

Report from Rachel Foran
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Thanks to Pastor Lueking's inspiration and his connections to Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, I was able to spend seven weeks this past summer living and volunteering with their multiple ministries in the West Bank. I specifically worked with the Bright Stars program and spent my mornings coaching soccer for middle school aged girls and my afternoons working at the Diyar college ministry, either teaching summer art classes to children or helping edit and write a variety of documents in English. I was able to use my English language skills to write reports for an American funded music program orchestrated by the college, a program similar to "American Idol" but featuring Palestinian young adults from all over the West Bank. Although the work itself was rich and fulfilling, my faith journey was most heavily influenced by the relationships and connections I formed with the individuals I worked with, lived with, and encountered while there.

While I was making plans for this summer adventure, another female college student was doing the same. I can only describe it as divine intervention that paired us together for the summer; although we started the summer as strangers, by the end of the seven weeks we were closer than sisters. The West Bank is a difficult place to live. The air is heavier there, not only because of the Israeli occupation, but also because of the tension inherent in the very sacredness of the land itself. I do not think I could have endured the entire summer without her beside me, helping me process what we were witnessing, experiencing, and feeling. God's grace provided for us by putting us together.

Grace appeared to be a constant theme that I encountered as I developed relationships with native Palestinian individuals as well. I saw grace and hope in their outlooks and dispositions. Even when life was harder than hard, they were able to find joy, laughter, and comfort. Helen, my Palestinian mother who owned the guesthouse where I stayed for the seven weeks, was a perfect example of this. She had several health scares over the summer, including undergoing an eye operation, and she also lost her elderly mother during one of the last weeks we were there. Nevertheless, words did not leave Helen's mouth unless they were accompanied by "Thank you God." Helen's faith was so strong that, despite her personal hardships, she continually praised God for the blessings given to her and her family. Her warmth and steadfast faith filled the house with God's love and grace.

I saw God's grace at work in the tireless efforts of my supervisor, Nuha, the dean of the college. She whole-heartedly devotes herself to improving the lives of her students through education. When she discovered that one of the contestants in the Palestinian Idol could not afford to attend the college's music program, she searched endlessly for scholarships in order to fund his tuition. Rooted in the belief that higher education has the power to shape and strengthen civil society, she consistently puts in extra work hours in order to make education affordable and accessible for Palestinian youth. The grace and hope of God shines through Nuha's determined efforts to better the lives of her people.

I also often found myself overcome by God's grace during times when I was frustrated, sad, or homesick. During these times God would fill me with the confident assurance that everything was going to be okay. It was a peaceful strength, filled with hope and comfort, which I knew I did not create in myself but was instead a manifestation of the grace of God in my life. My trip to Bethlehem showed me that we are all surrounded by God's grace, even though we may only realize it in certain instances; it taught me that I can work to cultivate grace and to show grace to others in my relationships and in my individual disposition.

This December, I returned to Israel with a program through Carleton College, entitled, "Judaism in the State of Israel." I embarked on a two-week trip to Israel with 15 classmates and two professors. There is nothing like a Carleton religion class to really complicate everything. Through this class I was able to learn more about the land, state, and people of Israel, and I was able to gain a much more complex and nuanced perspective on the place and its issues. Suddenly, it became harder to hold a black and white, vilified perspective of Israel; a perspective that was had been more appealing after spending seven weeks living under the occupation and surrounded by bleak, cement walls that seemed to only represent oppression and injustice. The class forced me to juxtapose the realities I witnessed and experienced over the summer with the realities of Israel, its history, its culture, and its importance as a homeland for so many people. The two-week trip itself was an eye opener as our class was able to meet with a variety of important Israeli individuals, from all areas of the religious spectrum, who provided us with a very diverse, and of course complicated, picture of what Israel means to its people today (let me just tell you, it doesn't mean one thing). We also spoke with Israeli and Palestinian individuals who work to bridge the gap between their peoples in order to experience and understand the Other. Their work especially inspired me and it allowed me to realize that despite life's messiness, we are still compelled to act in the name of justice, compassion, and human rights. Founded on a nuanced understanding of our complicated world, I trust in God's grace and love to continue showing me how to live an ethical Christian life geared toward the betterment of humanity.