

Christians Celebrate a Simple, Spiritual Christmas in the Holy Land

Growing up in England, Beverly Dwyer celebrated Christmas by going to church and spending time with her family, but it wasn't until she moved to Israel that she fully began to experience the holiness of the holiday.

Back home, "Christmas is a time of great commercialization, a moneymaker for the stores," said Dwyer, an evangelical Christian who has lived in Israel on and off for 18 years. "The birth of our savior isn't usually the focus."

In Israel, "the holiday is much more low-key," Dwyer said. "You have to make an effort to celebrate. The lack of commercialization and consumerism gives me the opportunity to really reflect on the true meaning of the season."

Compared with how the holiday is celebrated in Christian-majority countries – with dazzling lights, Christmas-themed shows and sales – the public observance of Christmas in Israel and the Palestinian territories is downright modest.

Christians are a tiny minority in the Holy Land, comprising about 2 percent of the population, not including the many Christian clergy, aid workers, students, migrant workers and asylum-seekers who reside in Israel, sometimes for decades.

It is possible to find public displays related to Christmas, but you need to look for them.

The municipalities of Bethlehem in the West Bank and Haifa and Nazareth in northern Israel decorate their towns with Christmas lights and organize Christmas-themed events, concerts and bazaars. In south Tel Aviv-Jaffa, the city puts

up a big Christmas tree, and stores sell everything from ornaments to Santa suits.

In Jerusalem, Christians celebrate the holiday mostly behind doors, in their homes and churches, and Dwyer considers this a godsend.

“For me, personally, Christmas without external distractions has given me a lot more time to strengthen my relationship with God,” she said. “I can read more, reflect more. I can spend more time in prayer. I’m able to invest myself in my spiritual walk with God.”

The Rev. Petra Heldt, a pastor ordained in the Protestant Church of Germany, feels much the same.

“Here the content is more important than the wrapping. Showing the love of God is the content and the wrapping is the glitter and glamor” of westernized Christmas celebrations, said Heldt, who has lived in Israel for the past 39 years.

Heldt said she appreciates the Christmas traditions of the Eastern Orthodox, who will celebrate the religious holiday on Jan. 7. She doesn’t follow these traditions, however.

“Orthodox Christians, who are the majority of (indigenous) Christians here, don’t focus so much on little Jesus in the crib, but in the coming of God to the world,” she explained. “They focus on the triad – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit we could not recognize the Son, who is the Messiah sent by God into the world.”

Heldt called this a “revelation.”

“It’s a sign of the love that God has for humanity. It is nothing but humbling.”

For Julaine Stark, an evangelical Christian from the U.S., the Holy Land’s style of celebrating the birth of Jesus has been a welcome discovery.

“It’s extremely noncommercial. In the U.S. they have Christmas in July sales for people who want to get a head start on their gift shopping. The consumerism and materialism are all-consuming.”

Living in Israel for the past three years has also given Stark a greater appreciation for the Jewish roots of Christianity.

“I see how the Jewish people’s feasts are feasts of the Lord and that they are tied to history and their ancient traditions,” she said. Jesus, who was Jewish, attended these feasts, according to the New Testament.

Stark, whose grown children live in the U.S., said she will be celebrating another quiet but spiritual Christmas in Jerusalem.

If the weather holds out, she plans to go to an annual bonfire in Jerusalem overlooking Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, and attend a “simple, very meaningful” Christmas service in a nearby church.

“Back in the U.S., raising my children we would sing ‘Jingle Bell Rock’ and ‘I’ll Be Home for Christmas,’ which are sentimental songs.”

Since moving to Jerusalem, Stark has gravitated toward traditional hymns but has retained her love for Handel’s “Messiah.”

“Christmas could be lonely without my family, but what I’ve found is that the whole concept of Shabbat – the Sabbath – and creating a place of rest, rather than trying to fill every moment with things to do and being busy, is something to embrace. I’m going to consider the Christmas week holiday a weeklong Shabbat.

“There’s so much to learn in the quiet,” she said. {eo}