

Christian reports on the Israeli Invasion of Palestine

Colleagues,

I'm torn between a number of options for this week's posting.

- A. The horror-stuff we just received (April 3) from our Lutheran friends in Bethlehem.
- B. Telling you about our weekend in New York City (Maundy Thursday through Easter) with four liturgies, sermons by 2 bishops—one Episcopal (Griswold), one Lutheran (Bouman)—the Easter parade on 5th Avenue, plus 2 operas at Lincoln Center (with five corpses, ribald raunch, etc.) and our eerie visit to Ground Zero on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter.
- C. Thoughtful responses from several of you to recent postings.

I'll opt for A. The others can wait.

In the very face of Apocalypse Now—Even so, Lord Jesus Come.
Ed Schroeder

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1. Mitri Raheb & Bethlehem Worst invasion in centuries, Pastor Raheb says www.wfn.org JERUSALEM, April 3, 2002—Word is filtering out from Bethlehem describing the devastation to the city streets and the infrastructure from the current attack by Israeli military.
The Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, pastor of the Christmas

Evangelical Lutheran Church and director of the International Center there, has sent an email asserting that the attack that Israeli's call an "incursion," is in fact "the worst invasion since decades if not centuries."

Raheb and his family, who yesterday were reportedly confined to upper floors of their home adjoining the historic church, are unhurt.

As a community leader, the popular Lutheran pastor was a prime mover on the eve of the millenium to see that the city's streets were repaved in local stone. They had fallen into acute disrepair during the long years of the occupation. He now reports that "the beautiful stone-paved streets around Christmas Lutheran Church are devastated. The tanks were standing around our Church and firing at the center of the old town. The entrance to our parsonage, car garage and staircase were destroyed. Most of the shops on Paul VI. Street were totally damaged."

Raheb, who also directs the new Bethlehem Media Center (organized with help from churches in America and Europe), now reports that "Journalists are forbidden in entering the city to cover the cruelty of occupation."

To help provide creative employment in the area, the International Center opened an Arts and Crafts workshop. Raheb now reports that "Our workshops, where we are trying to train young women to earn their livelihood, to appreciate beauty, experienced great destruction."

In his email, Pastor Raheb writes that "The offices of our architect and engineer also experienced much vandalism. The apartment of our volunteers as well. My office was hit too, this is why I can't write as usual. I hope that our communication specialist will be able to post some of the

pictures I took on our website. Please check there in few hours. These are first reports of what is going on here."

During the Gulf War, when Israelis confined Raheb and his family under 24-hour a day curfew, the Lutheran pastor wrote a book, "I am a Palestinian Christian" that was published in the U.S.A. by Fortress Press.

2. Paul Rowold writes:

Bethlehem—

I was able to speak with Mitri [Raheb, pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church, Bethlehem] and [his wife] Najua this morning [April 3]. With the focus of conflict being the Church of the Nativity, I hoped that the "smoke had cleared" around the Christmas Church and their home. Their comments:**Najua:** "This is real war! Rockets are flying, tanks are shooting! We can't leave our home, we can't even look through our windows! They are treating us like animals! Thank God Mitri's mother was able to come to our home before everyone was threatened to be shot if they show their faces, for Viola (who lives with Mrs. Raheb) is still in Austria and cannot come here! It is unbelievably horrible!"

Mitri: "There is so much destruction that we can see from here. There are IDF snipers in the Grand Hotel (one block away from the church), so I have not yet been able to assess the damage. Friends called to tell us that there is significant damage to the stained glass windows of the church, and all the windows of the guest house are gone, but I cannot go out to see for myself. The carpet store across from the entrance to our apartment is completely destroyed, as is our carport and the entrance to our apartment. I went through the building to see some of the International Center, and there is lots of damage there.

My office is heavily damaged. We are trying to stay in communication by remotely operating some of the equipment, but much is no longer working and I fear it is completely lost. This has nothing to do with "fighting terrorism"! The IDF [Israeli Defense Force] is destroying anything that could be a source of pride for us, including the German stone in the square adjacent to the church and the shop which displayed the art produced by our visiting artists. The electricity came back on at 10 this morning, but just now the shooting has begun again. It is not close...at least a block away. The IDF has not invaded our apartment as yet, but neighbors have called to say that in their area the army is going from house to house, taking the men away. It is really horrible. Does your government really know what is going on here? Some journalists tried to enter, and got nearly to our church before they were shot at. There is a lot of destruction. I haven't even begun to think about assessing it. Everything we build, they destroy."

Several items from Fred Strickert:

3. Blind children at the Helen Keller School tear gassed.

The school's Director is Suad Younan, wife of Lutheran Bishop Younan. Israeli police have fired tear gas in clashes with more than 2,000 activists attempting to carry humanitarian supplies to the West Bank. The activists, both Israeli Jews and Arabs, carried banners and chanted for Sharon to get out of Ramallah as they passed through a military checkpoint in north Jerusalem. The clashes happened on the doorstep of a school for the visually impaired, where 70 blind children aged from four to twelve were hurried into a basement by teachers. "It was awful," said teacher Suad Younan, 42. "They were so scared, and

because they are blind it really triples the agony for these children." As tear gas drifted across the school and police used batons to beat back the peace protesters, Mrs Younan and other staff members managed to spirit some of the children away. "We managed to sneak some of the children out of the compound," she said. "We were climbing fences, jumping in ditches to try to get them home." Thirty-two of the children remained trapped at the school, she said. Twenty of them had no hope of going home because their parents lived in the West Bank, where Israeli tanks and helicopters are hunting for militants.

4. JERUSALEM—The leaders of Christian denominations in the Holy Land on Wednesday were barred by Israel from entering the biblical town of Bethlehem, which was seized by Israeli forces as part of a military offensive in the West Bank. Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the top Roman Catholic clergyman in the region, said the group was trying to help get medical treatment to the wounded and bury those killed in fighting in the biblical city.

The convoy of church leaders and about 100 priests and lay people was stopped at an Israeli checkpoint on the outskirts of Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem. The clergymen stood in heavy rain, holding gilt crosses and umbrellas while trying to negotiate their passage with army officials. "We want to see to it that the occupation of Bethlehem and also of other Palestinian cities come to an end," said the Anglican bishop of Jerusalem, Riah Abu el- Assal. "All this military strength that the Israelis have and are showing will not bring peace closer to the area. On the contrary it will create greater grudges and greater hatred."

Near Manger Square, the bodies of four members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade militia were lying in the street

Wednesday, a day after being shot and killed, with Israeli troops barring their removal for burial.

"We are going to help bring the wounded to hospital and bury the killed," Sabbah, a Palestinian, said while waiting at the Israeli checkpoint. However, after standing in the rain and wind for about an hour, praying and singing, the group was forced to turn back to Jerusalem.

5. Water cut off to Ramallah Wednesday, April 3, 2002
Ramallah – I hope you get this message soon. The situation in Ramallah is as follows: many parts of the town continue to be without water. Even with the problems of water solved, it will not reach most homes because 6 out of 9 electrical feeding stations are down.

No electricity means no water, no sewage pumping (serious for public health) and no ovens can work to bake bread, among other problems. Five of the main feeding stations that provide electricity to Ramallah and 24 western villages are located in the Ramallah industrial zone. The electricity company is not allowed by the Israeli army to reach the area to fix the problems. The company was given the ok this morning to fix two other feeding stations in the Al-Bireh area, where the governorate and President Arafat are located, but as they go out this morning, they are being harrassed and believe they are in danger.

What we need is immediate intervention to get the feeding stations fixed in the industrial zone and in other areas. Without electricity, there will be no water and no bread and a major public health disaster. I hope you can work on this issue. The information in this email comes from the electricity company. About 120,000 people in Ramallah and surrounding villages are without electricity at this moment.

Rita Giacaman

Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University.

6. Marla Schrader—U.C.C./ Disciples of Christ Representative in Bethlehem Dear friends and colleagues,
As of this Wednesday morning, all major towns of the West Bank have been re-occupied. Nablus and Salfit were taken over by Israel this morning, adding to the atrocities taking place already in Ramallah, Tulkarem, Qalqilyia and Bethlehem.

There is little reporting as international journalists have been asked to leave or are confined to certain areas. The world knows best of the horrors taking place in Ramallah, however it seems that they are being repeated all over. In Bethlehem, we are under strict curfew and basically house arrest as there are Israeli snipers out on the rooftops. Yesterday there was non-stop shelling into the night. It is reported that the many wounded are not allowed to be taken away for treatment and have taken refuge in the Church of the Nativity. We were without electricity for the past 24 hours and telephone line for part of that time. The weather is cold and rainy. Many worry about running out of heating and cooking fuel, as well as fresh produce and dairy. There is no access to medical care at all.

Please raise your voice and help overcome the silence of the world governments. Every phone call, letter, rally and demonstration counts.

Marla Schrader

7. Jerusalem Anglican Bishop Riah from Episcopalian News

ServiceSalaam and grace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and blessed greetings from Jerusalem, It is Easter Day, the day of Resurrection. However, this year's celebration of Christ's new life is remembered in the middle of total chaos, and persistent suffering of a lonely people, who has long been fighting for their freedom and dignity. The services in the cathedral this morning took place with half the number of people we normally have due to closures and checkpoints. This year, the Easter story has been as vivid and clear as never before. The biblical drama continues; the actors change, but the plot remains the same. We have been witnessing the many Judas Iscariots, who continue to betray the Truth, and the many Pilates, who wash their hands, to defend their own safety. We weep before those who continue to watch the cross from afar, as if the scene means nothing to them.

After the services, I left with clergy and heads of churches towards Ramallah on a mission of peace and justice, trying to break down the siege inflicted on the city and its people, and to visit President Arafat. Apart from the Anglican clergy with me, we had the Roman Catholic Patriarch and his clergy, the Greek Catholic Archimandrite, and representatives of the Armenian, Lutheran, Coptic, and Franciscan Bishops and clergy. We were 15 people altogether. We gathered at St. George's Cathedral and left in the afternoon hours towards the city of Ramallah.

Prior to our departure from the cathedral, I spoke several times with the Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel, Rabbi Melcheor, who was part of the Alexandria Declaration, initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, as we committed ourselves to work for peace and justice as religious

leaders. We asked for his help and intervention to mediate with the authorities, and allow us to enter into Ramallah; I have even challenged him to come with us, expressing readiness to meet with Sharon as well. But all our three-hour-endeavor to enter the city came to an empty hole. We felt that the authorities do not want the church to provide a channel for peace and reconciliation, to bring an end to all the suffering and pain of the peoples of this land. As we were waiting, some settlers were passing by, some cried at us with the words: "Go to hell." Others spit at us. We were forced to return back to Jerusalem.

Ramallah has been declared a war zone, nobody allowed in or out. The reports that are coming from the city are incredibly horrendous. Our people could not attend church on Sunday. George Kopti, our priest in charge of the community, said his prayers with the immediate neighbours, who are living in the church close. He cannot walk out of his house, like everybody else, for fear of being shot dead. He reported that people were executed in the neighbouring Islamic Club with cold blood. There is lack of food and water supplies in the houses. President Arafat's compound has run out of water, too. Ambulances have not been allowed to reach to the injured, and one of the hospitals has been invaded. The soldiers are threatening to blow it up, 10 minutes after they leave the building; and all this comes with the ongoing reports of lack of blood in the hospitals for the injured, a matter that is causing the death of many others; 25 dead Palestinians are still kept in one of the hospitals, while the Israelis are not allowing their burial. The hospitals report that there is no more space to keep more bodies. Some of those bodies have been recognized, others have not

been recognized due to the extreme degree of torture. The church is planning tomorrow to donate blood here in the cathedral through one of the ambulances, the least we can do in our support for the community in Ramallah.

Stephanie Koury, an American citizen, lives and works in Ramallah as the legal adviser on settlements for the Palestinian Negotiating team. She reported to me personally that on Saturday, March 30 at 1:45pm, 10 Israeli soldiers invaded her house, and threatened to kill her cat. They ate her fruits on the table, even when she told them that that was the only food left for her. One of the soldiers lay down and asked her to give him a massage, an act of total humiliation, if not a war crime. She witnessed them holding an 18-19 year old young man, the son of her neighbour, forcing him on his knees, and pointing the gun at his head. When they left her house after three hours of sheer humiliation, they ran over her car with their tanks.

Know that this comes with my prayers, and best wishes,

In Christ,
+Riah Abu El-Assal

There's not enough room on this long posting to give you another report, this one from Robert Fisk, TV journalist in Bethlehem. Look it up at http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle_east/story.jsp?story=281051 He gives a graphic account of trying to cover the story of the war in Bethlehem today, April 3.