

RISING GENERATIONS

THE UPPER ROOM

Searching for Jesus in His Hometown

Sarah Swandell

Banging and popping noises sounded outside our hotel window. My roommate Laura and I looked at each other.

“What was that?”

“Maybe they’re doing construction.”

“At night?”

Another bang.

“Maybe someone’s throwing things into a dumpster?” That’s what we told ourselves so we could fall asleep.

We were in Bethlehem with our bishop. She had invited young women pastors to walk the Holy Land and learn about the struggle for peace between Israel and Palestine. Our hotel bumped against the apartheid wall—a long, snaking, graffiti-plastered concrete wall that divided Palestinians and Israelis.

I had heard people with flushed faces and shining eyes say, “I’ve been to the Holy Land! I walked where Jesus walked!” Would I feel the same glow while there? Surely I’d feel close to Jesus by the gnarled bark of ancient trees in the Garden of Gethsemane. Surely kneeling at his birthplace or entering his tomb, I’d find him. My toes tingled, ready to walk where he walked.

But instead of seeing Jesus, my eyes drifted to other sights: A teenage Israeli soldier walking and texting with her machine gun dangling across her back. Tombstone graffiti on the separation wall honoring the children who had died in bombings. The Way of Sorrow—the path Jesus walked on Good Friday—crowded with shops selling dusty stuffed animals and plastic flutes.

Jesus walked here, preached here, and taught here. So why couldn’t I hear him? Instead, I heard bangs outside our window—which I learned were from a refugee camp, where Palestinian families were trapped. In protest, children threw rocks at the Israeli guards in their towers; the guards, in turn, rained down rubber bullets and tear gas. On the last day of our trip, Laura and I grew restless. “Let’s go to the wall,” I said.

We had heard that just past the checkpoint was a special section of graffiti—a rare icon of Mother Mary. Our guide had said, “Look for it around the bend . . . and prepare to be moved.”

Laura and I headed toward the gate. As we approached, two Israeli guards stood to block the entrance, their guns slashed diagonally across their bulletproof vests.

“Sarah . . .” said Laura.

The guards waved us back, shouting something I couldn’t understand. Laura stopped walking. “OK. We’re done here.”

I kept on.

As I got closer, the guards waved their arms wildly, motioning to a different gate. *They think we want to pass through the checkpoint illegally*, I thought. I waved back, pointing to the bend in the wall. I couldn't say what I really wanted to say: We're on a pilgrimage.

At last they let us go. Laura ran to catch up. With hearts pounding, we rounded the bend and caught the gold glint of the icon. The Virgin Mary stood at the center . . . without her baby boy.

In almost every painting of Mary I've seen, she's holding Jesus in her lap. Not here. Here she's pregnant, one hand resting on her rounded belly, the other held to her face. She is waiting for her Savior to come.

Finally, I realized what I should have known: Jesus is found not in carefully preserved monuments or churches with gold candles and thick carpets. He is found not in fancy conference centers or tourist shops. Jesus is found in the waiting, the longing, the suffering. I saw him in spray paint on a separation wall. I saw him in the eyes of a Mother. On whatever walls we build to divide us, he brushes the colors of the kingdom.

Now I know where to look.

Dig Deeper

Where do you look for Jesus? Let Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 encourage you to keep searching, trusting that “the glory of the Lord will appear for all to see” (40:5, CEV).

Sarah Swandell is a songwriter, pastor, and bookworm from North Carolina. She blogs at sarahswandell.com.