

## GOOD NEWS FROM A HOLY LAND

Genesis 12:1-9

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This morning I want to share with you some of my initial reflections on our trip to Israel. This is not a travelogue - our group will share stories and pictures sometime this spring. Call this more of a spiritual travelogue.

First, I want to thank you for praying for the safety of our group; I know that many of you were nervous about us going. It was as smooth a trip as it could possibly be. Our small group of 13 all got along well; we laughed a lot together. Traveling this time of year is optimal - the weather was good - it was damp and chilly one day out of seven. This is low season for tourism in Israel, so we didn't have to contend with many lines. One bag was delayed three days, but other than that, we were incident and illness-free, and we are very grateful for that.

The man who made the trip what it was was our guide Waleed. Waleed is an Arab Christian - he was full of faith, information and good humor. He cares very deeply about the Christian community, which is a definite minority in Israel. Around 2% of the population of Israel is Christian. I loved hearing Waleed talk - he speaks Hebrew, Arabic and English fluently, and knows quite a few words in several other languages. Frequently he would say to us, in the middle of a talk about something, "Why?" "I'll tell you why." If he thought he was starting to lose us, he'd say, "Are you listening to me?"

Israel is a country steeped in history - I didn't realize how much I didn't know about it. We learned about the influences of the Greeks, the Romans, the Crusaders, the Muslims. But we were not on a historical or cultural tour; our trip was called a pilgrimage. Of most impact to us were the spiritual sites and the spiritual moments. Let me tell you about a few of them.

We took a boat - called a Jesus boat - out on the Sea of Galilee. I read one of the gospel stories about Jesus walking on the water. The day was a little overcast and misty - the shoreline is still fairly natural - there's not a lot of construction, certainly no billboards or souvenir shops. Our sail that day was probably not terribly different from times Jesus spent on that body of water.

What is it that makes a place sacred? The Sea of Galilee is sacred for Christians because Jesus spent time there. It's like a natural icon, a reminder of who Jesus was, what he said, what he did, what his life means for us. We saw some beautiful churches on this trip - some Orthodox, many Catholic, most of them quite ornate - but I felt closest to Jesus in the natural places, the gardens of the churches, the grounds. Most of Jesus' ministry was spent outside. As the years went on, people wanted to find ways to remember where he was - so they began worshiping at the site of his birth, the site of his baptism, the site of his death, and many other places. Over the centuries, small shrines became churches. I know that some people find the churches exceptionally moving. I thought a lot, on this trip, about the many pathways to God. Some experience God in incense, some in the Muslim call to prayer; cultures are different, and so are individuals. We saw people praying at the Wailing Wall, the Western Wall inside the old city of Jerusalem; we saw people praying at the tomb of King David; we saw Orthodox Jews in ritual prayer in the middle of the night in the airplane. How many of the world's problems would be closer to resolution if we could learn to respect our different pathways?

This church was simpler, more my taste - it commemorates the miracle of the loaves and the fishes with this mosaic on the floor. This summer, the church was partially burned. The arson has been blamed on Jewish extremists. "Why?" I can hear our tour guide saying. "Why?" I can hear God saying.

We visited the ruins at Capernaum, believed to be the town where Jesus spent most of his time during his ministry, where he taught in the synagogue. Here are some of the ruins, with the brand new church built adjacent.

Another lovely church commemorates the place where the risen Christ told Peter, “Feed my sheep.” We were able to spend more time on the Galilean seashore here.

On a mountain where it is believed Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, the beatitudes are all written in stone; this was another place where I felt more spiritual outside than in.

What is it that makes a land holy? Are some lands holier than others? The scripture for this morning tells us why the Jewish people are so tied to their land. They believe it was given to them by God, and essential to their identity, to the practice of their faith. You don’t have to know much about Israel to know that its history is steeped in conflict, and that peace is nowhere near. Last Sunday a mother of six, living in one of the settlements, was stabbed and killed by a Palestinian extremist.

This man is Palestinian and a Muslim; he was our host in the town of Samaria, and he introduced us to the keeper of the Christian tradition there one of only a handful of Christians in the area. This cave is reputedly the place where John the Baptist is buried. It has been a worship site for 1800 years.

The Church of the Nativity is built over a stone cave, believed to be the location of the place where Jesus was born. Miraculously, our group was all alone there for a few minutes, long enough for us to sing “Silent Night” and pray together. Whether or not you really believe that it is the exact spot of Jesus’ birth, you know it’s close, and the fact that millions of people have prayed there made it feel very significant.

A Russian Orthodox church encompasses Jacob’s Well, which is also the well where Jesus had a long conversation with a Samaritan woman. This priest is under continual

harassment and persecution. His predecessor was killed by a Zionist extremist, so he has already built his own tomb.

I asked our guide to show us the path Jesus would have taken into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He would have stopped at the top of Mt. Zion and looked at the city, at the Temple Mount. It was here that he said, "O Jerusalem, if you only knew the things that make for peace."

The prayers for peace are everywhere. They are in the Garden of Gethsemane where one can see ancient olive trees whose ancestral roots heard Jesus cry, "Won't any of you stay awake with me?" This peace pole is in Jericho, where Joshua led, where Zaccheaus lived, now a Palestinian town, poor and dusty. The prayers for peace are everywhere. This is the Garden Tomb, where the resurrection is celebrated, where our group gathered for communion.

The prayers for peace are everywhere; that's good news. And there are many pathways, pathways that lead to the light.

What I was personally hoping for on this trip was a deepened connection with Jesus - the Jesus known as the good shepherd - who probably saw many scenes like this one:— and I wanted a deepened connection with Jesus the healer. Once he healed a paralyzed man. He had been waiting to go into the water at Bethesda, where it was believed the pool here had healing properties. When Jesus saw the man, he said, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk." It was the Sabbath. Strictly observant Jews don't even push the elevator button the sabbath - we saw that in our hotel - but Jesus healed a man. It got him in trouble with the Pharisees.

It was activities like that which led to his arrest. He spent the night before he died in this dungeon - probably shackled. "Why?" we can hear God say. "Are you listening to me?" But it was a death that led to an empty tomb, and to the light, light for the whole world, not just for some, not just for one country or one land or one people. The peacock on this ancient mosaic is a symbol of the resurrection, of eternal life.

As we read scripture together, sang together and celebrated communion together, we felt the spirit of Jesus, the presence of the risen Christ. Those places have been made holy, too, by the millions of other followers who have worshiped there before us. All of us feel so grateful to have walked where Jesus walked, sailed on the same sea, but what really matters is “Why?” It only matters if we’ve been transformed, if we live differently, more faithfully, with more love. It only matters if we pray, and work, for peace, until every land is a holy land with peace and justice, and good news, for all God’s people.

The good news is that every place can be a holy place, if those places lead us towards transformed lives, if we are inspired to walk the way Jesus walked, and love the way Jesus loved. Whether it’s Lake Erie, or Pilgrim Hills, or this sanctuary, whether it’s the Sea of Galilee or the grandest European Cathedral, if it’s a holy place, it’s a place where you hear God. Where you hear God cry and say “why?” when looking at the sorrows of the world. Where you hear God say, “Are you listening to me? Have you read my word? I will show you the ways that lead to peace.”