

laity and not for theologians and its intention is to provide concise answers, then one appreciates the simplicity of the answers.

The book can be a valuable asset to the congregational library or resource center as it can be used for group discussions, adult courses on Lutheran faith as well as confirmation classes.



**Raheb, M 2004 – *Bethlehem besieged: Stories of hope in times of trouble***

Publisher: Fortress Press, 2004. 157 Pages. Price: US\$15.00

**Reviewer: Prof Dr Dorothy Jean Weaver (Eastern Mennonite Seminary – Harrisonburg, USA)**

This is a book aptly titled and poignantly written. Bethlehem was in 2004 and is today a city under siege. A large sign at the entrance to Bethlehem proclaims “Peace Be With You” in English, Hebrew, and Arabic, from the “Israel Ministry of Tourism”. But the sign is a visual absurdity, painted as it is right next to a tall and menacing guard tower in the 8-meter-high concrete wall surrounding Bethlehem and imprisoning its residents. Bethlehem is indeed “besieged”; and the residents of Bethlehem clearly live in “times of trouble”.

But Pastor Mitri Raheb of Christmas Lutheran Church is a man of profound Christian hope and deep vision for the future. So while he depicts the “times of trouble” in Bethlehem in vivid detail, he does not stop there. Instead, Raheb’s ultimate goal is to point beyond the ubiquitous and ugly “trouble” of present-day Bethlehem toward emerging signs of “hope”. And it is this word of courageous hope, spoken into a world of bitter despair, which is the ultimate and remarkable gift of Raheb’s book.

In the “Preface” Raheb writes (p vii): “I am not sure if it is my destiny to write books during difficult times. But writing in such a context becomes an act of nonviolent resistance: resisting being silenced, resisting being a spectator, and resisting giving up.” Raheb’s “nonviolent resistance” takes the form of vivid storytelling, as he recounts dramatic events from the Second Intifada and everyday challenges associated with the ongoing Israeli occupation.

In part one (“Under siege”) Raheb draws his readers into the terrifying days of April 2002, as Israeli tanks rolled into Bethlehem and positioned themselves near the Lutheran compound. Raheb recounts the sheer terror of deafening and deadly gun battles waged at close range (chapter 1, “A monk at the compound”). He depicts the kindness of a Franciscan priest in the besieged Church of the Nativity toward a Hamas soldier taking refuge there (chapter 3, “Father Amjad and Muhammad under siege”) and the courage of Lutheran parishioners who defy an Israeli curfew to attend Sunday worship (chapter 5, “Obeying commands or commandments”). And Raheb includes a sermon, preached at Christmas Lutheran shortly after the lifting of the Bethlehem siege, which passionately denounces warfare (chapter 4, “Though war rise up against me”).

But surely most riveting is the extraordinary account of Raheb’s close encounter with Israeli soldiers who invaded the Lutheran compound and held him hostage in his office as they carried out massive destruction on the premises (chapter 2, “Challenging yet transforming the enemy”). Here the depth of Raheb’s eirenic spirit and the courage of his conviction become visible in his persistent and fearless attempts (p 23) to “engage them in a dialogue” that would “penetrate to their humanity” and “challenge them to see my humanity.”

Part two (“Life under occupation”) opens with an account of Raheb’s life in Bethlehem (chapter six, “The land that swallows its children”), a life impacted at every turn by the Israeli

occupation. In succeeding chapters Raheb depicts ongoing challenges created by the Israeli occupation. Chapters seven and eight ("A matter of life and death"; "Adventures in driving") speak of military checkpoints which prohibit the movement of Palestinians from one place to another, sometimes with tragic and deadly consequences. Chapter nine ("What would you do if you were in my shoes?") recounts a litany of travel woes experienced by Raheb and his wife as they sought permits for international travel and attempted unsuccessfully to leave the country. Chapter ten ("Carry on") ponders the multiple causes of the "heavy burden of occupation" which the Palestinian people carry. And Raheb laments (p 86):

How long can we as Palestinians ... handle such a burden of harassment, humiliation, invasions, closures, and confiscations without collapsing and getting crushed underneath it?

In part three Raheb identifies "Glimpses of hope" that instill courage in the midst of challenging and desperate circumstances. Raheb's list comprises activities initiated through the International Center of Bethlehem at Christmas Lutheran Church: A candlelight vigil for peace on a dark and dangerous December night in 2000 (chapter eleven, "The light of right, not the power of might"); an art competition for portrayals of Christ from a Palestinian perspective (chapter 12, "Christ in Palestine"); a children's program focusing on art, music, sports, communication, and the environment (chapter 13, "Bright stars"); the staff, ministries, and partners of the International Center of Bethlehem (chapter 14, "Perplexed but not in despair"); a renovated pipe organ re-installed into Christmas Lutheran Church in December 2000 just in time for the Christmas Eve service (chapter 15, "A Christmas gift to Bethlehem"); and a destitute Lutheran woman who reclaims broken glass from the destruction of the Intifada, transforming it into glass angels for sale around the world (chapter 16, "Samar").

In chapter seventeen ("Christmas and the wall") Raheb recounts the sermon he preached on Christmas Eve 2003 as the wall around Bethlehem was becoming reality. And he reflects as follows (pp 144-145):

Christians have to take Christmas in Bethlehem seriously, because on that holy night and in this very place, God chose to be very concrete, to take flesh, and to take our world very seriously. We Christians are unafraid to face the brutal reality around us because we believe in a power mightier than walls and put our faith in a peace that exceeds all human understanding.

In chapter eighteen ("Building walls or planting olive trees?") Raheb reflects on the true meaning of "hope" within the Palestinian/Israeli context and beyond. And he draws powerful conclusions for his readers (p 156):

As Christians we should no longer be spectators in this world. We are actors on Christ's behalf. Sometimes we feel that that world in which we live has become a hell ... but our faith is in Christ, who is life. Hell is already overcome. Our call is not to transform this hell into a paradise but to transfer this hell into a world in which life is possible again.

Raheb's book is a genuine message of hope in our desperate world and a call to courageous action in our troubled times.

