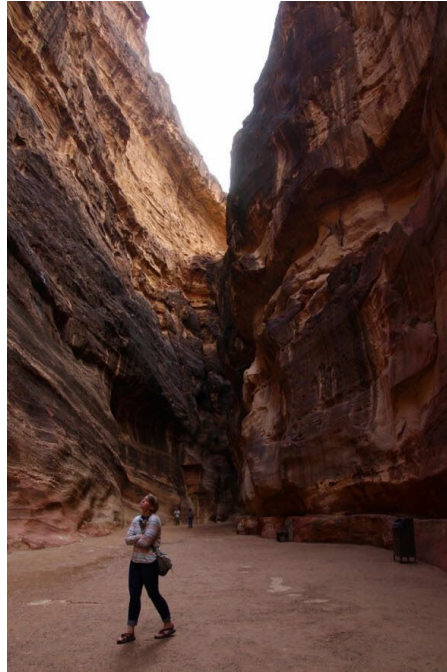


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# Abroad in Accompaniment

## A Year in the Holy Land



Exploring the slot canyon in Petra, Jordan. It feels a lot like the winding path to vocation.

## Baptism: Where God Meets Us

by Kelsey L Johnson on March 3

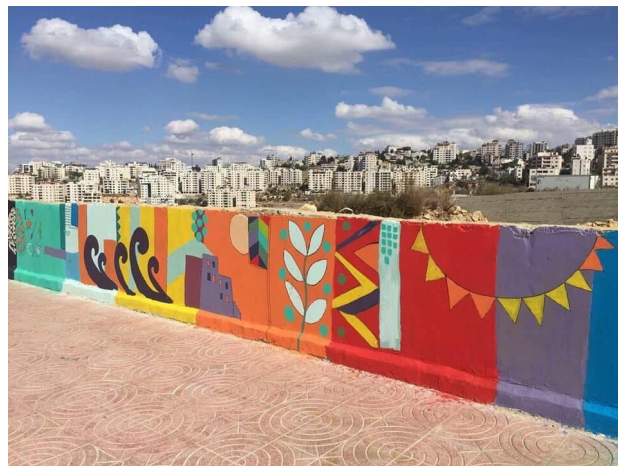
I can't believe it is already the "back half" of this YAGM year. Time has flown by, but I truly believe the best is yet to come. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't freaking out a little about "what's next" once I'm back stateside. A wise friend and YAGM alumni told me to stay present in every moment here and focus on this community. I'm finding the deep importance of this, and hold onto these words and as my mind wanders to the future, I have been much more intentional about focussing on what my eyes are seeing in the present. Leaning into community continually reveals more about the complexity of this Holy Land, and deepens my understanding of love through the people who have welcomed me into their lives here. I say with confidence that my experience here in Jerusalem and the West Bank will drastically shape my future. Again, I am deeply and abundantly grateful for this community and those in my sending community. I am blessed to be here alongside our Palestinian brothers and sisters, and continue to listen and carry their stories close to my heart.

Our midyear retreat to Jordan took place during the the last week of February. While leaving my community was more difficult than anticipated, I am so grateful for the privilege of visiting Jordan. It is a beautiful country, and home to a flourishing and diverse Arab society comprised

of Jordanians, and a majority of refugees from Iraq, Syria, and Palestine (according to the Lutheran World Federation) . As a YAGM group, we spent the week exploring sites in Petra, Amman, and Aqaba. Petra, a wonder of the world, was one of the most incredible places I have ever visited in my life and I am still attempting to wrap my head around how it was built over 2,000 years ago. I've been very vocal about how cool Petra is, and my YAGM cohort has enjoyed (lovingly) mocking my enthusiasm. As my roommate and fellow volunteer Katharine put it, "I have never seen you this excited about anything, ever." Wait until she sees how excited I am to go back to school once we're back from retreat... because that definitely tops Petra.

The devotional theme of the week was "Baptism", and it was intentional for the setting and time of year. We visited the recently excavated Jordan River baptismal sites one afternoon. It was a surreal experience. At one point we had the chance to walk down to observe the current site of the river(it's a meandering river and has moved as time passed). Between the banks and in the muddy water stood a flooded police barricade and caution tape. Our group peered through the reeds at various groups on the Israeli-monitored baptismal area. There was a group actively being baptised, while a Jewish group sang and read devotions, and further down the steps along the shore was a group of Muslims- sitting and standing. In the background were Israeli soldiers and surveillance cameras. We took our chacos off and stepped into the muddy waters from the Jordanian side. We made jokes about remembering our baptism as we splashed water on each other. I found a pair of eyeglasses. It could be a metaphor for the muddy waters of the world and the lens of our vocation as revealed through the vocation of baptism. It seemed heavy at the time. I left them in case the owner returned.

Thoughts and metaphors like this popped up all over the place as we continued to listen as a group and explore the meaning of vocation, discernment and how this year has already invited us to listen and see where God meets us in the world. I am so thankful for this time of reflection. One question on my heart is "where does trauma fit into this?"- trauma of people, trauma of an individual- I am challenged in my thinking. Is this part of God's plan, or is it a reminder that the world is imperfect and we need baptism? Perhaps this is where God meets us, rather than where we meet him- in the mess. He finds us in these muddy waters with glasses- a reminder to have two big eyes as we explore vocation.



One of my favorite views at the Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah.

# School of Hope

One of the places God continues to meet me this year is at school. In the spirit of gratitude, baptism, and vocation, I would like to share a running list of some places God has met me through my students over the last few months:

- when they say hi in the hallways
- when we laugh about inside jokes
- when they ask me to help them
- when they interrupt class to tell me there is an impromptu basketball game happening outside and they want me on their team
- when girls began participating in basketball because I was there supporting them
- when they want to tell me more about themselves, and their families
- when they keep copies of things I've written
- when they come to another class I'm leading during their off-periods because "the one earlier today was a lot of fun"
- when they help me struggle through Arabic phrases
- when I help them struggle with English phrases
- when they show up to class early to talk
- when they ask me to be in their snapchats
- when they insist on sharing their snacks with me
- when they make weird faces at me and dance around
- when they challenge everything I know
- when they frustrate and disappoint me
- when I frustrate and disappoint them
- when they forgive me despite my shortcomings
- when they smile at my bad jokes
- when the walls come down and we talk about frustrations, and if peace exists
- when they share their experiences with oppression
- when they're sad to see me go for a week
- when I can't wait to see them the next day even though today isn't even over yet
- when we sit in silence, together
- when they teach me more than I could have ever imagined or will ever teach them
- when I feel my heart and mind growing in accompaniment with them

# The Palestine Half Marathon

Training for the Palestine half marathon has had its ups and downs. Running has been a great outlet for stress and has grown into a hobby I greatly enjoy. Since October, I have been training on a treadmill in a gym in the basement of a hotel. Running long(ish) distances on a treadmill is something I have never done before this year, and it's not easy. Picture going for a run, and not actually going anywhere... it's frustrating. It's not easy to focus somewhere on the mirror in front of me and zone out, especially when there is so much to think about. I try to focus on my students, and on the goal of the marathon: to draw awareness to the freedom of movement a lot of Palestinians don't have. This thought stays with me when I am struggling through my runs. I look forward to running outside on March 23rd, and for the winding course through the West Bank. I look forward to running and struggling alongside others from the community.

# The School Dance

The Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah had a “Fiesta” themed school dance in February, and I was honored to help with the decorations, and chaperone the event among the other teachers. Highlights included tacos and chips, dancing, and helping choose the dance “king and queen.” The event was light and fun. I enjoyed seeing a different side to the students where they were able to wear non-uniform clothes and weren’t worried about test scores. Unsurprisingly, many of them are excellent dancers!



Katharine, myself and art teacher Majd chaperoning the dance.

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Please support me this year. I am still fundraising throughout the year, and your donation ensures the ELCA can continue sending young adult volunteers to walk with our brothers and sisters in global accompaniment. Click on the link below to make an online donation:

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My personal blog can be found at: [KelseyJohnsonYAGM.blogspot.com](http://KelseyJohnsonYAGM.blogspot.com)