Greetings Friends,

Thanks so much for praying for our time here in Palestine. We are half way through our visit.

Nader, the IFES General Secretary for Palestine, and his family have hosted us wonderfully here in Ramallah.  Nader's wife, Layeli, works part time with women and children in both Jerusalem and Ramallah.  They have three delightful kids that have attached themselves to us, Mira (5), Fadi (3) and Dalia (2).  Our first couple of days were quite cold and rainy, but now it has warmed up to 40s and 50s and mostly sunny.  Nader is an excellent guide helping us to see sights (the Arafat Museum, the Al-Amari Refugee Camp and the statue of Nelson Mandela---a gift to the Palestinian people and struggle, ) and to understand the increasingly troubled situation here in Palestine.  He has also introduced us to friends, family and colleagues who serve and help each other to navigate these challenging situations.  One thing has become very clear is the importance of family in this context.

Nader and one of his new emerging leaders and potential staff, Mahdi, drove us to Bethlehem.  Mahdi is doing a Master's degree in Corporate Development at Bethlehem University and was on his way to classes Friday and Saturday.  It was encouraging to see Nader and Mahdi work as brothers in ministry.

In Bethlehem, our host was Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church and Dean at Bethlehem Bible College. Munther arranged for us to stay in the Grand Bethlehem Hotel near the church for two nights since their Guest House was full.  That proved very convenient.  Nader took us around Bethlehem Friday morning to see Bethlehem University, Shepherd's Field and the celebration in Manger Square of the Armenian Christmas.  We ate at Afteem which had the best falafel!   Then Nader drove us to Dar Al Kalima Arts and Culture College where we toured the campus, met a couple of students and staff and then met Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, founder and president of the College, for nearly an hour.  We had an excellent time with Mitri, especially hearing about his vision for Bethlehem 2020.

Then Saturday morning Munther arranged for a seminary intern helping him this month from Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, a church with a very similar partnership with Christmas Lutheran, to take us around to various churches and some shopping around Bethlehem’s Manger Square.  After Munther finished a three hour planning meeting for the 2020 Christ at the Checkpoint conference in Bethlehem, he took us out to lunch at Afteem Restaurant for the best falafel (again) along with with our intern guide and one colleague who is working with him on the 2020 Christ at the Checkpoint conference.  This time Afteem was packed!  In the afternoon Madeleine, the intern, took Sally to the Walled Off Hotel – amazing Center of Art, including many works of Banksy and a museum telling the story of the history of the Palestinian conflict and the Wall.  While they toured, I rested my leg which I had strained just before leaving Chicago.  I was sorry I missed that display, but Sally filled me in. That evening Munther and his wife, Rudaina, took us out to a super BBQ Restaurant and we had a wonderful time over dinner – lots of laughter and comparing stories.

Sunday morning we attended Christmas Lutheran Church - both Munther and Mitri presided.  The church is the oldest Lutheran Church in Palestine, right in the heart of Bethlehem, featuring 14 amazing stained glass windows and a beautiful organ. Munther preached from Romans 12:9-16. After the service and coffee hour, Munther and his family drove us to Ramallah, where Rudaina's family lives.  We had lunch at another wonderful BBQ place with Nader and Munther where we spoke a lot about the upcoming national student conference and their past work together and shared prayer requests for the student work and the challenges facing the Palestinians. Nader and Munther were classmates at Beir Zeit University and have been at the heart of IFES work in Palestine.

We are now back in Ramallah with Nader’s family. The kids were eager to see us and have graciously let us sleep in their room. Last night (Monday) the IFES CSPU hosted a reunion for many of the volunteers for the Bible Society and the IFES work. The evening included 3 video testimonies of former volunteers and what volunteering meant to them and a slideshow of past activities. They asked me to share a word of encouragement from some of the “*How much more…”* from Jesus and Paul’s teachings. Then the rest of the evening was filled with hilarious games. Wednesday morning Sally l will lead a women’s Bible study group at Birzeit University on Jesus healing Jairus’s daughter and the woman suffering for years from a serious chronic illness.

Thursday we travel to Bethlehem for the CSPU (Christian Students in Palestinian Universities) national conference. This is a huge answer to prayer since it was not confirmed until last night that this conference could be held. The month before we arrived in Palestine, the universities were facing serious tension and were closed as recently as a week ago, forcing the postponement of exams. But because of this tension, the conference had to cancel their venue booking and then find a new venue for a week later. That was proving a nightmare for Nader since every facility was saying they were booked. But late last night he found a venue. Praise God. The venue however only takes 36 students, and they were hoping to have 70 in attendance. The theme for the conference Is – ‘*Be Encouraged’*. Sally and I have been asked to lead daily discussions from our ‘*Be Not Afraid’*  Bible study guide (unfortunately, the police are holding all the copies Nader had of the Arabic version for this conference – may be months for them to be released). We plan to focus on the Psalms ‘*Be not afraids’* one day, Isaiah’s a second day, and a Q&A session by gender the third. While Nader is in Jericho with work and the house is empty, Sally and I are preparing these sessions.

After the conference and after a final day with Nader, we will travel to Jerusalem to meet a couple who are IFES LINK staff working with the Israeli national movement. Then we fly back to Chicago on January 30. We hear we will be greeted by frigid temps and piles of snow!

Thanks so much for all your prayers.  It has been a privilege for us to meet and learn from and serve all three of our mission partners of First Pres Evanston on this visit. And we look forward to sharing more with you about how we can continue to stand with them in prayer, friendship and support.

Blessings

***Sally and Dave***