

December 27 meditation based on resources compiled by the Global Ministries
of the United Church of Christ
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I have always loved historical maps,
which helped me to locate and understand stories of the past.
Maps are an aid to imagination. When I first heard the stories in the Gospel,
I had one picture in my mind of places and locations and travel.
Maps corrected this a bit – I was surprised to find out
that Bethlehem and Jerusalem were only 6 miles apart: a walk of only a couple of hours.

And then, overlaid on these ancient stories and the maps that go with them,
are present days realities and stories. Bethlehem and Jerusalem are places of conflict, even as religions
that treasure peace live in them.

As we think about all these things, I turn to the words of children,
our hope for the future. I will read you 2 essays written by Palestinian children,
from resources compiled by the Global Ministries of the United Church of Christ.
One is written by a boy who lives in the town (now a part of Jerusalem)
that tradition associates with the birthplace of John the Baptist.
The other is written by a girl who lives in Bethlehem.
I will also offer some background information written for American children,
on the settings for the essays.

My name is John Hanna and I am seven years old.
My father is a film editor and my mother also goes to work.
We are the only Palestinian Christian family living in Ein Karem.
We live close to the Latin Church.
My grandfather came as a refugee from Ikrith, one of the Christian villages
on the border of Lebanon whose inhabitants were evicted in 1948.
They were largely Melkites. Today my family attends church in Jerusalem.
My sister and I go to school in Jerusalem at the Frères College
and my father drives us there every day.
I speak a little English. After school,
I go into our garden and play with some of the Israeli children who live upstairs.
I try to practice my English with them.
Sometimes it is lonely to be the only Christian family.
My father remembers feeling sad
because he also belonged to the only Arab Christian family in the village.
Seven people live in my house. I have a new baby brother
and I hope he will play football with me one day. In the meantime,
I play with my sister Elizabeth and I also share a room with her.
My grandparents also live at my house and that makes me very happy.
My mother is from Haifa. In the summer,
our favorite thing to do is to go and visit family in the Galilee area,
around Haifa and Jaffa and go to the sea. I love swimming in the sea.
I love drawing and I can show you my drawing of a boat in the sea.
I have not made up my mind about what I want to be in the future.
I do not know much about America
but I would love to meet with other children from there. I know that my hometown

is the birthplace of John the Baptist who baptized Jesus Christ.

What does John mean when he says he is a refugee?

A refugee is someone who has been forced to leave their home and now lives someplace else, waiting to return home.

People become refugees because of wars, because of hunger, or because of fear that they could be hurt.

There are many Palestinians who are refugees who fled their homes in 1948 when the state of Israel was created there was a long war and people were afraid for their lives.

Today many Palestinians are living in refugee camps or other villages, over 60 years later, waiting to go home.

Their children were born away from home and now their grandchildren too.

One-third of the families live in camps spread out in 59 different locations located in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

Today there are over 4 million Palestinian refugees.

The United Nations has said that these Palestinians have a right to return home in the UN Resolution 194, passed in 1948, but still today the problem is not solved.

My name is Ronza Abu Sabbah. I am 9 years old.

I live in Beit Jala, a town near Bethlehem, and I have two brothers and two sisters.

I go to the Good Shepherd's School and I am in the fourth grade.

My mother, Hanan is a science teacher at the school, and my father is an architect.

We are a Greek Orthodox family and we pray at St. Mary the Virgin Church.

My school is an all girls' school. There are 34 girls in my classroom

and 17 of them are Muslim. We have a religion class on Mondays and Thursdays.

The teacher has a book. She writes out things on the blackboard

and we copy in our own notebooks. After three or four such lessons,

we have a quiz or an exam. Yesterday's lesson was about the Resurrection.

I am happy to be in the land of Christ. I go to the Nativity Church on Christmas day. Bethlehem for me is a town we enjoy being part of.

It is a place where I go with the family to eat pizza and walk in the streets.

It is alive.

My friends are Hanan, Diana and Irene, who are Christian,

but I also have two good Muslim friends, Dania and Arwa.

My friends and I talk about school and our common hobbies.

I usually play with my cousins. I watch cartoons on TV, read stories in English

and in Arabic, and help my mother at home with the dishes and mopping the floor.

On Sundays, after church I go to Sunday school. We sing hymns and do drawings. Sometimes when the army came,

there was a curfew and we could not go out from our houses or even come to school. Time was wasted and now we have to make up for the lost classes.

Miss Huwaida, our religion teacher, is wonderful.

She teaches us hymns such as "Lord, I am a White Page"

and "Do Not Leave Me Alone, Dear Lord."

We collected money to help the ones who were affected by the curfew and those who could not find food to eat.

The birth of Christ means new life, a life of security and joy for all,
and we Christians have a role to tell the good news.
We learn humility from the birth of Christ in a manger and to love all people.
Even when there are difficulties in our own personal relations, love can bring us closer.
I am pleased that I was chosen to represent Bethlehem in this interview.
I would like to invite the children in America and Canada
to come and visit the Holy Places, but now our life is not easy.
People cannot travel and visit families in other towns because of the checkpoints.
I would like us to be able to travel freely and feel secure.

What does Ronza mean when she talks about The Church of Nativity?

*The Church of Nativity is built above a cave,
which is believed to be the manger where Jesus was born.
The cave includes two small rooms: one with a star to mark the place of Jesus' birth, and one to mark
the place of the manger and the resting place of the holy family.
After the time of Jesus, the cave was covered with a shrine.
The shrine was torn down by Queen Helena,
who constructed the first Church of Nativity.
She came to Palestine on pilgrimage in 325 AD,
discovered the site and ordered a church to be built.
The church was dedicated in May of 399.
Later the church was destroyed
in the Samaritan revolt against the Byzantine rule in 522, but was built again in 527. Because of the
mosaic of the Magi dressed in Persian garb,
the Nativity church was left alone,
when the Persians rampaged through the land in 614 destroying churches.
The Crusaders also renovated the church,
adding artistic touches and used it as a coronation place in the year 1100.
Nowadays, the church is divided in three parts which are each cared for
by three different Christian denominations:
one section under the care of the Greek Orthodox,
one section under the care of the Armenians
and one section under the care of the Franciscans (Catholics).
Christians from around the world come to pray at this church, especially at Christmas. The Muslim
population in Bethlehem also honors Mary at the church of Nativity,*

Today, as we sing our carols and pray our prayers,
may we honor these places, these children and their dreams for peace and security. Amen.