provide quick access for settlers to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The road is exclusively for use by settlers while Palestinians living in the same area are required to travel on roads which are generally in poor condition, follow a circuitous route to reach a checkpoint in the Separation Wall and are generally very congested. Travel time to the centre of Jerusalem has dramatically increased for Palestinians living outside the wall but it is a very different situation for Israeli settlers. This is only one of the many separate systems which exist for Palestinian and Israeli residents in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. One system for the occupier and another for the occupied!

Bible Reading: John 1: 6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

The Testimony of John the Baptist

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but he confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said,

'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
"Make straight the way of the Lord"',

as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Prayer

Our stories today tell of unimaginably challenging situations faced by people in the South Hebron Hills and East Jerusalem. Despite the dire situations described, there are many examples of those who believe 'It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness'.

Give thanks for the witness of Christians in the Holy Land who hold onto hope in a God who is born among us in the midst of our darkness.

Take time to pray for remarkable Palestinians and Israelis whose lives embody a determination to see walls come down, who believe that a just and peaceful future is possible and ask God to help us believe that too.

Poem

Today I am taking sides.

I am taking the side of Peace.
Peace, which I will not abandon even when its
voice is drowned out by hurt and hatred,
bitterness of loss, cries of right and wrong.

I am taking the side of Peace
whose name has barely been spoken
in this winnerless war.

I will hold Peace in my arms,
and share my body's breath,
lest Peace be added to the body count.

I will call for de-escalation even when I want
nothing more than to get even.

I will do it in the service of Peace.
I will make a clearing in the overgrown
thicket of cause and effect so Peace can
breathe for a minute and reach for the sky.

I will do what I must to save the life of Peace.

I will breathe through tears.
I will swallow pride.
I will bite my tongue.

I will offer love without testing for deservingness.

So don't ask me to wave a flag today
unless it is the flag of Peace.

Don't ask me to sing an anthem
unless it is a song of Peace.

Don't ask me to take sides
unless it is the side of Peace.

Rabbi Irwin Keller, Oct. 17, 2023

Week 4: 24th December 2023

My name is **Pam Hartgerink** and I was an Ecumenical Accompanier (EA) in Hebron from August to November, 2022. I am retired and applied to be an EA as this seemed to be something practical I could do to make a contribution to a long-standing international human rights issue and to learn more about the situation. What I saw and experienced truly shocked me!

Hebron is the only city in the West Bank with Israeli settlements in the centre of the city, and is divided between H1, controlled by the Palestinian Authority; and H2, controlled by Israel with around 2,000 soldiers to protect 600+ Israeli settlers who have taken over many Palestinian homes and buildings in the heart of the city.

***Supporting Palestinian families
with the olive harvest in H2***

The UN has counted at least 22 permanent Israeli military checkpoints in H2, each with a number of surveillance cameras, in addition to partial and temporary checkpoints. There are 35 Palestinian primary and secondary schools in H2, and most students and teachers need to pass through at least one checkpoint on foot on their way to and from school, sometimes several. An important part of our role as EAs in Hebron was to monitor the checkpoints students and teachers pass through going to/from school as they often face delays, harassment and violence at the checkpoints. An example of harassment our team witnessed was when two brothers aged 7 and 9 were seized by soldiers outside their school in H2 when they were leaving to go home. They were taken to a checkpoint and held there for 4 hours with nothing to eat or drink. The soldiers told the brothers they knew they hadn't thrown any stones, but said they would only release them if they told the soldiers the names of other boys who had allegedly thrown stones earlier in the day. Even if the brothers had been willing to give names, they couldn't as this was their first week at that school and they didn't know anyone! The brothers were only released when a representative of the Red Cross came personally to the checkpoint to make sure they were released.

Israeli soldiers also enter schools, for example claiming to look for children who have allegedly thrown stones, or to take down Palestinian flags in the window. Often these incursions are accompanied by violence, in particular firing teargas inside and around the school.



Examples of Palestinian children's interactions with Israeli soldiers in H2, Hebron

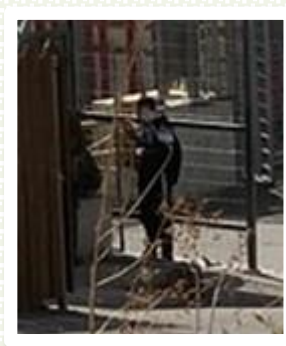
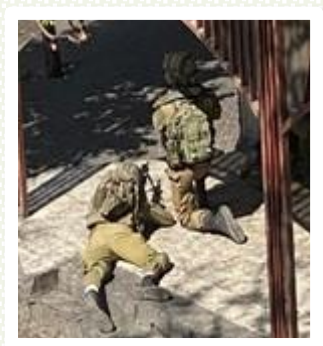
Returning to Australia and comparing the educational experience of Australian children highlighted just how extreme the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories really is. Education is such a vital element in the development and future of individuals and any society.

The daily grind of delays, harassment, violence, humiliations and abuse from Israeli soldiers and settlers towards students and teachers (indeed all Palestinians) is relentless and shocking to witness, and from conversations with teachers, parents and other Palestinians, has a profound effect on the children's education.

My name is **Lyndall Edwards**, and I was witness to the daily lives of Palestinians living under military occupation in the Occupied Palestinian city of Hebron, in the south of the West Bank. I refer you to Pam Hartgerink's letter as an excellent summation of the physical barriers enforced in the centre and fringes of Hebron, where I was an Ecumenical Accompanier from August to October in 2022.

These physical barriers create substantial community fractures, with thousands of Hebron citizens having to pass through armed military checkpoints (CP), and submit to humiliating body-searches, to make every day journeys to work or school, or to places of worship. These daily unjust restrictions are on a scale that Australians, who live under the rule of law, could barely make sense of.

L-R: Military presence in Hebron; queueing for entry to Friday Prayers; a blind-folded child waits at a Hebron CP.



All photos on this page by Lyndall Edwards 2022

The daily terror inflicted upon children is what broke my heart the most, among the daily human rights abuses I saw. While visiting the EAPPI placement in Bethlehem I sat with the devastated family of Rayan Suleiman, a seven-year-old boy who died in the village of Tuqua, near Bethlehem. Tuqua is ringed by illegal settlements, and access to and from school is particularly dangerous in these parts of the OPT. Never-the-less, Rayan was happy at school, and already a good student. One Thursday Rayan was chased home by three, fully armed Israeli soldiers. He ran straight upstairs, terrified, and called out to his mother, who went to him. Downstairs, the soldiers began banging on the front door, yelling that they would return in the night to arrest Rayan. On hearing the soldiers, little Rayan raced downstairs in terror to the rear courtyard of the home, where he collapsed and died, presumably from a heart attack brought on by fright. That little boy would have seen his whole life how the occupation treated children and knew what was in store for him. Andrew Wilkie raised Rayan's story in Parliament in 2022, illustrating the injustice and inhumanity Palestinian's suffer under occupation. I hope that more Australians will speak up for Rayan and all the children of Israel and Palestine, that they all may be able to live equally under the rule of law and be a generation that can work together for peace.

L-R: Rayan's grave (IDF at rear); decoration at an occupied Hebron Primary School



Bible Reading: Luke 1: 26-38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Further Reflection

What prayers or actions are you prompted to make in response to hearing these stories?

On the eve of Christmas, when festivities usually abound, the Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem, are calling upon congregations to stand with those facing afflictions by this year foregoing any unnecessarily festive activities. A Bethlehemite writes *"the Municipality have removed Christmas decorations that adorned the city's neighbourhoods for years, as a gesture of mourning for the lives lost and in solidarity with the people in Gaza. In Bethlehem, we anticipate the arrival of Christmas season, which brings joy to our souls, both young and old. However, the continued absence of justice in the Holy Land leaves little room for celebration or joy."*

Prayer

God, with Mary we ask, 'are you sure you have chosen us?'

What does that mean?

Some think being 'chosen' means they are more loved and special to you than others.

Some think it means having exclusive right of the land which is only given to them.

With Mary help us to take up your call to be midwives of hope,
change our fear to faith as we join you in bringing new life to birth,
and allow the fruits of love, joy, justice and peace to grow in our lives.

We will proclaim your love that includes all people without favourites.

We will know your gift of joy as we discern your image in one another.

We will work for a just peace, recognising the wrongs done,
ensuring truth telling is the foundation for reconciliation.

With grace as the bedrock of our lives we will grieve with you
when suffering and pain is inflicted on any of your children.

We will get ready Prince of Peace for you to be born in our lives and our communities as we long for the day
when all children of the Holy Land, Israeli and Palestinian, can live with equality and freedom.

Amen

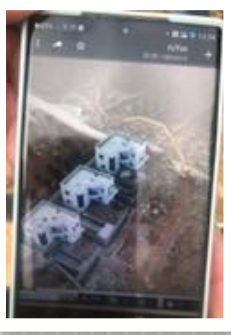
Week 5: Christmas Day

My name is **Robert Jarman**. I have spent a lifetime working in theatre in Tasmania. I served as an Ecumenical Accompanier, November 2022 – February 2023, based in Bethlehem but working mostly in surrounding villages.

The family unit is the much-cherished basis of Palestinian society, so here I will share three stories of families.

AL MINYA, 14 NOVEMBER 2022

While illegal settlements continuously expand, the Israeli occupation authorities refuse over 97% of building permits to enable Palestinian villages to build houses for their children when they grow of age and marry. To avoid homelessness, Palestinians are compelled to build without permits and hope for the best; however Israeli home demolitions have increased substantially in recent years.



On our first day 'in the field', we were alerted to a demolition taking place in the village of Al Minya. We met the man whose property had been destroyed. He had built three, two-storey homes: one for his parents, one for his parents-in-law, and one for himself and his children. All three had been obliterated in a mere fifteen minutes. The man was heavily in debt to various building contractors, and now had nothing to show for his efforts on behalf of his extensive family other than three indistinguishable piles of rubble. The entire family was now homeless; the man's brother came to his aid with at least temporary shelter. Also, in the course of their 'work', the IDF's heavy-equipment had damaged multiple olive trees, a primary source of income, belonging to the man's neighbour.



THE VILLAGE OF KISAN

Kisan village has a population of about 500. 65% of its land has been confiscated, cut-off by the Separation Wall or given to the nearby illegal Israeli settlement, Ma'ale Amos. We spent much time in Kisan, providing protective presence to the goat- and sheep herders, almost all of whom are female. Kisan is small and isolated, and the IDF and settlers are bold in their actions, even in the presence of international observers. Whilst with the shepherds, we witnessed a parade of settlers trespassing through Kisan pastures and threateningly displaying their guns, and a pointless attack by soldiers, who kicked goats and fired sound bombs, resulting in several goats dying or miscarrying.



Sabah leads school holiday reading for shepherd's children.

One of the village leaders is a woman named Sabah, whom we got to know well. She is in her thirties and is married to a policeman, Adnan, who is frequently away for work. They have three children. Sabah is on village council and studying for a Bachelor of Social Work at Bethlehem University. She has recently, almost single-handedly, raised the funds to open a village library, and runs school holiday activities like story-telling. The most striking thing about Sabah and Adnan is how ordinary they are. They are caring parents, responsible community members, charitable neighbours, generous company. They're good people.

One day, the shepherds were attacked by three soldiers. Sabah raced out to the field to intervene (she is multi-lingual). She started filming the attack. A soldier smashed her mobile and attacked her. One of the shepherds photographed the attack and shared the photos with me. Sabah suffered damage to tissue in her neck requiring weeks of medical treatment.



A Soldier-Settler (Yossi) and two soldiers attack Sabah.

On another occasion, we were present when soldiers arrested of a twelve-year-old boy and physically assaulted the boy's grandfather and sisters. Sabah was there with her children. Her oldest boy, Uday, is ten, and delightfully cheeky. He loves all types of games, especially soccer. He is a great kid! When the soldiers arrived, Uday run behind me and for the rest of the day, even after the soldiers had gone and we were walking back to the village, he held my hand tight. Suddenly this cheeky kid was a scared little boy who needed reassurance. He is not alone in his need; the occupation has created multiple generations of Palestinians who are live in constant fear, and whose only hope is found in the expression, "Existence IS Resistance".

EVEN AFTER DEATH

In our three months, we reported on three killings of Palestinians in Ad Duheisha Refugee Camp in Bethlehem. All three killings occurred during IDF incursions into the Camp to perform arrests. All three killed were young men who were not the targets of the operations—that is, all three were 'collateral damage'. They were aged 22, 15 and 14.

We learnt of the Israeli practice of withholding bodies. We spoke to the families of two men—19-year-old Fadi Mohammad Ghattas from Ad Duheisha and 17-year-old Mutassim Atallah from Jannata—who were killed by Israeli forces and whose bodies are still to be returned. We also learnt that, in the Bethlehem area alone, there are 18 bodies currently being withheld by Israeli Forces, some dating back to 2016. According to the Geneva Conventions, the parties of an armed conflict must bury the deceased in an honourable way, "if possible according to the rites of the religion to which they belonged and that their graves are respected, properly maintained, and marked in such a way that they can always be recognised".

The grief at the indiscriminate killing of their young sons is impossibly painful, and hard for anyone to imagine; the distress caused by the withholding of bodies, and the inability of the family to provide their loved ones with the respectful burial required not only by their faith but also by common decency, heaps sorrow upon sorrow, bitterness upon bitterness.

Bible Reading: Luke 2:1-7

The Birth of Jesus

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

Prayer

'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.'

God, for many of us, Christmas this year is tinged with sadness specially for those
who have experienced the loss of loved ones.
When we look back over this past year there has been too much pain and suffering to bear,
and heartache and blood shed on a scale we can't comprehend.

We light the Christ candle to remember the gift of hope which the Christmas story offers us.
We remember God clothed in human flesh;
The mystery of God born among us, the sound of the first cry of new life.

God, midwife of hope
Hope was born in poverty and vulnerability, in a land that was occupied.
You know our pain, our grief, our suffering.
As we see the flames of the candle dancing may our spirits be warmed as God wraps us in
love as the Christ child was wrapped in swaddling clothes.
Bring your light into the forgotten places of the world.

Prayer from Sabeel Jerusalem (14 November 2023)

Divine Creator, as we lament all loss of life, we plead for you to send manna to the hungry and multiply their food as Christ did to feed the 5000. Lord, quench the thirst of all who are searching for water and justice. May our prayers ascend to the heavens like incense. Have mercy and protection on all who are suffering, particularly those vulnerable in Gaza. How much longer shall this suffering continue, O Lord?
*Lord in your mercy... **hear our prayer.***

Emmanuel, you were displaced as an infant to Egypt, forced to flee for your life. You were a refugee, vulnerable to suffering and abuse. Lord, as your precious children in Gaza are displaced for the second or even third time from their homes and lands, grant them your protection and mercy. Lord, we pray that you help our unbelief and provide a liberation where all Palestinian refugees can return to their homes with dignity.
*Lord in your mercy... **hear our prayer.***

Blessing

May the God who cares for each one of us give you peace.
May the joy of Christmas seep into your soul.
May the deep healing of the love of God strengthen you and help you continue your journey
to embody your prayers in acts of kindness, solidarity and compassion.

*O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel.*

Additional Prayer Resource

A Prayer of Lament and Hope (used with permission)

Shared 4 November 2023 at Christ at the Checkpoint online event by Lamma Mansour.

God our Lord,

We come to you in this darkness, Hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed; Persecuted, but not abandoned; Struck down, but not destroyed*; Because we carry your *Sumud* (steadfastness) in our souls. (2 Cor 4:8-10).

God of resurrection,

Death is around us, lurks in the corner, threatens our loved ones. Our Saturday is long and dark, And the suffering feels unbearable and endless. In faith, albeit limping, we declare: You have defeated death. Sunday is coming. We believe, help our unbelief. (Mark 9:23-25).

God who knows sorrow, and is acquainted with the deepest grief,

Hold us near while we weep, embrace us while we mourn. Help us feel your tears blend with ours, Our friend who sticks closer than a brother. (Isaiah 53:3, Proverbs 18:24)

God who walked our land proclaiming the good news of the kingdom,

among the white body bags in Gaza, Hug those leaning over them, crying for divine mercy.

Sit with our children shaking with terror, cover their ears from the sound of bombs raining down.

Wander the corridors of our hospitals, overwhelmed with the injured, Strengthen the minds and bodies of our doctors struggling with grief and exhaustion.

God who lifts our burdens,

Lift the rubble and rescue those underneath, with your mighty hand bring them from the edge of death back to life. Clear the air from the smell of burning, Infuse our land with your fragrance of salvation.

God who knit us in our mother's womb,

As we see the children of Gaza write their names on their arms, preparing for a death too soon,

Remind us that you have inscribed their names on the palm of your hand,

That you created their innermost being. (Psalms 139:13, Isaiah 49:16)

God who feeds the hungry,

Protect the bakeries, and those waiting in line to feed their families. As you multiplied the widow's oil, with your miraculous hand feed the people of Gaza. Lift the siege, cease the fire, rain bread down from the heavens.

(Psalms 146:7, 2 Kings 4: Exodus 16:4)

God who dwells in the praises of his people,

Sit in the pews of the churches of Gaza, steady the hearts of worshippers as the airstrikes shake the ground beneath their feet. Listen to our children reciting the prayer as you taught us: "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (Psalm 22:3)

God of comfort,

Embrace those who have lost loved ones – in all the land, Pour your Love in their hearts. Hold their hand as they navigate life after the loss, Comfort them with the peace that passes all understanding.

God of compassion, do not allow the violence we witness to harden our hearts, To desensitise us to the sight of a father mourning his child, or homes reduced to rubbles in the blink of an eye. Protect our minds as we witness the brutality our kin endure on screens, remind us that you have made them, and us, to thrive, to live, to love. Keep our hearts soft, breaking for what breaks yours.

God who flipped tables,

As we encounter selective empathy in our brothers and sisters across the globe, as we hear that our lives matter less than others, as we witness people's apathy to our death, sanctify our anger and let it not turn into bitterness. Help us confront these lies with truth, love and kindness not shown to us. (Mat 21: 12-13)

God who has brought down rulers from their throne and lifted the humble,

As the powerful sow hatred and encourage the bloodshed, as rulers issue meaningless statements and speak hollow words, remind us that you are above all authority, that righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne. (Luke 1:52)

God who is patient,

Hold us near while we question, while we struggle, while we search for you in the rubble. God of light, As the darkness threatens to overwhelm, Shine in us and through us. Amen