

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Backstage Bethlehem

Christianity's 'living stones' can help ensure the early Christian culture survives

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 12.19.2011 2:53 p.m.



The [Holy Land](#) has been an object of pilgrimage for the Abrahamic faiths — Jews, Muslims and Christians — for more than 2,000 years. Christian pilgrims to Palestine have included as an essential element a visit to Bethlehem, the traditional birthplace of Jesus. From the oldest church in Christendom to an astounding global collection of crèches to meeting with local Christians, a visit to Bethlehem is unforgettable.

The small city (about 30,000) is practically a suburb of Jerusalem. The main entrance is a 10-minute drive south through neighborhoods collected on the dry hills. Israel has closed this entrance with a 30-foot-high steel wall, so it takes a lot longer now to reach [Manger Square](#), and depends on traffic at the checkpoint.

Manger Square is a spacious cobbled plaza book-ended by a mosque and church, each dating to the seventh century. When you walk down to the [Church of the Nativity](#), you duck into the entrance through a 4-foot opening meant to prevent soldiers on horseback from entering as well as encourage worshipers into a supplicative position. The original building was completed in 326 under the direction of [Helena](#), mother of [Emperor Constantine](#). She placed the church over ruins of a first-century era temple she believed to be commemorative of Jesus' birth.

Emerging from the cavernous church into the bright sun of the plaza, you can find the [Peace Center](#) on your right. The organization promotes peace, democracy, religious tolerance and diversity. It highlights the native Palestinian culture and art, but is not affiliated with any religion, faction or ethnic group.

The Peace Center houses a phenomenal nativity collection. Beginning with the millennial celebration in 2000, hundreds of crèches were sent from more than 55 mostly Anglican/Episcopal churches around the world. Some are tiny artworks

meticulously handcrafted, and others are life-size or life-like figures dressed in the traditional outfits of the donor country.

The cultural center links old and recent history, attracting international visitors to listen to local people. On one visit we listened to a presentation by Michael Nasser on [Open Bethlehem](#), a project designed to tell the world about Bethlehem to save this Christian city in crisis.



The Peace Center in Bethlehem houses a large nativity collection. (Karen Telleen-Lawton / Noozhawk photo)

“There’s nothing worse for us than feeling isolated,” Nasser said. “I don’t want to hear a guide in 20 years say, ‘Once there was a time when Christians were living here, when mass was celebrated in the church.’” Under occupation, Bethlehem’s Christian population has dropped from 85 percent in 1948 to less than 20 percent now.

On another occasion, our Peace Center speakers joined us from [Bethlehem University](#) — four students and the director, Brother Jack Curran. The university was the first college in the West Bank. It is now more than 40 years old and the largest employer in Bethlehem. Brother Curran’s answer to a question about the separation walls was significant and meaningful:

“So much of Jewish scars stem not from Islam but from Jews’ experience of the culture of persecution. It’s important to embrace both traumas. The healing has to be mutual. The worst you can do is choose sides. Instead, you can enter dialogue with without approving existing policies.”

I thought about the crèches in the Peace Center: the young holy family, suffering under the taxing authority of foreign rulers and stigmatized by unwed pregnancy, whose followers two millennia later are trapped again in occupation. By coming to hear the stories of Christianity’s “living stones,” we can help ensure the early Christian culture survives. They are a testament to their forebears, who found ways to coexist at the crossroads of history and faith.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton’s column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*