Bethlehem Besieged: Stories of Hope in Times of Trouble

Mitri Raheb is the pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church of Bethlehem and director of the International Center of Bethlehem. He is Arab, Palestinian and Christian, in his own words, “an Arab Christian living in an Arab-Islamic context, a context shaped by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

*Bethlehem Besieged* is Raheb’s personal account of everyday life in the midst of trauma and violence. Everyday life contains resentment and frustration as he recounts the daily indignities and constraints of life under occupation that may prevent going to work, shopping for food or attending school regularly. It contains anger and grief when those constraints and hostilities mean the destruction of property or the denial of basic medical care for the sick or injured as in the chapter detailing the death of Raheb’s own father-in-law earlier this year.

Raheb was born and educated in Bethlehem, where his family has lived for hundreds of years. His entire conscious life has been lived under Israeli occupation, marked by related events as much as by the usual milestones one associates with growing up: graduation, marriage and children.

His earliest memory is from the 1967 Six-Day War—of a bomb hitting the next-door neighbors’ house, and of taking refuge in the Church of the Nativity with his mother. He finished high school without a graduation celebration, married without a wedding party, always hoping for an end to the conflict when such celebrations would be more appropriate. His first daughter, Dana, was born as Saddam Hussein was occupying Kuwait and his second daughter, Tala, shortly before the Oslo Accords were approved.

Raheb is even-handed in apportioning blame for the current plight of the Palestinians living in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank. He names the sins of Europe against the Jews; the sins of the Jews of Israel who have become obsessed with power and control in the quest for security; the cynical use of the Palestinians by other Arab nations; the feelings of guilt of diaspora Jews who back Israel even in its wrongdoing; the Christian Right of America who, anxious for Armageddon, support the unfettered expansion of settlements by the
far-right parties of Israel; and finally, the disastrous policies of Palestinian leaders during the past 50 years.

In June 2000, along with its partner organization, the Baltimore-based Institute of Christian and Jewish Studies, the Alliance of Baptists sponsored a study tour to Israel and Palestine. An entire day was spent in Bethlehem, a short distance from Jerusalem, providing the group with a glimpse into the daily lives of Palestinians–Christians and Muslims–living under Israeli occupation.

It was on that day that we toured the Church of the Nativity, the old city of Bethlehem, the modern campus of Bethlehem University and the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church. We were introduced to Mitri Raheb and the myriad ways his congregation serves both Christians and Muslims in that community.

He told us that Palestinians and Israelis had been extremely skilled at turning neighbors into enemies. The challenge for a more peaceful future, he declared, depends on a commitment to turn enemies into neighbors.

This meeting occurred only weeks before the beginning of the Second Intifada, a much more violent period in the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians.

Raheb’s entire life has been spent in a seemingly unending cycle of hope and despair. This hope, he declares, “is no longer something we see but rather something we practice, something we live, something we advocate, something we plant.”

Mitri Raheb and his family have planted themselves in the heart of Bethlehem and are symbols of hope in times of trouble.

In *Bethlehem Besieged*, Mitri Raheb invites us to discard our Christmas-carol images of Bethlehem, to confront the bleak and dangerous reality of life beyond the daily headlines and to commit to work alongside him for new relationships between Christians, Muslims and Jews.

*Jeanette Holt is associate director of the Alliance of Baptists.*

Order *Bethlehem Besieged* now from Amazon.com.