ISSA FLIES

"A Palestinian Sunbird's Christmas Journey"



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Written in collaboration with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land
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Created Fall 2025

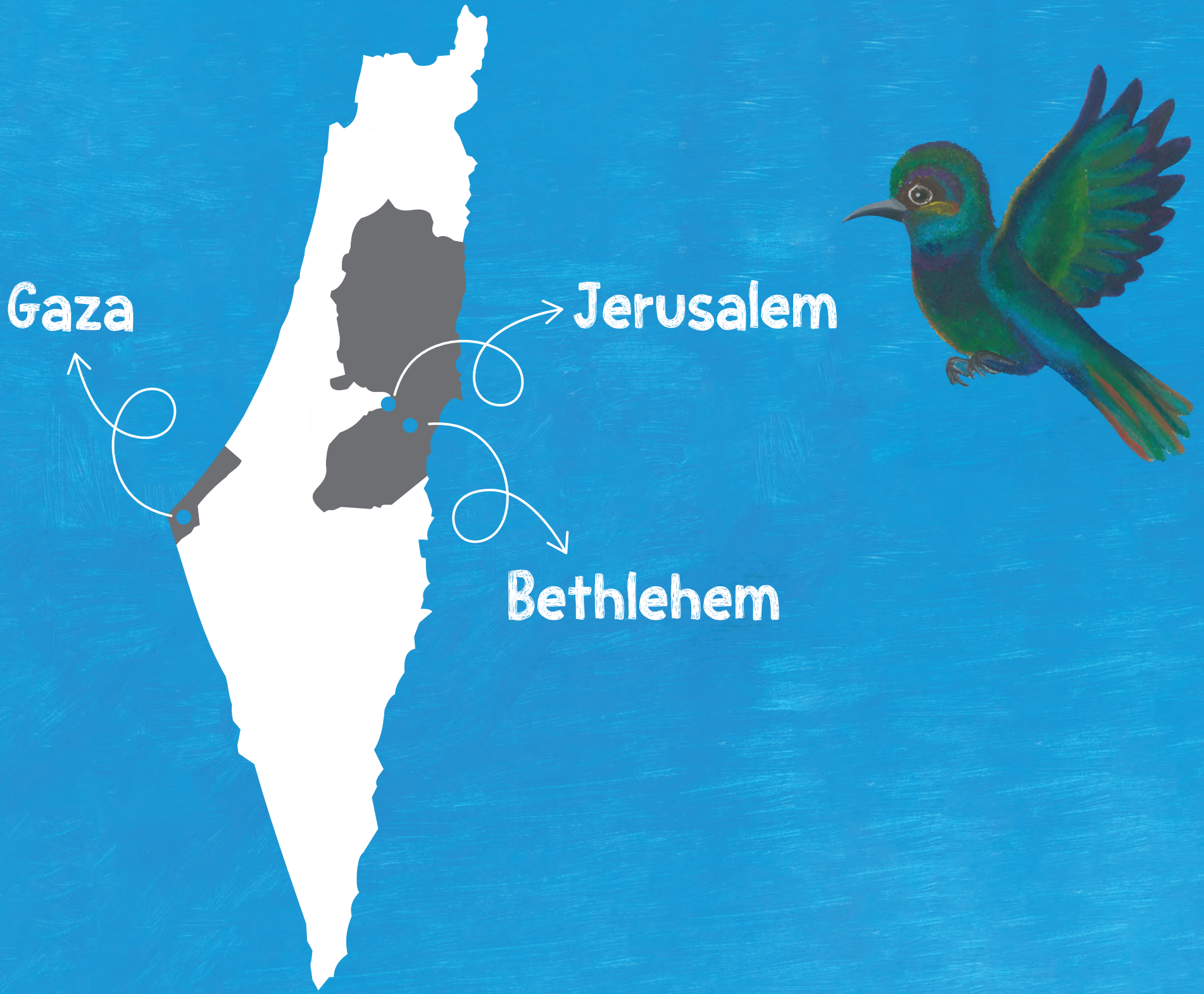
A note of context to the adults...

Greetings from Bethlehem, the birthplace of the Savior!

In our Western context, when we see images of Bethlehem we see desert landscapes with camels, palm trees, and sometimes stables or barns. While there are certainly camels and palm trees in Bethlehem today, there are also people whose ancestors were Jesus's neighbors, followers, and first disciples. In today's Bethlehem, these people go to school, work, church, the mosque, and all the same places Americans go every day. There are Christians and Muslims in Bethlehem. 2,000 years after the first Christmas, the indigenous Christians of Bethlehem, Palestinian Christians, go to church and praise God for the birth of the Savior.

While our biggest difficulty getting to Christmas service in the United States might be a traffic jam, or maybe a blizzard, Palestinians often face much worse in their journey to church, or to their schools, work, the doctor, or even their own homes. Palestinian Christians in Palestine, like all Palestinians in Palestine, live under military occupation. This means the government of Israel controls which Palestinians can go where, when, and with whom. While this system was created in the name of things like "security" and "safety", Palestinians face a lot of danger because of this occupation.

Pastors, Sunday School students, teachers, and congregants from Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Gaza shaped the story in this book. This story is not about one group of people being better than the other. This story is about how indigenous Christians experience Christmas in the land where Jesus was born, where he led his ministry, where he died, and where he was resurrected. Listen to this story with an open heart. Where is Jesus in this story?


Gaza
Jerusalem
Bethlehem



Pronunciation Guide

Issa (ee-sa)

Ramallah (ram-UH-la)

Mirelle (me-rell)

Teta (tay-ta)

Yusef (you-seff)

Gaza (ga-zza)

Miriam (mee-ree-yum)

Habibi (ha-bee-bee)

Issa is a Palestinian sunbird. He calls Palestine his home. He has wings, so he can fly wherever he wants.

Today Issa is happy. Today is Christmas. Issa knows that Christmas is very important in Palestine, because Palestine is where Jesus Christ was born.

Issa decides to take a trip to see how people will spend their Christmas day.





First Issa flies a little bit north, to Ramallah. The Christmas tree is big there, with many sparkling lights.



He sees a little Palestinian girl he knows, Mirelle. She is going with her dad to Jerusalem, to see her grandmother.

Issa perches at the top of a watchtower. Soldiers from Israel look back at him.

Israeli soldiers hold a lot of power. They tell people where they can go and where they cannot go.


EXIT



The tower is part of a big wall. Mirelle and her father live on one side of the wall, but her grandmother lives on the other.

To get to Jerusalem, where her grandmother is, she must have permission from the Israeli soldiers to cross to the other side of the wall.

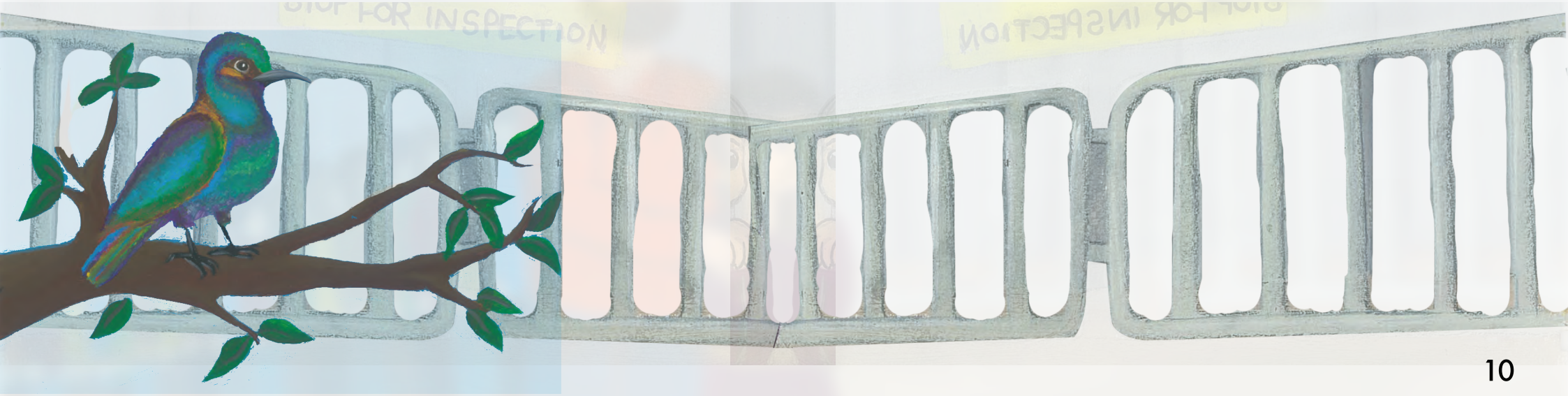
Where they cross is called a checkpoint.
Today, there is special permission for Palestinian Christians to enter, because it is a holiday.

Mirelle and her dad got permission, but her mom stayed home. She didn't get permission.


EXIT

Mirelle stands in the long line of people waiting to cross the checkpoint to the other side.

Issa flaps his wings and sees the tired look in their eyes. He watches Mirelle reach up to grab her father's hand.




BARRIER
STOP FOR INSPECTION

She whispers softly,

"Please God, let us pass today to see Teta (Grandma)."

Issa flaps his wings and flies, over the checkpoint, over the line of tired people waiting to enter Jerusalem.




BARRIER
STOP FOR INSPECTION



Issa flies over the wall, which curves like a snake through the green mountains and rolling hills.

He sees the bright orange and yellow of the fruit trees below, clementine and lemon.

Soon he reaches a different part of the wall, near Bethlehem.

In a long line, cars sit and honk their horns.







Issa finds another checkpoint, one that is not along the wall but in the middle of the road.

He watches a soldier scroll on her phone, not flinching at the honking cars, the family sitting in front of her, waiting.





In the back seat of a black car, Issa sees a little boy named Yusef. He watches as Yusef stares out his window at the soldier.



Yusef is from Bethlehem, but the road to his home is closed. He can't get to the Christmas service until the soldier opens the way.


BETHLEHEM

The soldier keeps scrolling on her phone. She keeps the road closed.

"Please God," Yusef whispers, "let us pass so we can be at the Christmas service."

Issa takes flight.




BETHLEHEM

Issa flies and flies and flies until he reaches a city called Gaza.
Everything is gray there, and most of the buildings are only concrete pieces on the ground.

Issa sees a church.





Through the window, he sees people praying. They live inside the church now, where they hope to be safe from danger.



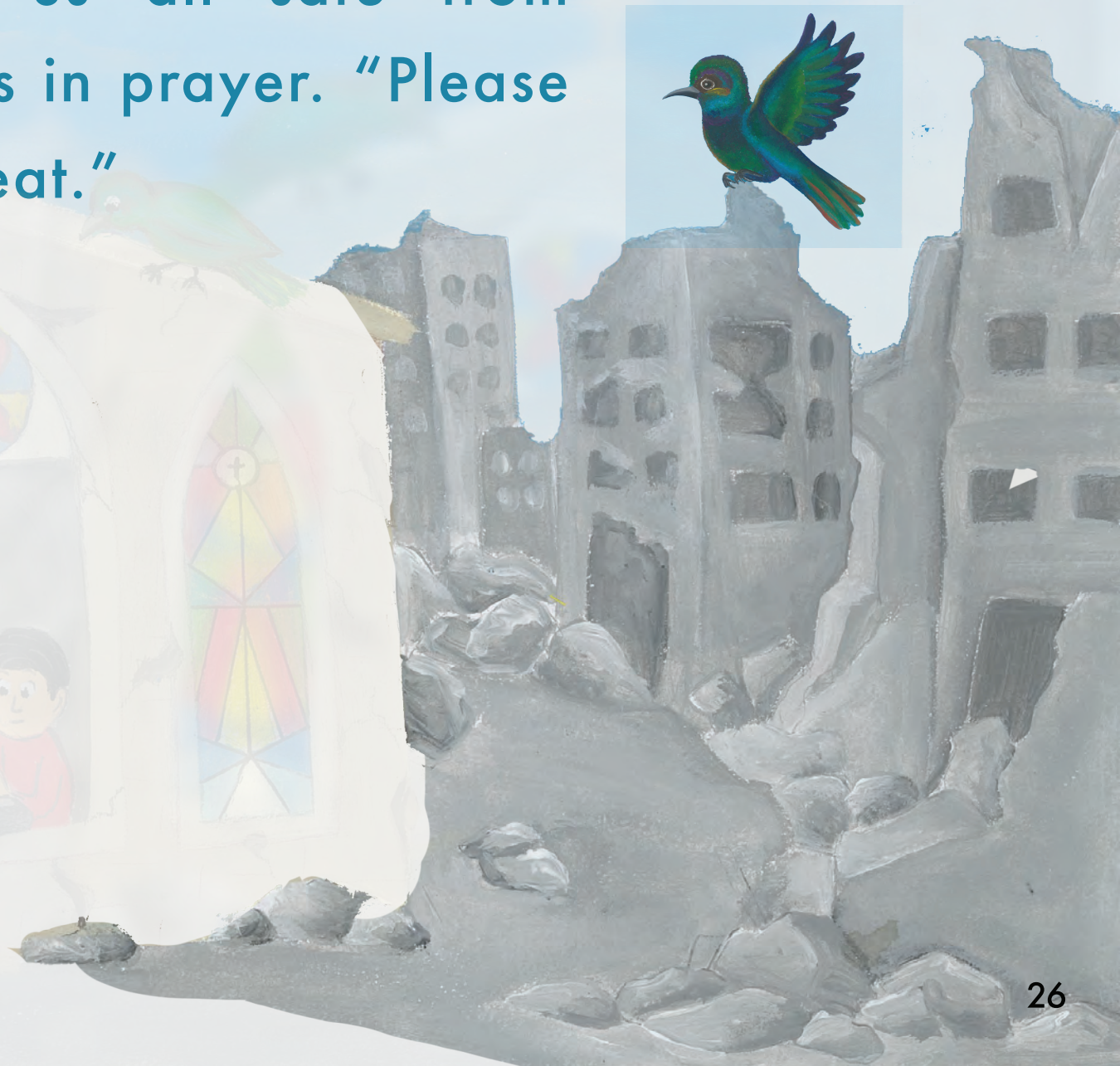
Issa sees a little girl named Miriam. Miriam leads her younger brother to the front of the church. She takes a long, skinny candle and lights it.

Her tummy rumbles. She is hungry.



"God, please keep us all safe from danger," she whispers in prayer. "Please send us something to eat."

Issa flies.





Issa reaches Jerusalem, to the Lutheran church in the Old City.

He perches on the window and sees Mirelle in the pew, next to her Teta.



“Laylet al milad yummaha-l-bughdou”, they sing.
(“On the night of Christmas, hatred will vanish.”)



Issa flies on to Bethlehem, to the Church of the Nativity.

He looks and he looks, but he can't find Yusef. Issa nestles into a cozy corner of the window until the priest says the very last prayer.

He hears quick, small footsteps.
Yusef runs, panting, into the sanctuary.





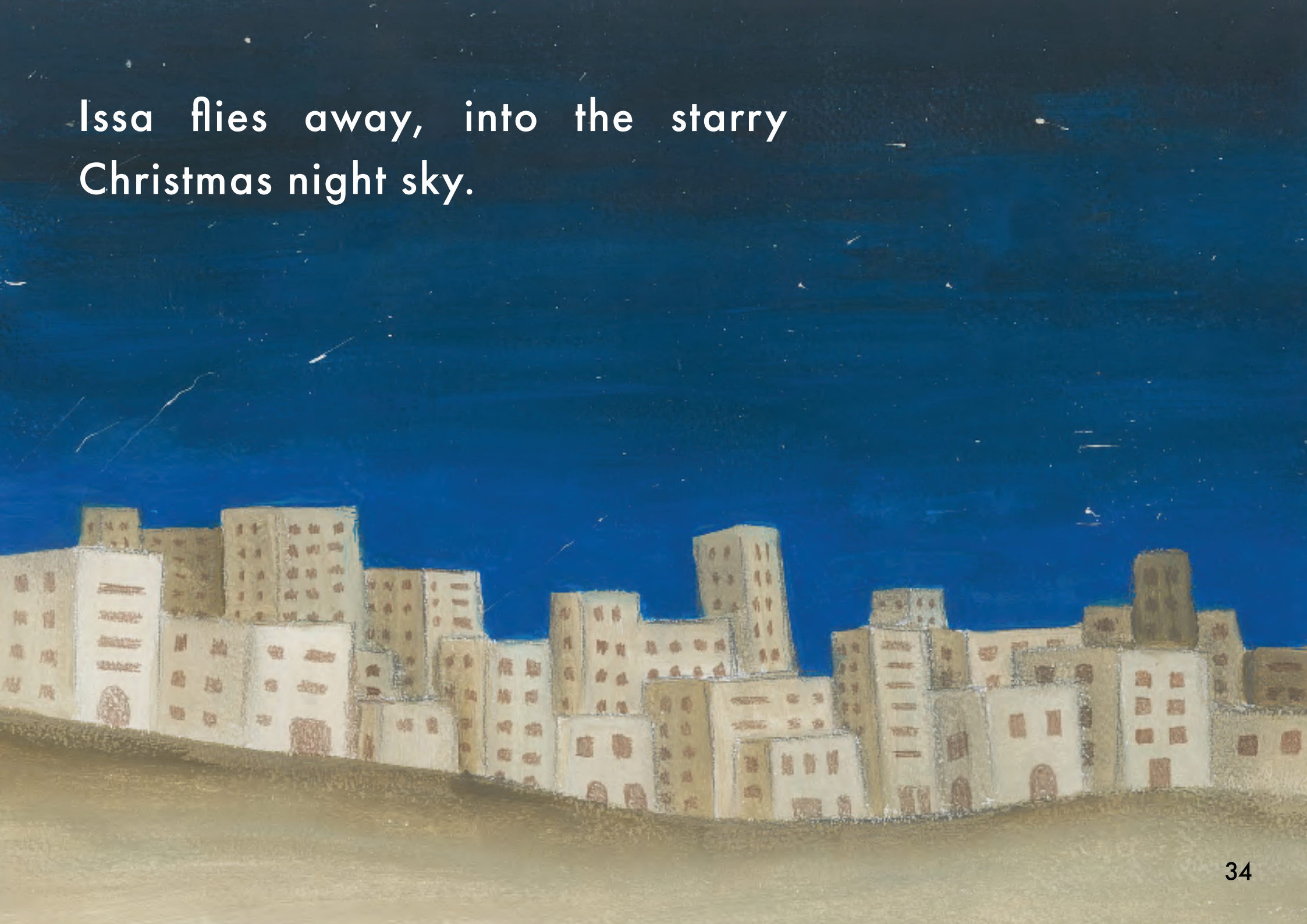
He waited in the car for hours before the soldier let his family drive the rest of the way home.

"I'm sorry, Jesus," Yusuf says, folding his hands in prayer. "I'm late for your birthday."
An old woman from the congregation wraps her arms around Yusef as a small tear springs from his eye.

"He was with you the whole time, habibi [my love]," says the woman.






Issa flies away, into the starry
Christmas night sky.



Let's Chat!

-Who were the characters in this story?
-What was a problem in this story for the characters?
-Were the pictures in the book of Bethlehem different from how you imagined Bethlehem?
-Are there people in your church, your city, or your country that have a harder life because of who they are? Who?
-Who does Jesus ask us to love?
-Did you see Jesus in this story?
-How do you and your family get to church on Christmas?
-What is different about your way to church, and the children in the story?



Activity!

Draw your way to church. Do you take a car? A bus? Do you and your family walk?

Let's Sing!𝄞♫

Ask an adult to scan the QR code to hear children in Palestine sing Mirelle's song!

Did You Know?

Palestinian Sunbird: The National Bird of Palestine (Asfour il-shams عصفور الشمس)

The Palestine Sunbird is a small, speedy bird that lives in gardens, valleys, and even cities across Palestine. It has a long, curved beak that helps it drink sweet nectar from flowers, and sometimes it eats insects too. The male sunbird shines with black, blue, and green feathers, and in spring he grows an orange patch on his chest. The female is brown and gray, which helps her stay hidden. These birds build hanging, pouch-shaped nests out of soft plants and spider webs, where they lay 2–3 eggs. The parents take care of the chicks until they are ready to fly on their own. Sunbirds are also helpful to people because, as they drink nectar, they spread pollen from flower to flower, helping plants grow. You might have to wake up really early to hear this bird's beautiful song, because they love to sing right when the sun comes up!

The Lutheran Church in Palestine has an Environmental Education Center where kids like you learn about Palestinian birds and nature! How cool?



