# THE FIRST ADVENT IN PALESTINE

## REVERSALS, RESISTANCE, AND THE ONGOING COMPLEXITY OF HOPE

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# 9

# EVEN AFTER GOD ARRIVED

*The Holy Family, Mother Rachel,*
*and the Slaughter of the Innocents*

*Bethlehem and Egypt | Matthew 2:13–18*

Even after God arrived in the form of a baby, tense political dynamics continued. Economic hardship continued. The entire region remained under threat. The new king was born. Angels sang, shepherds visited, a star led magi from the East to worship this child. Yet in the thick of night, the Holy Family was forced to flee, seeking refuge across a border in a foreign land.

Even after God arrived, there remained reason to lament, as another massacre occurred, another traumatic event visited upon the landscape and upon the families who called Judea home.

Advent calls us to wrestle honestly with this truth: troubles don't disappear just because Jesus arrived. The world is still harsh and riddled with injustice. And Matthew knew it. He wrote his Gospel after the destruction of the temple and the sacking of Jerusalem by the Roman

colonizers in 70 CE. Despite the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, things seemed like more of the same: empires and their economies exerting oppressive tactics with persistent and reactive force.

Lament remains the appropriate response to a world not immediately changed by God's arrival, and grief the honest response to the human experience even after God embodied our flesh and frame. Matthew tells of atrocities even in the wake of incarnation.

Even after the arrival of Jesus, when God's incarnation and theodicy are joined in the first advent and in all those since, we who seek to embody God's peace on earth respond to the perpetual invitation into places of pain.

After the birth of the heralded Prince of Peace, the advent story unfolds with refugees, infanticide, and collateral damage for those in the villages of Judea.

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After the magi depart, an angel appears once again to Joseph in a dream. The midnight messenger instructs him to hurry and take the mother and child to Egypt.[1] Herod is on the cusp of a rampage aimed at the child. Immediately Joseph obeys, fleeing with his family that very night. No time taken for long goodbyes with family or neighbors; no time to plan their route or to pack much, save some clothes and food left over from the previous day. Maybe they traveled with unleavened bread like their ancestors once did.[2]





The magi departed quietly to Persia, taking a less-traveled road. The Holy Family departed in the dark of night for Egypt, where they sought sanctuary.

For most families in the region, the morning dawn was a time to make daily bread for their loved ones. And for most on this particular morning, there was no warning. But Joseph took Mary and their child away from Bethlehem, and they became yet another refugee family fleeing a brutal regime. Jesus the refugee relied on the hospitality of Egyptians to stay safe when home was no longer secure.

It is a matter of human calculation as to when home becomes "the mouth of a shark," as Warsan Shire writes in one of her many poems about home, immigration, and seeking refuge in a dangerous world.[3] The daily duress of life under the empire could be enough to force one family to consider migration. The economic stresses or eventual land loss might push others to leave their home. Or, like Joseph, the threat of imminent peril triggers an immediate flight elsewhere, almost anywhere, to secure safety for one's family. The God who became a refugee holds deep compassion for those forced to make similar choices; it is in God's personal story, the memory embedded in God's own body.

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Herod knew that no matter what he tried, he would never be a beloved leader of the Judean people. No elaborate

refurbishing of the temple could win their affections. And nothing would convince them that his roots and commitments were actually Jewish. His insecurities mounted. He knew that a messianic hope was growing among the Jews, and that disdain for his kingship was increasing their hunger for another king—perhaps this one, somewhere in the hills of Judea.

The birth of Jesus made Herod a threat to all the inhabitants of Roman Palestine. His paranoia provoked, Herod would likely do anything to quash the rumor or the young rival—putting everyone in harm's way. The magi tricked Herod. When they failed to return to the palace to give him news of the new king, their deception prompted him to ferret out the details on his own. Desperate to put an end to this rival king, and willing to be no wise man's fool, he ordered the murder of all male children under the age of two in Bethlehem and the surrounding region.

Herod's militias soon swept through the entire area in pursuit of the young rival. But far from a mission of precision, it left Bethlehem awash in blood, the epicenter of infanticide, and even surrounding towns were not spared.

When Herod's men hunted for boys of a certain age to slay, pressing family members and neighbors to give up the whereabouts of Judea's youngest sons, more blood ran in the streets as men and women who refused to comply were also killed. The death count included those





righteous ones who tried to hide and defend the innocents. Among them would have been Zechariah.

When the militia came to Ein Kerem, the village of the righteous priest, he and his wife hid their son because he was under two years old. Tradition remembers Elizabeth hiding in a subterranean space with infant John. Zechariah, likely at the door, refused to let the soldiers in, or blocked the road trying to divert them from his son's hiding place. John remained hidden and survived the massacre, but legend insists that Zechariah was targeted and died in Herod's war against the sons of Bethlehem and Judea.

As I read the Matthean narrative, I was struck to notice for the first time that we don't hear of Jesus ever returning to Bethlehem. He travels to nearby Jerusalem, but not to the ancestral home of his father. In a sense, this feels like the one place he didn't visit, which suggests intention. I continued to wonder if it was due to the guilt of the massacre in his name that he carried into his adult life.

After passing through Bethany, where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived, maybe he hesitated when he came to the edge of Bethlehem. Did he remember the stories his mother told him of the time they left under cover of darkness when others, like Zechariah, were left to fend for themselves and try to protect their children? Jesus's body, like all human bodies, must have held the trauma. Part of incarnation was the loss of lives in his name.

I imagine that Jesus lived with his own sense of sadness that he was the child Herod sought, the reason for the post-advent slaughter. He got out with his life, and his father survived. But many others did not. And maybe every time he traveled south, the knowledge needled him—and he walked around Bethlehem to avoid his own lingering advent ache.

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Advent is the subversion of imperial power. As such, advent will always confront earthly empires, bringing God's disarmed peace, which arrives like a baby to an ordinary couple in an insignificant town on the edge of the empire. And the cycle of advent and atrocities in its aftermath continues as we opt for familiar modes of human power: the Pax Persica, the Pax Romana, and now the Pax Americana have all purported to be substitutes for God's peace. Only when advent is the final word will empires and their economies cease and the meek at last inherit the land.[4] Only when we find ourselves summoned by God alongside ordinary priests, barren or abused women, shepherds, tradesmen, and foreigners participating in God's subversive peace campaign, can we incarnate another kind of peace, can we inherit the land.

Prophets like Isaiah told of this subversive peace through poetry, igniting the imagination of Israel. But in the advent narratives where God takes on our very flesh to inhabit the human story, we see what defying the





powers of this world could look like. In the incarnation, we see the possibility of embodying peace.

If violence begets more violence, as history reveals with little ambiguity, then what is the antidote? And how will the arrival of a defenseless baby as the picture of divine kingship set our imagination on a new trajectory for peace? Can we incarnate a regime without a corresponding military? Can we incarnate a regime that doesn't extract tribute and taxes from the peasantry? More to the point of advent, how can we imagine ourselves as part of such a weapon-free campaign?

The advent narratives stretch our sensibilities, pulling us from the status quo we are accustomed to, toward an utterly different embodiment of peace and salvation. It may not even be the deliverance Jews most hoped for when they dreamed of a Davidic leader coming to vanquish the foreigners, punishing rivals as similar powers have done for generations.

While Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the tender green shoot of an ancient lineage—of Jesse's old, dry tree stump—he was not what most expected. A savior who arrived without an army, he invited people to participate in their own liberation by living by a different story. By living an advent ethic. God recruits us to be advent practitioners, intentionally disarming our violent tendencies and cultivating abundant capacity for the ebb and flow of lament and hope.

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Among those who live under occupation in Jerusalem are people like Nafez Assaily, whose story I discovered through a local friend and peacemaker. The culture of violence shaped his childhood, much as it did that of young Mary in Galilee. Meeting that incessant conflict with resistance proved formative for Nafez as he grew up in the Occupied Territories. From Jerusalem to Nablus and eventually to Hebron, he witnessed the spear tip of hostility directed at his community. It would be understandable if he had succumbed to the weight of hardship, broken and bitter. But as Mary sang out her song of resistance in the hills of Judea, so Nafez held a different ethic and expectation for his land—a nonviolent one.

While attending university in Nablus, Nafez encountered for the first time the philosophy of nonviolence practiced by Gandhi. As he watched a movie about Gandhi's life and nonviolent action in India for one of his classes, Nafez wondered if Gandhi's method could be an answer to the Palestinian situation. His personal exploration turned into a commitment to live as an advocate for nonviolence in his homeland—an inclination that hinted of the mothers of advent, Mary and Elizabeth, who also imagined a future peace free of violence.

Over the next set of years, my friend and I would often return to Nafez's story. I learned that he had begun local initiatives in Hebron and the surrounding villages to teach nonviolence. He believed that training Palestinians





in nonviolence had to be very practical and that he needed to offer tools that would help them resolve the basic struggles of their daily lives in nonviolent ways. This meant teaching families to understand and navigate their own city nonviolently, including its infrastructure and municipal leadership. His commitment to things concrete and practical resonated with me and the community development work my husband and I do. His wisdom felt both fresh and familiar.

When Nafez worked with kids, he showed them how to purchase good food (rather than the expired products flooding the markets from Israel) and how to avoid arguments with their parents at home.[5] He asked people about their life challenges and helped them create solutions that diminished frustration and agitation, always providing ways to steer clear of violence.

Nafez found that people learned best in the context of their own life, learning first how to manage family and work life without resorting to violence. As they do so, they slowly begin to embody a nonviolent approach to living in Palestine.

This approach requires patience, but he believes it is necessary as Palestinians absorb new information. Slowly and with small moves, people begin to see the benefits of nonviolent resolutions. Patience in the work is something Nafez considers a primary virtue. Creating a culture of nonviolence takes time—maybe even generations.

He, like other friends in the region, shares a hope for a Gandhi-like figure to emerge from among these children, one who can be a positive catalyst.[6]

In this work with children, one of Assaily's best tools is books. In 1996 he began the Library on Wheels for Non-violence and Peace.[7] Some villages are so remote that he could only get there by donkey with a saddlebag full of books. As he traveled, he loaned kids books featuring stories of nonviolence. Returning weeks later, he exchanged them for new books, and in this way he cultivates children's exposure to new ideas, widening their perspective of possible responses to frustration within their family or community. As someone whose life has been changed by books, by meeting stories of justice and peacemaking in words on pages, I was profoundly moved when I heard about Nafez's work with children who had to travel through checkpoints. I could imagine boys, picture book in hand, reading stories of nonviolence distracting them from the soldiers. Or girls, engrossed in chapter books about Malala Yousafzai or another brave girl. This initiative instantly convinced me of his genius.

Nafez got to know the kids and their parents, and they often talked about real challenges in their community as he counseled them in nonviolent approaches to resolving matters. The children who first benefited from the program are now in their twenties. Some are leading nonviolent actions in their own communities, thanks to Nafez and his vision for peace.





In 2007 he created a program that distributed books to Palestinian commuters.[8] The second Intifada had ended, but the long wait at various Israeli checkpoints hadn't. So Nafez partnered with bus drivers to provide reading material for commuters enduring delays beyond their control. He curated a collection of books of short stories and lessons appropriate for the ride times, all of which taught nonviolence. Some of the books were profiles of the ancestors Joseph, Moses, and Jesus—models he saw as responding to hard circumstances without resorting to violence. Reading would, he hoped, be a good way to take the edge off the wait, diffuse the frustration, and harness that time into productive activity. It also struck a subversive note, showing the Israeli soldiers at the checkpoints that Palestinians were making good use of their time, not seething at the delays or looking for a fight.[9]

For more than three decades, Nafez Assaily has practiced the slow, steady work of nonviolence in hard, even remote terrain. He embodies the patience of a true peacemaker. He exemplifies deep participation in God's peace campaign, accepting advent's invitation. He is creating a culture change toward peace, working in generational arcs toward a future where justice can flourish.

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After Matthew tells of the slaughter of the innocents, several times he repeats the words *mother* and *child*.[10] As he mentions the weeping of Mother Rachel for her children,

the vulnerability of many generations of mothers, sons, and daughters haunts this text.

As I read the text again, I imagine that this is another thing Mary pondered in her heart on the trek to Egypt, once the news of what happened in the wake of their departure reached her. Maybe she wept like Rachel for another generation of children lost to yet another empire. Maybe she wept like mothers weep still for the children of Gaza, Ramallah, and Bethlehem. Because it seems empires continue to come for our children, even as we live under new iterations of Caesar's so-called peace.

And while the mothers of Bethlehem and the nearby towns like Ein Kerem are not directly named by Matthew, they are certainly in view as the Gospel writer invokes the memory of Rachel, quintessential mother of Israel.[11] According to the prophet Jeremiah, she was inconsolable, much like the daughter of Zion (Jerusalem) in Lamentations, who found none to comfort her in her grief.[12]

Whether the loss of Jerusalem in 587 BCE or of those taken captive to Babylon or all the other atrocities that subsequently rocked the land, the grief was unrelenting. Rachel wept without ceasing. The slaughter of children in the aftermath of the first advent was now added weight to her grief. Maybe that's what Matthew hoped his readers would see—this fresh grief connected to the others preceding it.

But there is something else about Matthew's choice of text. Rather than point to the "Daughter of Zion" of





Lamentations to convey grief over more loss at imperial hands, he chooses the poem from Jeremiah. In doing so, he makes a subversive move to point toward hope. Rachel's bitter weeping for her children and refusal to be consoled are part of what is called "The Little Book of Consolation," a small missive of hope within Jeremiah's words and writings. In Matthew's use of these lines of the poem in perfect resonance with the bloodbath in Bethlehem, his readers are prompted to also recall God's response to Mother Rachel and an unexpected reversal—the promise that her children will return to her from captivity in foreign lands: "There is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country."[13] They will live, and thus she can celebrate the newness that God brings after seasons of devastation. What Matthew alludes to is a poem as heavy with promise as it is with pain.[14]

And in Rachel, Matthew chose the preeminent Mother of Suffering. Rachel waited years to marry Jacob after her father foiled their union. And then she struggled with barrenness. After she did give birth to a son, she saw him disappear at the hand of his brothers. In childbirth with her second son, she died. In her short life she carried lamentations that haunted the landscape for generations to come.

The memorial at Ramah, where Rachel was buried, stands as a reminder not only of her loss but of all other children lost too soon. In a subsequent season, Ramah

would be the staging area for those children taken into Babylonian captivity.[15] It became a locus for losses remembered by Israel, a kind of memorial touchstone. With Rachel's bones in the soil of this place, it was a convergence of mother and land holding both lament for loved ones lost and grief for future generations.[16]

But Mother Rachel's loss was to be reversed generations beyond her own lifespan. Jeremiah writes that she, alongside other bereft mothers of the land, would rejoice in this family reunion initiated by God.[17]

This is the promised reversal that unravels empires, past and future. Jeremiah wrote about it as a plucking and then a planting, as the tearing down and then the building back. Later Isaiah would continue these themes, using words of exile and then return.

Then Matthew, drawing from the Jewish canon, reminds those who weep in Bethlehem that the next stanza in the reversals is the experience of God's slow but sure hope.

Tearing down, then planting; exile, then return; weeping, then meeting God's future—these reversals will arrive on another generation's horizon, and they are the reward for those faithful who lamented like Mother Rachel.[18]

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Advent's exhortation is to God's peace, birthed among ordinary people in hard landscapes. The message is as





relevant now as it was in ancient Palestine. Embodying God's peace and living as a peacemaker amid troubled times—this is what the newborn king did. He incarnated another kind of peace for a world hemorrhaging with injustice.

This was no easy peace—it came with confrontations, abandonment by his followers, crucifixion. But that way of seeing the world and of living into it differently brought change, if slowly.

As long as there are empires based on human power, there will be the need for advent. Beyond holy days or holidays, advent is about the kind of power we choose to live out and embody on earth.

As long as there are land removals and home demolitions; as long as peace talks start, stop, and stall without advancing justice; as long as American-made bombs drop on Gaza from Israeli planes, we are called to cry out for advent. First Intifada, Second Intifada, and every other act of resistance until we embody advent's peace.

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Nafez Assaily says that creating a nonviolent culture begins at home, begins in your own village—before it ever looks like direct action. First, it is a disarming of violent tendencies in ourselves and in our own reactions to people and situations we encounter daily. When the work has been done within, then we have the tools to create changes that make for true peace.[19]

This call to disarm violence is a necessary ingredient of God's restorative justice and congruent with the imperatives of the first advent. We welcome this newborn God-with-us into our arms instead of reaching for weapons, instead of coming to blows with enemies. We tend the fragile newborn One given to humanity by God, as the hope for a new kind of kingdom, a different peace, and a future and lasting justice.