

**Advent Message**  
**from Bishop Deborah Lieder Kieseey**  
**to the people of the**  
**Dakotas Conference of the United Methodist Church**

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I just returned from my first trip to the Holy Land. I had heard many people say how powerful that experience was, that I was looking forward to seeing and experiencing this place for myself.

And it was powerful.

Throughout the ten days there, the words of the song, “I Walked Today Where Jesus Walked,” kept coming to mind, for I truly did feel as though I was walking in the footsteps of Jesus.

- To stand on the Mount of Olives looking out across the city of Jerusalem...
- To see ancient olive trees that were alive in the time of Jesus...
- To walk the narrow streets of Old Jerusalem...
- To share a meal of the shores of the Sea of Galilee...
- To visit the Basilica of the Agony in Gethsemane...
- To spend time in Bethlehem...

Was indeed, walking where Jesus walked.

It was powerful.

But it was also disturbing.

For this beautiful land of Jesus’ birth – and life – was also filled with other images I will not soon forget.

I saw checkpoints – so many, in fact, I couldn’t count them all – checkpoints erected simply to keep the Israelis and Palestinians separated ...

I saw young people everywhere in military uniforms, with guns draped casually over their shoulders...

And the Wall – oh my ... the ever-present Wall cutting through this Holy Land and the holy city of Bethlehem...

It was disturbing.

This Holy Land – this birthplace of Jesus, the Prince of Peace – is not a place of peace. And I couldn’t help but think that just as Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem (Mathew 23:37). I believe He weeps now over this beautiful

land of His birth – just as He weeps wherever there is injustice or oppression or abuse or hatred. He weeps where there is violence or lack of human rights. He weeps where we build walls to keep ‘others’ away.

And yet, the message Christ came to proclaim is one that breaks down dividing walls and brings all God’s people together within the love of God. In the words of the Ephesians:

**“For He (Christ) is our peace; in his flesh He has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of household of God.” (Eph. 2:12-20)**

And I must say that throughout the Holy Land I did see signs of hope – as women and men from all sides (Jewish, Arab, Christian, Muslim) were working to break down those barriers between them and to begin instead to build bridges.

So friends, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior,  
As we sing our carols and decorate our homes;  
As we anticipate families gathering and loved ones coming together;

Let us also pledge to live out the message that the Christ Child came to proclaim: A message of hope. A message of love for all. A message of peace.

For the words of Isaiah are spoken to us, in this world of 2011:

**“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who live in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined... for a child has been born – for us, a son given – to use; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:2, 6)**

That is our hope -- and that is our Peace.

Blessings and peace to you all.  
Amen

