

*From the beginning to the end, you'll enrich your faith and experience the best!*

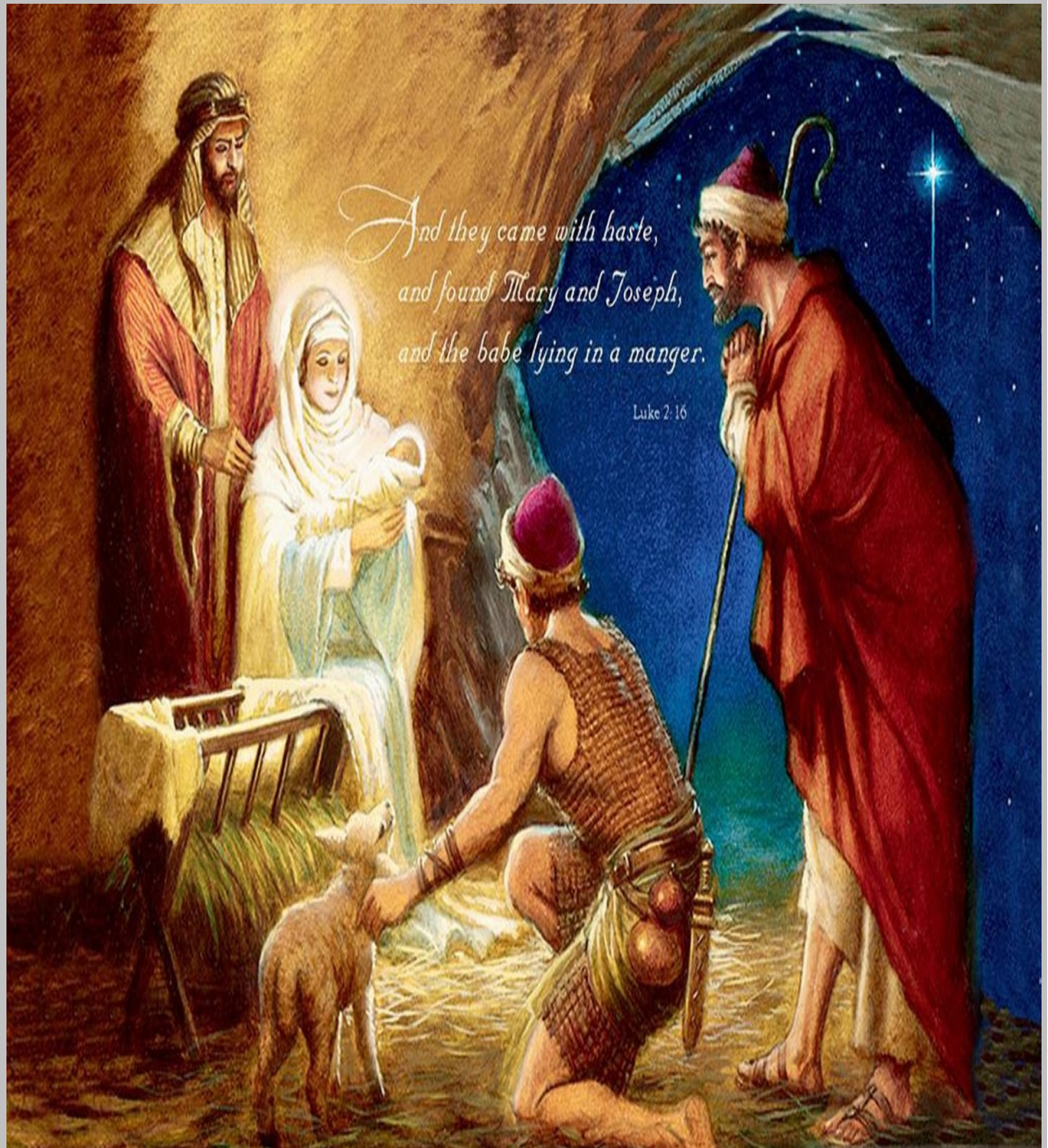
**Inside this issue:**

**A message from our tour hosts and guests** 2-3

**Recipe** 3

**Upcoming Tours** 4

**Coupon** 4



*And they came with haste,  
and found Mary and Joseph,  
and the babe lying in a manger.*

Luke 2:16



Reflecting on the birth of Jesus, we give thanks to God for the gift of salvation and eternal life that was given to us. We also wish to express our thanks to all of you who have traveled with us throughout the year. God's blessings upon those with upcoming tours planned, and to all of you who may travel with us in the future. May the gift of the Christ child bring you peace and joy, today and always.



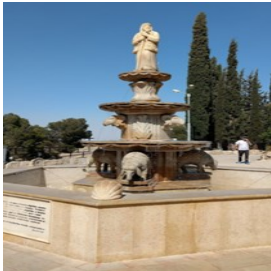
## A message from our tour hosts and participants....



### The Bells of Christmas

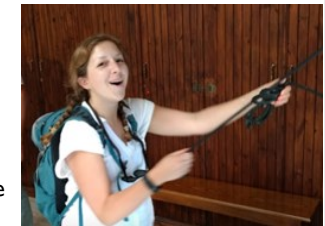
*"The bells of Christmas chime once more; the heav'nly guest is at the door. He comes to earthly dwellings still with new year gifts of peace, good will." Hymn writer Nikolai Grundtvig, 1783-1872*

When you set out to travel, whether it is a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, or a trip to the next state, it is often those little unexpected moments along the way that leave the deepest impression. That is exactly what happened to me as I was visiting the Chapel of the Angels, one of the many churches designed by the Italian architect Antonio Barluzzi that you'll see in the Holy Land. Here in Beit Sahour, a Palestinian village just outside Bethlehem, known as the Shepherd's Fields, you can visit the tent shaped chapel that is built alongside the ruins of earlier places of worship and commemorates the place where the shepherds were greeted by the Angelic hosts and told of the birth of Jesus (Luke 2.8-20).



Even with the encroaching settlements it remains a quiet haven from the hustle and bustle of Bethlehem and the mass of tourists who descend on the Church of the Nativity. You can explore one of several worship spaces that are dug into the natural caves of the area and rest by what is one of my favorite fountains in the Holy Land. As you enter the chapel itself you can look up to the ceiling and see what seems to be a million stars surrounding the canopy of a giant palm tree with ten angels that harken one to almost without thinking burst into a rousing chorus of "Angels We have Heard on High" or "Hark, the Herald Angel Sings."

On this particular day, a caretaker was present, and he asked one of the members of our group if she would like to 'ring the bell.' Would she like to ring the bell! Her face lit up and as she pulled on the rope and the bell rang out to the world. I was overwhelmed with the words of the hymn I cited above. "The bells of Christmas chime once more" indeed they ring out clearly whenever we remember the great gift we have been given in Christ. They ring out in Beit Sahour and around the world as the love of God in Christ is proclaimed. And this word of his birth brings joy and light into the hearts of all. "He comes to earthly dwellings still, with new year gifts of peace, good will." That's one of the lessons I always learn in the Holy Land, that our faith is not relegated to bones and stones; but is living and dynamic and still brings with it the gifts spoken to the shepherds and now bequeathed to us. May you always hear the bells of Christmas.



**Pr. Jeff Frohner, Lutheran Church of the Resurrection, Marion OH**

One of my favorite experiences in Israel was on the Sea of Galilee. The word says to praise Him...We sailed on the Sea of Galilee to take communion and enjoy the ride. All aboard, we listened to praise music and watched how the wind curled the waves against the boat. Our pastor read the communion scriptures of the Last Supper/Passover and we carefully poured the wine as the boat rocked us.

Hymns say praise Him in a storm...As we traveled on the Sea, a rainstorm arose, just like in Matthew 8:24, "And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with waves." All hands on deck started rolling down the plastic windows as the sea sprayed into our faces. Thanking Jesus our Lord and Savior we quickly ate wet bread & drank the wine as the wind splashed sea water into the boat. As we slid around inside our cork on the sea the joy of the Lord was so tangible it inspired us all to grab hands and sing back to the wind!

Our dancing was even more ridiculous as we rolled with the sea and not with the beat of the music. We felt safe and happy to be experiencing the wild ride of a fisherman's life on the Sea of Galilee! The "Jesus Boat" didn't turn back and cut our ride short because of the storm...we continued to sail the full circle of our trip. We each had time to stand before God and pray and thank Him for taking us through our own storms of life. As quickly as the riotous wind came...it left, and the waves died down too.

We were regular riders, shopping for souvenirs before the boat docked for the next tour group. I was the happiest soaked tourist as I marched off the boat. Yes, I dried off in the modern bathroom!

The beauty of coming to Israel is you get the best of both past and present life in the Holy Land. I couldn't just be a bystander to the life of Christ or the lives of boat pilots on the Sea of Galilee that day.

Let me tell you, sharing time in the Holy Land with a community of believers and the residents of Israel today was more wonderful than I could have imagined. Thanks to Alpha 2 Omega Travel for the hard work of making travel affordable, comfortable, delicious, and rewarding. No matter where I travel, I will remember God is with me and in any storm, I will praise him and tell the waves, "You don't steal my joy or change my course. I'm an overcomer in Jesus' Name. "

**Nikki Linen, Church of Grace, Yorba Linda CA**



Every Advent season, as I prepare to celebrate Christmas, I take some intentional time in the throes of the holiday rush to reflect on the astounding reality of the Incarnation. For Christmas is more than the anticipation of the arrival of a man in a big red suit who drops off a few gifts for those who've been good. Christmas is the celebration of the God who loves us so much that He comes down to earth as one of us and generously becomes the gift everyone needs - for all the world to be saved. Nothing reinforces - deepens and widens - one's appreciation of the gift of Jesus than visiting the place where Christ was born.

To enter the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, you must stoop down low to the ground to walk through a small door called the "Door of Humility." Originally, this door was designed to prevent people from riding their horses into the church – and from carrying large items out of the church as loot. The actual grotto of the Nativity is below the main altar, in a chapel reached by descending fourteen stairs. What history, tradition, and archaeology hold as the physical site of Jesus' birth is marked by a fourteen-pointed star. Even in the grotto, you must bow down in order to lay eyes on the birthplace of Christ, for it is located on the ground underneath a low altar. Some pilgrims, as they kneel, touch the stone at the center of the star and briefly pray before returning to the main church by ascending fourteen more stairs on the other side of the grotto. Taken together, the fourteen stairs on each side of the grotto as well as the fourteen points of the star inside the grotto, represent the three sets of fourteen generations in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel.

There are few experiences as profound as coming to the place where the Word became flesh. Having to first walk through the "Door of Humility" frames our understanding of what child is this. It calls to mind one of first, ancient hymns of the Church, quoted by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians: "Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

At the same time, as we continue to have to crouch down in order to draw near to the place of Christ's birth, we are reminded that this is how we are both to come before and to follow Jesus. Like the famed shepherds and magi of old, our rightful position as we come before the King of Kings is a posture of bowing down. But the homage we seek to give is to be expressed by lowering ourselves - like Jesus did - for the sake of serving others. May we refuse to relegate the reality of God with us in Christ to a Nativity scene on the mantle or an hour spent in church on Christmas Eve. Let us instead come, all ye faithful, and daily bow down before Christ by incarnating the love of Jesus through the lavish compassion we bestow on those in need - making ourselves present to those who are sick or lonely, sharing gifts with those who have none. O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

**Pr. Chris Zweitmann, Grace Lutheran Church, Huntington Beach CA**

## Maklouba

This is a very popular "all in one pot" dish for family lunches at home.

### Ingredients

2 lbs lamb shoulder, cut into 1-inch cubes  
 1/2 teaspoon salt  
 1 medium cauliflower, in large florets OR 1 large eggplant (aborigine) cut into thick slices  
 1/2 teaspoon pepper  
 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon  
 1/2 cup butter/vegetable oil  
 1 tablespoon allspice  
 2 cups rice, soaked in hot water

### Preparation

1. Put rice in hot water to soak.
2. Place lamb in a pot, cover with boiling water and cook covered for 30 minutes.
3. In a skillet, fry the cauliflower or eggplant in butter till golden brown on both sides.
4. Put the rice to drain in a colander.
5. Drain the lamb, reserving its broth and wash the pot to reuse it.
6. Put the lamb into the bottom of the pot and sprinkle with half of the spices.
7. Arrange the fried cauliflower/eggplant on top of the lamb and sprinkle on the rest of the seasonings.
8. Next, spread the drained rice on top of the vegetables.
9. Over this pour 3 cups of the reserved lamb broth (add water if necessary).
10. Cook covered over low heat till it is almost dry, about 20-25 minutes.

11. Invert the pot and unmold the Maklouba on a large serving platter. The meat and vegetables will now be on top. Serve with a side dish of yogurt and a fresh salad.



**ALPHA 2 OMEGA  
TRAVEL**

P.O. Box 402128  
Hesperia, CA 92340

Phone: 760-985-3540  
linda@alpha2omegatravel.com

Enrich you Faith!

**Snow in the Middle East!**

When many of us think of snow, we think of having a white Christmas! Snow is not common in Israel and the Middle East, but when they have a snow storm, everyone is very excited. While transportation stops and many people are told to stay at home, the vast majority welcome the snow, and enjoy the time with their families.



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