

O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

Betty Scholten, participant in CPT November 2002 delegation

Singing “O Little Town of Bethlehem” will never be the same for me. “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie,” has a new and ominous meaning. These words, which for so many years have brought visions of a peaceful city under a starlit sky, now bring to mind a fear-filled city under Israeli military siege.

I have just returned from a two week delegation to Israel and Palestine with Christian Peacemaker Teams. We had been invited to spend a night in Bethlehem with a Palestinian Christian family. We began our journey from Jerusalem on the main road, hoping to pass through the check point into Bethlehem without incident. It was not to be. We were turned away by a young Israeli soldier with a gun who said it was “for our own safety.” No one was allowed to go into Bethlehem; it had been placed curfew by the Israeli military because it was believed that one of the Palestinians involved in a recent shoot out in Hebron had at one time lived in Bethlehem. Twelve Israeli soldiers and police and three Palestinians had been killed in that incident on November 15.

We turned back but were not deterred; we found our way through back roads where there were no check points. As we walked into Bethlehem there was an eerie silence and absence of life in the streets. Only a few children were brave enough to defy the curfew and the soldiers. They greeted us warmly with the little English they knew, “Hello. How are you? What is your name?” Soon we noticed people waving from windows and calling from rooftops as they welcomed us. Occasionally a door would open a crack to reveal a family wanting to make a connection.

When we arrived at our hosts’ home, we were invited to their third floor porch, where we looked out over the city and talked quietly. We were warned to stay away from the edge of the porch so as not to attract the Israeli soldiers’ attention. The stillness was broken, not by the sound of children playing as you would expect nor by the joyful singing of pilgrims as they made their way to the Church of the Nativity. The sounds were of tanks and jeeps and armored vehicles roaring through the streets as they occupied Manger Square. The noises were of explosions as homes were demolished, drilling as homes were being readied for demolition, and of gun shots.

As the afternoon progressed, it was learned that a house in the neighborhood would be blown up that night. The frightened ten-year-old son clung to his father and asked if they would be safe. What could the father say?

During the evening we went next door to the home of a man who is deeply involved in nonviolent resistance and in reconciling people of his community, in bringing together his Christian and Muslim sisters and brothers. Even as he spoke the house was shaken by a loud explosion which destroyed a nearby home. Then there was silence.

Christmas has new meaning for me this year. My heart and mind continually turn back to Bethlehem, with prayers that there will be a new birth of peace and justice there just as two thousand years ago there had been the birth of a baby whose message is love and peace. I pray that the sounds will no longer be of tanks and guns but of children playing and pilgrims singing.

One week after our first entry into Bethlehem, we returned. There was still a curfew, but the Israeli tanks had been withdrawn. We walked quietly into Manger Square and prayed together in front of the door of the Church of the Nativity. We prayed for peace in this city and throughout the world. We prayed to the Prince of Peace, the one born to bring peace to our world, and we knew that still, in the words of the carol, “in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light” and that even in these violent times “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”