

After the journey

As I think about the Magi, I've remembered lessons about hatred and fear that I learned by traveling to Israel myself.

By [Rachael Keefe](#)

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Sometimes it's what you do after the journey that matters. We spent four weeks preparing ourselves for Bethlehem. Four weeks to make a journey that we take every year. We see the sights—Mary nine months pregnant plodding along, Joseph new to this family thing worried about getting it right, an over-crowded city and an inn with no rooms, the stable and its manger ready for sacred use, angels singing good news to sleepy shepherds, a star shining and shining and shining until Magi from afar finally show up—and continue on without giving them as much attention as maybe they deserve. Then we celebrate our arrival and quickly leave, maybe not even waiting around to see who else has made the trip. Did it matter at all?

More than 20 years ago I went to Israel with a church group. I thought it would be the first of many such trips. Unfortunately, I haven't been back yet, but that trip changed me in ways I wouldn't understand for several years. Once we landed in Tel Aviv, there was a push to get us quickly out to a safer place. The day we were supposed to go to Caesarea Philippi we were rerouted because there was fear of retaliation for a suicide bombing. I was shocked when the bus stopped at a checkpoint before being allowed to enter Bethlehem. The Holocaust Museum with the display of children's shoes and the names being read aloud kept me awake more than one night.

Then there was the night a few of us went to the baths somewhere in Jerusalem. I was approached by two young men. We were talking about the usual kinds of things young people talk about when they first meet. We exchanged names, which I no longer remember. They were 19-year-old twins who were reluctant to tell me where

they were from. They were certain that if they told me where they lived I would not talk with them anymore. They were Palestinian and they told me that most Americans don't like Palestinians. When I asked them why, they didn't really know either. They said something about religion and politics and the conversation moved on.

Of course, there were other moments on that trip that have stayed with me, too. Seeing the wadis fill up and flood into the Dead Sea. Presiding over communion in the Garden Tomb. Renewing baptismal vows in the Jordan River. Climbing up to see the ruins of Herod's castle.

Something stirred within me on that trip that has remained awake and restless since then. Seeing young soldiers on the streets and knowing that the violence of war was so close drew my attention to the world beyond my own experience. I am still haunted by those sweet young faces telling me that I wouldn't want to talk to them because they were Palestinian. It had never occurred to me not to talk to someone just because of where they live or what religion they practice or what policies their government puts in place. At 29 years old, things that I had only read about became real.

I returned from that trip and made a point of learning everything I could about Israel and Palestine. I've tried my best to be aware of what is happening in the world, and to do my part to change things when possible. Mostly, though, I've tried to combat fear, hatred, and ignorance—especially when these things are enhanced in the name of any God.

I've been thinking a lot about that trip to Israel. It had a significant impact on me and my understanding of ministry. I can't help but think that experiencing the Christmas story through worship and community should change and challenge us in similar ways. The Magi who followed a star for years experienced something. They might not have known specifically why they felt compelled to make the journey, but they went. They encountered the Christ-child and went home by a different road. They were changed so much that they literally could not travel home the same way they had come. They went altered the route to keep Jesus alive. Who knows what happened to them after that? At least they started out on a different path.

As hatred and fear seem newly unleashed in the U.S., I am haunted by that pile of children's shoes in the Jerusalem Holocaust Museum and the faces of those innocent

Palestinian twins. My fear is that we are not taking the lessons of history seriously enough, and remaining silent when we should be crying out for justice until our voices are hoarse. My fear is that we don't trust that the Love that broke into the world and rested a while in the manger is enough to save us from ourselves. My fear is that we have forgotten the wisdom that faith has taught us, and we will not survive this current wave of hatred, fear, and ignorance. My fear is that we have convinced ourselves that the stories of our faith are powerless, which would mean God is also without power.

We journeyed through Advent and Christmas, and we may have experienced joy or sadness, or both. We might question the meaning of all of it. We might feel uncomfortable or unsettled. We may have encountered Christ and still experience the awe of the moment. This is all fine. However, no matter what we might want to tell ourselves to maintain our own sense of comfort and control, it really is where we go from here that matters.

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