

Can you hear your shepherd's voice? Imagine being in a crowded, noisy room. You close your eyes. Can you pick out the voice of your shepherd from all the rest? Sometimes, it is the other voices that are the loudest. It is the other voices that might be more intriguing or tempting to hear. But in today's gospel lesson, Jesus reminds us to listen for his voice, so that we may have life and have it abundantly.

In 2013, my husband, Nate, and I had the opportunity to live and work in Palestine for one year. We lived in a small town called Beit Sahour--a short walk straight downhill from Bethlehem. The Palestinians we lived and worked with had a lot of voices directed toward them. Voices of unwelcome. Voices of persecution. Voices of occupation. Our Palestinian brothers and sisters have lived under Israeli occupation for 70 years--for some, this is for their entire lives. But they continue to follow their shepherd.

In Beit Sahour, our pastor, Ashraf, often used a metaphor to describe the faith of the Palestinians. The olive tree, plentiful in Palestine, grows and flourishes in the harsh desert climate. It thrives and bears fruit year after year despite the unwavering heat. It provides for families at the harvest even though there has been little rain. The olive tree remains steadfast in this land through these desolate circumstances.

Pastor Ashraf went on to compare the olive tree to Palestinians. The olive tree, he said, is a metaphor for Palestinians. Like the olive tree, Palestinians grow and flourish in the harsh circumstances in which they find themselves. They live faithful, family-oriented lives despite

living under Israeli occupation. Palestinians remain steadfast in their beliefs and values even though they face many challenges living under Israeli control. I witnessed the realities of this metaphor the longer I lived in Palestine.

Under Israeli occupation, Palestinians are restricted from traveling within their own county by 542 obstacles, including a separation wall, roadblocks, earth mounds, and checkpoints. Despite these 542 hindrances, Palestinians continue to live their lives. They overcome these obstacles and pass through them for work, for family, or for worship.

The first time I crossed through the separation wall at a checkpoint into Jerusalem was a completely horrible experience. We were on a bus full of Palestinians who, like us, lived on the West Bank side of the wall. As we approached the checkpoint, the bus riders all around us began to stir, gathering their belongings even though we were still far from the next bus stop. At the checkpoint, all of the Palestinians exited the bus and were corralled like cattle through a narrow line. As I watched from the window, I saw each Palestinian present to an Israeli soldier their identification before being allowed to cross a line in the sidewalk. Palestinians are not allowed to cross the border on a bus, you see. Instead, they must exit the bus at the checkpoint and walk across, literally, a line in the sidewalk. Then, they are given permission to reboard the bus. Meanwhile, the international bus riders, including myself, are allowed to remain on the bus, presenting our identification to another Israeli soldier. Watching this unfold, I felt a rock settle into the pit of my stomach. I felt privileged. I felt sick. I felt ashamed. I wanted to become invisible, but instead, my face flushed a more pronounced shade of red. Even now, it's difficult for me to talk about. My shame lingers. I couldn't look in the faces of the Palestinians

as they reentered the bus. Here I was, brand new to the country, yet I was given more privilege than those around me--Palestinians who had lived and worked here for their whole lives.

These Palestinians, with a will stronger than mine, don't allow the voices of the occupation to dictate their lives. They overcome the physical obstacles built to keep them out.

Like the Palestinians on the bus, our Arabic teacher, Michael, didn't let the reality of the occupation change him. Michael lives in Beit Sahour, just like we did. His daughter, though, lives in the Armenian quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, on the other side of the separation wall. Michael is only allowed to cross the wall and visit his daughter and her family when he has permission to do so, likely only twice each year. They live only 8 kilometers from each other, but the occupation makes it seem much further. Instead of letting this defeat him and break his family ties, Michael Skypes with his daughter everyday. The voices of the occupation can't keep them apart.

Like Michael, our host parents, Abeer and Fadi, apply for permission to enter Jerusalem about twice each year--once during the Christmas season, and once during the Easter season. While they don't have family separated by the wall, there are many holy sites that are inaccessible to them. Abeer and Fadi are faithful Christians, and they are raising their four children to be the same. It is important to their faith and to their family to visit the places where Jesus walked, taught, was crucified, and was resurrected, even though these sites are all on the Israeli side of the separation wall. So, they apply for permission to get into Jerusalem.

The year I lived in Beit Sahour, all six members of my host family applied for permission during the Easter season. One week before Easter, five of them received their permission. Only my host dad, Fadi, remained. With two days to go, Fadi finally received his permission, too. I was thrilled for them! I asked Fadi if he would go with his family to visit the Christian holy sites over the weekend, but his answer surprised me. He said no. Actually, he said, "No, it's too humiliating." It was too humiliating for him to enter into a checkpoint and be under scrutiny of the Israeli soldiers standing there. It was too humiliating for him to present the Israeli soldier his identification and permission paperwork. It was too humiliating for him to allow the Israeli soldier, likely not more than 18 years old, to decide arbitrarily whether Fadi would be given permission or denied permission to cross the border with his family. Fadi's sense of humiliation made me wish I hadn't asked.

Despite the humiliation, Fadi visited Jerusalem with his family. For him, sharing the experience of the holy sites with his family was too important--more important than any humiliation he would face. Fadi didn't allow the voices of the occupation to get in the way of his faith.

Mr. Tony's story is the last story I want to share with you today. Mr. Tony was the vice principal I worked with at Dar-al Kalima Lutheran School in Bethlehem. One morning, Mr. Tony got a phone call at school from his brother. It was bad news: their family's several acres of land, affectionately known as The Tent of Nations, had been demolished by Israeli forces. Fifteen-hundred of their fruit and olive trees had been destroyed. Mr. Tony's crops had been devastated, just like they had been 10 years before. The Tent of Nations sits among five different Israeli settlements, built illegally on Palestinian land. It's no secret to Mr. Tony and his family that Israeli leaders would like to put a road through their family's land, connecting each of

the illegal settlements to one another. Mr. Tony responded to this horrendous crime by saying, "We refuse to be enemies," echoing the sign that sits at the entrance to the Tent of Nations. Refusing to be enemies with those who started the fight, Mr. Tony and his family replanted their lost trees. They didn't allow the voices of the occupation to define them.

Mr. Tony, Fadi, Michael, and the nameless bus-riders encounter daily challenges in the face of the Israeli occupation. Though the occupation voices fight to be the loudest, our Palestinian brothers and sisters listen to another voice instead. They cross the separation wall in order to go to worship. They defy arbitrary permission by Skyping family members. They go through humiliating checkpoints to visit the land where Jesus walked. And they plant beautiful trees where they are not wanted. Our Palestinian brothers and sisters don't listen to the voices of hatred, persecution, and oppression. Instead, they focus on the voice of their shepherd. May we, too, hear the voice of our shepherd over the loudest voices that try to get in between.

Amen.