

A Trip to Modern Bethlehem Reveals What First Christmas Was Really Like

As I write this, I am just coming out of the fog of jet lag and an Israeli cold that I got on my first-ever trip to Israel. This was a trip that I am sure I will be unpacking for quite some time, but I thought I would take a stab at some reflections on Christmas since we traveled so close to the holiday.

The location of our hotel on the trip was very close to Bethlehem. Out of our window, we could see the wall that separated Jerusalem from the Palestinian area of Bethlehem. The bus stop outside of our hotel was called, "Bethlehem Checkpoint." It was a constant reminder of the traumatic experiences that region has experienced for centuries. I imagine Mary and Joseph had similar thoughts as they saw Roman soldiers on their way to Bethlehem. Your Christmas this year may feel raw and messy, but that is okay. The first Christmas would not have felt any more like a Hallmark movie than yours does.

Before we left, we watched a kids' Christmas movie called *The Star*. It really highlighted the messiness of the first Christmas. Talking animals trying to figure out what is going on when things felt chaotic and dangerous. Most nights of the trip, my wife, daughter and I each tried to come up with two takeaways from the day. On one night, my daughter had as one of her takeaways that we as a family needed to learn to trust God more in the day-to-day experiences of life. She was so right. The same would have been true of the story on that first Christmas. It was a journey of trust in a world that did not make sense.

Traveling on this trip with my wife and daughter makes me appreciate in a small way what Joseph may have felt on his journey to Bethlehem. As we traveled, I was aware of the needs of my little family and the challenges of being in new surroundings. I read something about how interesting it was that the angel did not speak to Joseph about Mary's situation until after Mary had talked to him. We like nice and neat, whereas God is OK with our journey as we learn to trust Him.

So as I look to Christmas this year, I will try and walk with God in a new level of trust. I still like five-year plans, but I will try to trust God when He simply says, "Take the Next Step With Me." I will try and remember those rolling hills of Bethlehem and know that it is not always about nice and neat, but about the presence of God coming to our messy and chaotic world. {eoa}

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