

An Eye Witness Account of the Holy Fire in Jerusalem at the Holy Sepulcher

Waiting for the Miracle

Maria C. Khoury, Ed. D.

Every year during Holy Saturday, for many centuries, there is a most magnificent miracle that continues to take place in Jerusalem since the time we were allowed as Christians to celebrate ceremonies in public.

Pilgrims from all over the world gather in Jerusalem to witness the greatest of all miracles-the Miracle of the Holy Fire. The miracle has turned into a glorious cultural event but many simply cannot get anywhere near the Holy Sepulchre Church. The soldiers, the police, the large crowds, the noise, the drums of the Boys Scouts and the Girl Scouts anxiously waiting to receive the Holy Fire from the Life Giving Tomb of Christ is a day long adventure. But always happens approximately 2 pm on Holy Saturday. It was a miracle in itself that finally after twenty years waiting, because of the Second Uprising and the height of the violence with lack of pilgrims in the Holy Land, I got inside the church myself.

It is an exciting celebration with the sound of many languages at the same time where representatives of many churches from all over the Holy Land come to receive the Holy Fire and carry the flame back in small lanterns to their particular churches for the Midnight Resurrection Service. Special permits must be issued for Christians from Gaza and the West Bank to enter Jerusalem but furthermore, you need another ticket/pass to enter the Holy Sepulchre as an added bureaucracy.

It is on this Great and Holy Saturday that the Holy Fire will be received by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, His Beatitude Theophilus III, as it has been done every year, on the same day, in the same manner, at the same time, at the same holy place of Christ's Life Giving Tomb. This is the miracle that allows us to believe that Christ is alive and offers eternal life. This is the miracle that tells us that Christ is truly among us. This powerful miracle is another way that God communicates that we do believe in the Living God. As we chant in our Midnight Resurrection Service: "Come ye and receive light from the unwaning Light, and glorify Christ, Who a rose from the dead."

A spectacular parade to receive the Holy Fire is held in every town and city where small numbers of Christians live. For example, we anxiously wait at the outskirts entering our village of Taybeh by five in the evening. The priests of all three churches, Fr. Daoud, Fr. Raed and Fr. Jack with the mayor of the village, my husband, David, usually lead the faithful with the choir chanting to meet our cousin Ibrahim with his seven year old son Philip who traditionally go to the city of Ramallah to receive the Light from a patriarchate representative who brings it from Jerusalem to Ramallah for all the Palestinian Christian communities that cannot reach the Holy City. Philip made his dad put a sign on their little white car last year that read "Light of Christ," and wanted to ride on top but was forced to patiently sit with the flame until he said "Christ is Risen" and gave it to the adults.

Nine years of violence in the Holy Land, back and forth, surely we have been living in the darkness of all evil where children do not even have a childhood especially following

the latest devastating war in Gaza. "And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." (John 1:5) The strong Christian message during this Holy Week is that our hope lies in Christ and the streets will simply be filled on Holy Saturday with faithful who came to witness in Christ's love. Be this Light for Christ no matter where you live in the world.

For us who live behind the ugly Wall, this Holy Saturday we await this glorious miracle of the Light that proceeds from the core of the stone that covers Christ's Life Giving Tomb and once again we hope to celebrate the oldest unbroken Christian ceremony that exists in the world.

In Luke 16:15 we read that Jesus said: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" We witness the truth and receive the Holy Fire on Holy Saturday in Jerusalem so that all who are not living in the land of Christ's Holy Resurrection can believe that Christ is the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. (John 1:9)

"And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things." (Luke 24:47) Our Christian community is small and diminishing but with God's help can survive the daily hardships that make life unbearable. We await the miracle of a free Palestine and human rights for all people. We are waiting for a miracle of peace with justice, stability and genuine democracy to happen. In the Holy Land, in the hearts of Christians, every day one says, Truly the Lord is Risen!

Editor's Note: Maria (Kouremenou) Khoury sincerely thanks all individuals and over 100 churches that have hosted a Holy Land presentation and have generously supported Taybeh projects in housing, education and her ministry. She is currently organizing the Taybeh Oktoberfest, the annual village festival, Oct 3-4, 2009 in Taybeh-Ramallah, Palestine.

Celebrating Miracle of Holy Fire Behind the Wall

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It was an amazing and extraordinary day in Ramallah and then in Taybeh receiving the Holy Fire following the miracle at Christ's Holy Life-Giving Tomb in Jerusalem on this Great and Holy Saturday afternoon. I decided not to argue with the soldiers and the policemen in Jerusalem like last year where my husband David and I could not get anywhere near the Holy Sepulchre. Also, I decided to take the advise of the Greek monk during my first time to witness the Miracle of the Holy Fire (2002) when he kicked me out of the front row near the Life-Giving-Tomb and said in Greek: "My child it is not only with the eyes that we see." I think he desperately needed the space for the Greek Consul and Greek dignitaries that attend this special miracle but his wise words never left my thoughts.

I had a wonderful day waiting for the Holy Fire to go through the checkpoints and arrive in Ramallah for all those who do not have permits to enter Jerusalem. Since on top of the

security permits, we also need additional passes to go by further checkpoints to get to the Holy Sepulchre. To access holy places and pray on holy days should be a basic human right not needing any permits or passes but we live a bizarre life under Israeli occupation. Don't ever take your religious freedom for granted, we suffer to achieve it.

It was an incredible two-hour parade in Ramallah which included the Boys Scouts and Girl Scouts from Taybeh and all of the surrounding cities, villages and refugee camps with the largest Scouts group being Sireyt Ramallah which was the first group to initiate the parade and the last group of scouts leading over thirty altar boys from the Ramallah Orthodox Church marching with icons and crosses. The streets were filled with thousands of Christians and Muslims watching Father Galation, along with the Mayor of Ramallah, the Honorable Jennet Michael, who is a devote Orthodox Christian herself receiving the flame from the miracle of the Holy Fire and marching throughout the main street in Ramallah until they reached the Holy Transfiguration Church with the president of the parish council, Mr. Salem Hanania also accompanying. Fr. Yacoub, Fr. Nicola, Fr. Emanuel were all present along with Fr. Aktham the Latin priest and the Episcopalian minister. The Ramallah governor was also present in the procession with many prominent Palestinian Christians along with Mr. Moheeb Awad who represents the only Christian vote in the Palestinian Legislative Council beside Dr. Gazi Hanania, former council member and David Khoury, Mayor of Taybeh. My good friend, attorney Maher Hanania, reflected upon this unbelievable day the best: "By far this is the most emotional day for Christians."

There were people in the balconies, on the roof tops and hanging out of windows trying to catch all of the colors and sounds of the many drums and bagpipes of over twelve different scout groups with the Ramallah Islamic Scouts, Ramallah Orthodox Club, Jifna, Birzeit, Aboud and Kadoura Refugee Camp to name a few. My favorite scouts were the two year old boys and girls who needed an adult to keep them marching in a straight line. I specifically noticed the teenager among the scouts wearing the t-shirt, "Our time Has Come," and immediately I thought it meant our time has come to have a normal life like the rest of the world since nine years there has been no change in the Holy Land and conditions continue to get worse than the day before. Atrocity after atrocity there has only been violence and darkness while the world watches and does nothing to help end the occupation.

A group passed out chocolates to the crowds that had a typewritten note: "Love one another." And if you have ever personally asked me about Muslim-Christian relationships in Palestine, I offer the example of this Holy Saturday reflecting a beautiful day of cooperation and celebration as Christians witness the Miracle of the Holy Fire. If you have ever personally asked me why Palestinian people do not practice non-violent resistance, I experienced this day in Ramallah and Taybeh as peaceful and non-violent resistance. People trying to live normal lives and celebrate ancient centuries' old traditions while locked up within a wall and open prison. Israeli Occupation forces brutally killed Bssem Abu Rahmeh from Bilin, 30 years old while participation in a non-violent demonstration on Friday and the Israeli settlers from Bet El viciously killed a

young boy from Jalazon Refugee camp the same day. It is a struggle to stay peaceful while you are being stripped of your dignity and humanity on a daily basis.

After the Holy Fire has been received in Ramallah with this fantastic parade each Scouts group is responsible to carry the flame to their home village to prepare for the Midnight Resurrection service continuing yet another parade and marching to the local Orthodox Church in an ecumenical parade where all Christian faiths participate. Thus the Taybeh Scouts including our seven year old cousin, Philip, who learned from his dad Ibrahim to carry the flame in the lantern, insisted on holding the sign, "Light of Christ" and riding on top of the tiny white car while entering Taybeh before sunset while the whole community was anxiously waiting chanting hymn giving glory to God.

Christian people filled the streets of Ramallah and Taybeh today as witnesses to the true Light. In Luke 16:15 we read that Jesus said: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." We witness the truth and His Beatitude the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, Theophilos III, received the Holy Fire on Holy Saturday in Jerusalem so that all who are not living in the land of Christ's Holy Resurrection can believe that Christ is the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. (John 1:9) Christ is Risen!