

Journey to Jesus' Footsteps

Edited Journal of Holy Land Pilgrimage by Janice Donahue
Lent, 2008

Day Five (Three in Israel) February 25, 2008 Monday

Interesting, Feels like we've already been here for days and days, we have done so much. Six a.m. wake-up call. Morning already? We have another splendid breakfast, rich in local favorites. Am still trying to eat Biblically with the fresh produce, rich cottage cheese, hard cheeses boiled eggs, fresh grapefruit, green and black olives, alive with flavor. Am still loving the breakfast pickled herring and yogurt. Hummus at every meal. All the water I can drink.

We are headed to 8 am Mass at The Church of the Annunciation. That's big. I wonder if this was the actual site. Yossi is convincing. There are actually a couple locations with different groups holding fast to their ideas. I understand the Greeks thought it across the way. But we are filled with wonder here. Could this be the actual place? The angel Gabriel came to Mary, simple, pure young girl. There seems to be so much holiness in this place. Pregnant with meaning. My heart feels full here. Full of love for Our Mother, her goodness, her purity, her consummate communion with the Love, the Will of Our Heavenly Father, her quiescence to The Holy Spirit. Her docility. Silence fills my soul. No room for nonsense here. No room for the baloney we clutter our lives with. No room for trash. It is a good place to pray for the ability to throw out the unnecessary, to pray for goodness, for purity.

This church is filled with extraordinary mosaics from all over the world! Photographs do not do them justice. They must be seen with the human eye. They call for it!

Down we go into the rock, the basement of the original building. We see the very rock, the actual steps upon which it is said the holy Mother of God, St. Ann, and St. Joachim walked daily. Holy places! My soul sings for joy! Dare we share the air of such places? The hunger for holiness overtakes the unworthiness. Could we remain in this space all day? That would bring such contentment.

We are told there was a 4th Century church built above by St. Helena, Constantine's queen mother. Later, a 7th Century church was built on the destroyed remains of St. Helena's building, and much later, a third church was built.

I bought three olive wood Rosaries from a man outside the church. Mom bought three, also. The word, "Nazareth" is stamped in black on the back of the cross. I think the man was a Muslim by His dress. No matter. Maybe there is a Grace in just holding a Rosary. I can't barter on these. How much do we have? How little, this man, selling arms of Rosaries on the street? I don't want to barter with him. I want him to have the money and a smile and a "thank you".

We walk back to our bus along the rocky, uneven streets of Nazareth. Shops are open. I see giant 50 lb. bags filled with dried chopped herbs, whole grains, and corn kernels... Little pairs and clusters of Arab men are gathered, sitting, chatting at various little spots along the sidewalk and streets, dressed in traditional garb, as they have for centuries. Some nod to us, some smile kindly, gesture as they speak, savor a smoke, pass the time. There are headscarves and long tunics under woven suit jackets. It seems right. It feels real. I smile back at each one. This is their land, too. How fortunate we are to have this opportunity to share a little bit with them!

Back on the bus. How kind Nedal is! He supplies us with ice-cold water bottles for only a dollar--a great deal anywhere. He always has a smile. Is so gracious and accommodating about opening the under--storage to take the wheelchair out, put the wheelchair in...he is terrific and we all love him. We tell him he's great. We hope he believes us (and understands our words). Nedal's English is a little limited. We had a little chat that was more like a lot of laughs as we bumbled around with our communication (or miscommunication) skills. We just love Nedal!

We drive past "Mary's Well"-- the traditional site of the well used commonly by all women in Nazareth for many centuries. I judge it to be about a half--mile walk up hill from Mary's house, where the present Church of the Annunciation now stands.

It is 9:50 am and we are headed to Cana, where the married couples in our group will renew their marriage vows: Ed and Marilyn, Gene and Melinda, Jersey and Elizabeth, Jim and Linda.

Yossi explains everything quite well. He tells us The Wedding at Cana took place on the "third day". (John 2:1--11) The third day is considered a lucky day, he tells us. As Yossi speaks, I see a beauty in him, a deep tenderness under the gruff exterior, a very deep spirituality, a calling.

Inside the church the couples renew their vows. As wives, Viola and I receive a separate, special blessing. (Day Three and still no luggage for Viola!) This church building was notable for its many colored marbles--black, pink, white, wine, and two intense shades of real blue! I have never seen some of these colors in natural stone. I am amazed. We walk down the side steps into the bowels of the church to the actual house below, the site of the wedding feast! We saw, we touched, some of the actual walls, floor, and steps, grinding and stone vessels. Yossi explained that such a celebration actually would take place over seven nights; seven, for the number of perfection? Father Mike reads from John, the only Gospel where this story takes place. Why would that be? Maybe, because John heard it directly from Mary, as they sat one day, taking a meal, perhaps, years after the Resurrection? I wonder.

Back upstairs we have the delight of tasting little cups of the sweet red Cana Wine. Why is it, everything here is so delightful? I have to buy two small bottles of the wine as keepsakes for my Mother and for me. We shopped a little. Still, no bargaining. It

seems wrong on these little things. I just love this and I love these people I meet here. How can I best honor them?

Yossi gifts us with the most delectable baklava we have ever tasted! Buttery and rich with crushed cashews. Definitely superior to any I've enjoyed stateside.

Driving again, we see the Valley of Geneseret, next to Magdala. I think of Mary Magdalen and wonder at the source of her finances. Did she inherit her money? Had she managed at type of wayside where travelers could eat and lodge? Hmmm. Magdala was more a Roman town than a Jewish one. The Romans had built up the place for off-duty Roman soldiers on R and R. That would not have made coming from Magdala enviable among the Jews. To have Magdala attached to one's name would not have been very complimentary, it would seem.

We take the route through the very canyon from Nazareth Jesus would have walked down. We pass palm and olive trees at the junction and turn north, to Capernaum. We drive up and around the many spring green hills until we have a view of the Mount of the Beatitudes where we were yesterday. We are reminded by Father Mike of these Bible verses: Matt 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, and John 6:1-14. We come to a stop in Tabgha, the site of The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes.

A 4th Century church overseen by German Benedictines now covers the site. At the entrance is a plaque with a blessing by Holy Father John Paul the Great. Hills, verdant, lush, covered with bright yellow--blooming mustard bushes, surrounds us. Jesus talks about the mustard as a tree, but it looks like a bush to me. There are more groves of spiky leafed mango trees, olive tree groves, banana palms with their banana bunches wrapped in bright blue plastic sheeting to protect the fruit from the elements and pests. The hillsides are deeply studded with rocks and rocky outcroppings as they slope down to the Sea of Galilee, their rich green grasses and fluffy yellow blooms ruffled by the breezes.

At lunch, we have two choices, falafel or shwarma. The words can be a little confusing. I choose shwarma, a fluffy pita stuffed with a delicious yogurt curry sauce, sliced chicken, and green salad with lettuce, cucumbers and tomato. Loved it.

1:40 PM--John 21:12-14 Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love Me?" This is the site of the Peter Primacy Church, one of my favorite and curious stories. How merciful Jesus is to give Peter three acts of redemption to make up for Peter's three denials during the Passion. The scenery strikes me as very Mediterranean with the flowers, the types of housing, and the rolling hills. Quite lovely. Both Popes, Paul VI and John Paul II, visited this very place, John Paul in 2000. The church stands near the beach, the original built in the 4th--5th Century. Inside, in front of the altar, is a giant, porous white rock. "Upon this rock I will build my Church..."

After a short while, as everyone chatted, meandered around, I went straight to the water's edge, removed socks and shoes and sat on the ground, feet in the water,

wondering. The very water Andrew and John would have stepped barefoot into! I dug my hands into the sand-- really, more fine ground rock seeded with tiny seashells of all shapes and colors, (And some refuse to call it a sea, shame on them). I watched two schools of fish feeding at the water's surface a short distance off and gazed across the sea.

Jesus watched from this shore. He saw the boat of Peter, together with Thomas, Nathaniel, James and John, and two others (John 21:1--12) coming closer in the early morning light. He watched Peter jump from the boat and hurriedly race toward Him. He stirred the coals in the breakfast fire and looked back at Peter, running across the beach to embrace Him.

These are things Jesus saw--and I am seeing them, too. As Peter said, at another time, in another spot, "Lord, how good it is that we are here!" So it is, for us, the pilgrims, on this journey. Again, I smell the clean water, alive and sweet, run the fine composite gravel through my fingers, spy some gulls in the distance, watch the sun, breaking through the clouds, scatter a sprinkling of light across the waters. I burn it into memory before the call to board the bus sounds. Reluctantly, socks and shoes go back on and I trudge up the hill, sand in my pockets. (There's just something about that water!)

Now we're on to Capernaum, the center of Jesus' entire ministry after He left Nazareth. Home to Peter (and Peter's Mother--in--Law), Andrew's home. Why is there no mention of Peter's wife? Likely, she'd already died when Peter met Jesus. Makes the most sense.

Much archeological excavation has been done here. We see a multitude of stone and marble artifacts: grinding stones for olives, an ancient olive press (Yossi describes the long, labor intensive ordeal of making olive oil, central to existence in the days of the Bible), vessels, columns, ornate and simple capitals, a wide array of architectural detailing.

We walk in and around the remains of a 3rd Century synagogue built directly over the remains of the original synagogue present in Jesus' time. Capernaum was unique because it was one of the few Biblical towns that built an early Christian church next to the synagogue. The church was built over Peter's home, the largest home yet excavated in the town, if tradition is correct. Iconoclastic Persians destroyed both the synagogue and the church in 614 AD.

We see much of the original lower walls throughout the ruins. Yossi explains why we see both pale and black stones. The black stones are the original stones built into walls and homes by real people, just like us, who lived at the time of Jesus. They may have seen Him, may have spoken to Him, and may have touched Him. Hands that touched these stones may have touched Our Lord. It is an honor just to stand in this fascinating place and think on life and times in Capernaum where so many we revere lived and breathed, loved and worried, worked and laughed-----right here....

{The Iconoclasts came from a movement in the Eastern Empire headed by the emperor vociferously denying the holiness of religious images as abominations. These militants completely destroyed all but two Christian churches in The Holy Land and beyond. The Church of the nativity, built during Constantine's reign, was partially but not completely destroyed.}

Capernaum was not a small town. We see acres and acres of ruins, many stone cubicles attached to each other in rows, in cubes, in other assortments, indicating a complex town where extended families lived in close proximity to one another. The houses fight tightly together. No wasted land here on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. We see few windows, thick stonewalls, small rooms, small passageways. Yossi explains that most people lived in single story dwellings, some with dug out basements, some dug into hillsides. Only wealthier people (tax collectors, priests, merchants) had a second story with flat roof. The average roof was of reed or rush, bound together and lay atop the walls. It is easy to visualize men lowering the paralyzed man on His pallet through the roof of the house for Jesus to cure. Some houses had solid supported flat roofs, which could be used for drying grain or sleeping on during hot summer nights.

Yossi explains that St. Matthew, the tax collector, was "the big tax collector of the town." He tells us that this was a prosperous job at that time, especially with caravans of raw materials and merchant goods coming and going. All commerce passed this way and all was subject to Roman taxes.

The latest church built upon the remains of the past Catholic churches is ingenious. It is raised on angled stilts like a spaceship rising from the ruins. While it occupies the same area as earlier churches, it is elevated, leaving a clear view of the archeological site below, so we can see both old and new simultaneously. Within the new church is a thick, clear Plexiglas floor that provides an excellent view of the remains below. I have to stand on the Plexiglas floor. I must. I do. (What a rebel.)

Yossi calls out that we have only a few minutes left. I spot the sea and run for it. This shoreline at Capernaum is different than the last shore we were at. It is a short beach, very rocky. Small waves slap and splash against piles of black round stones. It's a rougher beach. There are tall grasses, some wild flowers, and lots of rocks. Time to head back to the bus where Yossi explains the two theories of why Jesus came to earth in this locale: Minimalist and Maximal list

Minimalist Theory: This area of the Galilee is "the backwoods", "no man's land", far enough from the Roman, Herodian, and Temple governments to be out of earshot, to have some degree of privacy and autonomy in daily life. Minimalists say this triangle of Nazareth, Cana, and Capernaum comprised nothing of interest to the authorities, allowing "The Way" some room to grow and flourish. Immediately, I think this does not make sense. Weren't the Romans building a new modern city just a few miles from Nazareth? Sephoris? Weren't tax collectors everywhere?

Minimalist Theory: This same triangle is right in the center of one of the known world's major trade and transportation crossroads between Asia. At the time of Christ and for centuries before, there were major kingdoms in all directions, bringing people, armies, goods, and trade right through the center of this triangle. Why else would the Romans be constructing a major city there? Roman roads were being expanded. This makes sense to me.

Yossi closes the day's touring with a bit of local wisdom. If a person needs to ask God for favors, this is the place to ask. "From here to heaven is a local call!" Sounds wise--at least for a little while longer, until we arrive in Jerusalem, and discover how close to God we can actually come in this amazing land.

Gene and Melinda host a wine and munchies pre--dinner party in the lobby of **Golden Crown**. It seems some goodies they brought to serve everyone disappeared from their room the previous day thanks to housekeeping. After some interesting negotiations, the hotel provided some replacement treats with wine. We all gathered for a relaxed merry time, very thankful for the wonderful Christian hospitality of Gene and Melinda.