

A YEAR IN THE HOLY LAND



OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER IN REVIEW

Pictures:

Top- The view from the top of Herodian's Palace

Bottom Left- The Olive Harvest Festival in Bethlehem

Bottom Right- Picking Olives in Beit Jala

Happy November! I can't hardly believe that I am already three months into my YAGM year. Since my last newsletter, life has gotten even busier with school, church, continuing education, and ELCJHL events. Amidst the exciting chaos, I grow more thankful for the days I have time to relax with my host family. October and November brought several new adventures filled with learning, excitement, frustration, and wonder. Highlights include: Rally Day at the Lutheran Church in Ramallah, a tour of Al Aqsa Mosque in the Old City, celebrating my youngest host brother's 1st birthday, harvesting olives in Beit Jala and Jerusalem, celebrating Thanksgiving at Christmas Lutheran Church, celebrating my oldest host sister's 18th birthday, a Halloween celebration on the Mount of Olives, the 19th annual Olive Harvest Festival in Bethlehem, a visit to the Garden of Gethsemane, and the celebration of the Lutheran Reformation at both Dar Al-Kalima Lutheran School and the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City.

I am incredibly blessed to have witnessed and taken part in so many celebrations and events. As the weeks go by, it is becoming increasingly important for me to take time out to slow down and reflect upon how these experiences have shaped me and will continue to shape me as I grow in community, faith, and understanding.



ANCIENT STONES

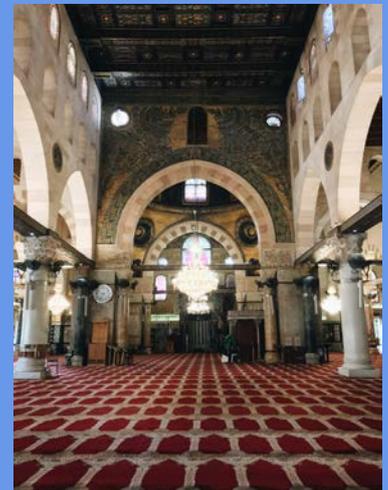
The Jerusalem and West Bank YAGM program has the unique opportunity to come together as a cohort once a month for continuing education. The purpose of our continuing education is to learn more about our companions, the land, the conflict, and religion. Our September continuing education led us to Jericho, where we visited the Mount of Temptations, the place where Jesus was first tempted. At the Mount, we discussed temptations each of us currently face, temptations we foresee for ourselves in the year ahead, and how these temptations affect us and our YAGM experience.

Our October continuing education focused on the Islamic religion. Christianity makes up only 1% of the population in Palestine. Since the majority of Palestinians are Muslim, it is essential that I expand my understanding about Islam to better live in community with my Palestinian neighbors. By developing a more robust knowledge about the Islamic religion, I am better equipped to accompany the communities I am surrounded by this year. Our October continuing education began with watching *The Messenger*, an epic historical drama chronicling the life and times of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. The film helped me gain a more comprehensive understanding of the history of the Islamic religion.

It was during our October continuing education event that my cohort and I had the unique opportunity to tour the Al Aqsa Mosque located in the Old City. The Mosque was built on top of the Temple Mount, known as the Al Aqsa Compound, and is considered the third holiest site for the Islamic religion. Islam and Muslims believe that Muhammad was transported from the sacred Mosque in Mecca to Al-Aqsa during the Night Journey. At the Mosque, Muhammad is said to have led the other prophets in prayer.

Although most tourists are only allowed to tour the compound and cannot venture inside the Mosque, because of the strong interfaith relationships built between the ELCJHL and local Muslim religious leaders, my cohort had the incredibly rare chance to tour both the compound and inside the Mosques. In a word, the Mosques were breathtaking. The architecture of the various buildings is incorporated with beautifully intricate wall and ceiling mosaics, which included inscriptions some of the earliest surviving verses from the Qur'an. Touring the Al Aqsa compound was a privilege, especially since many of our Palestinian Muslim companions are unable to go and pray at the Mosque because of movement restrictions. I am incredibly grateful for the generous invitation and hospitality extended by the Muslim religious leaders. I truly valued this experience as it further deepened my understanding of the Islamic religion.

Touring the Al Aqsa
Compound



LIVING STONES

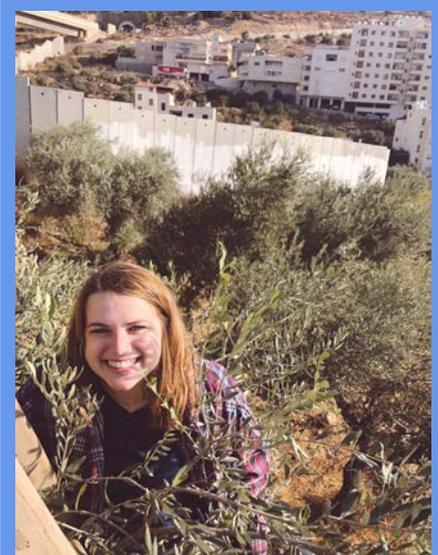
From roughly mid-September to mid-November, Jerusalem and the West Bank are busy with the olive harvest season, which is an economical, social, and cultural event for Palestinians. More than 7 million olive trees are cultivated in one harvest season. Olive trees do not just hold economic significance in the lives of Palestinians, but they also symbolize Palestinians' attachment to their land. Palestine has some of the world's oldest olive trees, some dating back to 2,000 years. Several families harvest trees that have been passed down in the family for countless generations. The olive harvest season also bears significant socio-cultural meaning because it brings families together to remember and celebrate their forefathers and mothers who tended to the same trees several-hundred years ago.

One of our cohort's companion families has traditionally picked olives every year for more than 200 years. The family owns a plot of land in Beit Jala. Each harvest, the family typically produces a year's supply of high-quality olive oil. My YAGM cohort and I, along with two other volunteers, had the immense privilege to help the family with this year's olive harvest. This year's harvest was abundant yielding 300 pounds of olives between seven trees. Our harvesting day was filled with laughter, learning, hard work, relationship building, and delicious food.

However, amidst the joys and labor of the day, our cohort could not ignore the fact the solemn Separation Wall that loomed in the background. The family's land is now directly next to the Separation Wall, making it impossible for the family to build anything on their land that they have owned for hundreds of years. Our companion family is not the only one that is affected by the Separation Wall, and other movement restriction limits imposed upon Palestinians, gravely affecting their ability to harvest their olives. Thousands of trees have been uprooted or even destroyed to clear land for the path of the Wall. The Separation Wall serves as a constant, somber reminder of the social injustice Palestinians face daily.

Witnessing the Wall's direct influence on my Palestinian neighbors developed my understanding of the conflict and its' devastating impact. I pray for justice, fairness, and equality.

Picking Olives in Beit Jala and on the Mount of Olives



A WORD OF THANKS

As Thanksgiving approaches, I have taken time to reflect upon what I am grateful for this season. Praise God, I have so much to be thankful for! So many people have opened their homes for me, fed me a meal, and supported and prayed for me throughout my YAGM journey thus far. Here are a few things I am thankful for this holiday season:

~ The many teachers and staff at Dar Al-Kalima Lutheran School who guide and care for me every day. From teachers inviting me to events to bringing me food to opening their homes to share a meal with me to giving me rides and Arabic lessons, I am blessed by the time they dedicate to mentor, support, and love me.

~ My host church community whose members so generously open their homes to me for lunch after church on Sundays and invite me to activities. They are true exemplifiers of what it means to live in community, and I deeply admire their steadfast commitment to the church and their community.

~ My students who without fail, bring a smile to my face every day. From the small interactions with a few students to working with an entire class, I am grateful for their creativity, joyous spirits, and zest for life.

~ The taxi drivers who I call weekly to pick me up from Arabic lessons and events. I am so grateful for their honesty and concern for my safety and wellbeing.

~ The strangers on the street who recognize when I am lost or in need and always extend a helping hand. I am grateful for their patience and willingness to help me.

~ The Olive Branch choir I joined and all of its members. They fill my Wednesdays with beautiful music, and I am blessed by their desire always to ensure I have a ride home after rehearsals.

~ My fellow YAGM's host sites and families who always greet me with a smile and take interest and joy in my successes and empathize in my sorrows.

~ The ELCJHL and their support of the YAGM program. I am grateful for their invitations to church events and I am appreciative to be involved in the life and ministry of the church.

LET US
GIVE
THANKS
TO THE
LORD
OUR GOD.
FOR IT IS
RIGHT TO
GIVE OUR
THANKS
AND
PRAISE.

A WORD OF THANKS CONTINUED

~ For my country coordinators Meghan and Gabi, and their family. I am grateful for their support, guidance, and wisdom. I am thankful for their help as I navigate the unknown and for their constant support when life gets a little more uncomfortable.

~ For my fellow YAGM'S, Olivia, Maddi, Sarah, Lyndsay, and Megan. I am so blessed to be on this journey with them. I am grateful for their support, love, humor, and adventurist spirits. I am blessed to know them and to have their friendship. Their courage and strength inspire me every day.

~ I am incredibly thankful for the love and support of my host family. Their hospitality and kindness mean the world to me. God's love and grace shines brightly through them, and I am incredibly grateful to be apart of their family this year. I am thankful for the daily rides they give me to school and back, for all the meals my host mom has cooked for me, for including me in their family events, for playing board games and cards with me, for being a listening ear, and for the wisdom and counsel they share with me. I enjoy spending time with them and I am so blessed by the love they give me every day.

~ Last but certainly not least, I am thankful for my friends and family at home who have been cheering me on throughout this year. Without your love and support, I would not be where I am today. I am thankful for your encouraging messages and letters. Thank you for all of your prayers, love, and support. I love you all.



The Garden of Gethsemane with the Old City in the background