

God's Beloved People,

This is written from my notes on the trip to Jerusalem and the occupied territories, January 2009, with 40 other ELCA bishops.

What you notice all night is the soft blue screen on the forward wall of each cabin section in the airplane. Over and over it tells you what used to be fascinating information: *Distance to destination 2906 miles; Time to destination 4:59; Local time at origin* etc, interspersed with a graphic map of the globe and the location of your tiny airplane on it, over it.

But it is a long, long night and despite real improvements in airplane seat design, sleep is in fits and starts, if at all. A flamboyant Jewish woman, dressed in red from her boots to her broad-brimmed hat, has commandeered the two seats to the right and is sleeping with her head on my arm. Three moms with infants occupy the bulkhead row just in front of me. At least one of the women is traveling alone, the other two with spouses seated elsewhere in the plane. Each of the male spouses looks like a rabbinical school student, neatly put together until the late night rounds of walking crying babies.

I'm taken with their prayer shawls, worn under a vest and showing at each shoulder and as fringe hanging below the jacket line. *Altitude 34047*. The map shows we're coming over the outer banks of England. Sunlight now covers half of South America according to the TV graphic. The same graphic shows the Tel Aviv airport and Jerusalem beyond, Jerusalem and Bethlehem and Israeli and Palestine. Gaza is occupied as Israeli forces press inland to find the rocket launching sites and smuggling tunnels; Stories of food shortages, medical needs and sparse cooking fuel are hard to confirm, but logical in a war zone. *Outside Air Temperature -83 degrees*.

So why am I here, writing in the dark?

I joked with Susan that when we face the demanding Israeli security at Ben Gurion airport the most they'll be able to squeeze from me is that "We were invited." But that, really, is the truth and it is the only plausible explanation for why we're on this trip. Our Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) has asked for us to come in support of their ministry. They are a tiny church of Christians in a land of Jews and Muslims. Pressures from decades of old struggle for land and peace make it more and more difficult to sustain ministry in this land called Holy. Only 1.2 % of the population in Jerusalem is Christian.

But it is also a pilgrimage, maybe not the same pilgrimage we would have made before Hamas broke the truce and resumed firing rudimentary missiles into Israel, but a pilgrimage none the less. It is the land of Jesus and I haven't been here before. I am eager to see the terrain and smell the air and taste the water and feel the soil of this Holy Land. I've always wondered what the Bible meant by "wilderness" having grown up in the wilderness of Alaska. I understand the Jordan River is a trickle now, pooled mostly at Christian pilgrimage sites, but on hard times just like so many water-courses in the world; And Zion, Mount Zion, Jerusalem itself, wedged as it is between occupied territories to the East and fully developed Israel to the West. What of Jerusalem, the divided city, and its ancient ruins and modern culture?

These were the questions we had once the hostilities began after Christmas. Many of us felt, for the first time, the fear our children had for us, fears different and the same from those times when we had said goodbye to them as they traveled abroad.

Local time at destination: 11:27 am. It's morning in Jerusalem and we're due there in four hours. *565 miles per hour.* It's warming up outside, only *-71 degrees.* If the graphic is right we're over the English Channel.

I have been wondering about this conflict. In reality it's less than 100 years old, not particularly long in historic terms. The book, "The Lemon Tree" (Sandy Tolan, author) has filled in the parts of this history I surely knew at some point: Jewish diaspora; WW II and the horror of Jewish Holocaust; Hungarian Jews seeking a homeland; England the landlord in Palestine. It is unimaginable that England had 84,000 troops in the Holy Land in 1947! A partition plan, proposed by the United Nations and agreed to by Israel, failed with the Arab States. Israel's War of Independence in 1948. 20 years later the Six Day War of 1967. I was much too occupied by leaving home for college to have noticed. Some lands occupied as a result of that war were never intended to be taken by Israel but now they are in dispute. And so it goes until today, some progress (Israel's withdrawal from Gaza) but equal setbacks (radicalization of parts of the Palestinian leadership, influences from Iran, Lebanon, Egypt, etc.).

I try to clear my mind of all the questions, all I don't know. I think it will be enough if I am a witness: A witness to the Prince of Peace and Jesus' love for Jew and Arab; a witness for the plight of our small church in this land; and maybe even a witness for renewed hope if President Obama can bring renewed focus to the region. In biblical language a witness is said to be a martyr. I'm not a martyr but I hope this trip can be for good. As the world shrinks, and as we learn over and over again how this particular dispute drives other conflicts in the Middle East, it is more than ever time for attention.

But I have conflicting thoughts. Someone has said that you are not fully adult and human until you have contended with an issue that will not be solved in your lifetime. There's that, and then there is a sense that maybe this issue is always with us, like God used the lesson at the Tower of Babel, to teach the human family that when it thinks it's getting its act together, the Holy Land erupts again. Holy Land as Humility Land. Surely God is God and we are not. *Distance traveled: 3480 miles* (or maybe none at all).

More extensive notes and reflections on the trip are posted under the Bishop's page of the synod web-site, www.ewaidsynod.org.