

Journey to Jesus' Footsteps

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

Day Four (Two in Israel) February 24, 2008 Sunday

6:30 am-- up and at 'em! 7:30 am breakfast buffet (Terrific cottage cheese and plump red tomatoes-- delicious! Rich cheese, olives that burst with flavor, terrific pickled herring, and a hard--boiled egg.) Mostly wonderful. I am finding some salad dressings, some flavors in various foods very new to my palate, strange to my taste buds. We all notice that in one type of food or another. New flavor combinations. The sweets are a little sweeter than I am used to and the breakfast bread offerings are mostly buttery puff pastry with fillings of various kinds-- a bit too fatty for me. Still, I'm trying many things so I will learn and experience it all. On the bus by 8 am with our tote bags, Bibles, water bottles, cameras, sunglasses, candy, and journal.

"Good morning, everybody! I am your guide. My name is 'Yossi' and our driver's name is 'Nedal'..." We don't yet realize how much we will all grow to love that dear introduction.

8:44 am-- First sight of The Sea of Galilee!! The mountainous Golan Heights rise up beyond the sea. Beautiful purple blooming shrubs line the road. It is a little overcast today, but pleasantly moderate in temperature. Neither warm nor cold. Just right. We will experience passages from the Gospel of John this day.

In explaining the differences between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, Yossi compares them to mankind: "To receive and to give means you are alive! Then, you are like the Sea of Galilee. This is how God designed us to be: giving and receiving. "To only receive but never to give is to be as dead; dead like the Dead Sea. Water flows in, but it gives out nothing. You might as well be dead!" Wise words.

We drive through Nazareth. In Jesus' time, maybe 200 people lived here. Now it is such a large city, a bit of urban sprawl, up and down ridges and mountainsides. I am amazed at how very high, mountainous and rocky it is. I see grasses, hardy shrubs and scrub, wildflowers dotting the roadside. Down, down we go. It is still rocky and the road snakes around as we approach Cana. I can't help but think about the journey Jesus and Mary took when they attended the wedding feast. We have a sense about the kind of trip it was, along this rocky, winding way. Did they travel in a group? We know Jesus had disciples along and there were likely other relatives from Nazareth. The Apostle Nathaniel was from Cana. Did he meet Jesus at the wedding feast? Did he observe the miracle of the water into wine? Was that the beginning for Nathaniel? It wouldn't have been an easy stroll or even short hike to reach Cana, but a daylong journey on foot. Imagine, walking along the rocks and scapple in sandals. I wonder what time of year it was. Was it dusty and hot, or were they pelted by rain blown by westerly winds? Our dear Mother and our Savior were not weaklings!

As we continue driving down, down, we get an amazing view of the Jordan Valley and the Sea of Galilee--both at sea level elevations. We pass flocks of sheep, grazing without a care on bits of new green grass, pass orchards of date palms, mango trees, orange and fig groves. The eyes feast. Wildflowers are blooming! All along the slopes we can see them in bright yellow, red, purple. I had read about this time of year in the Galilee---three good weeks of springtime awakening. What kind of Gift is this! We are so fortunate to be here at this very moment in time. Thank you, Father.

As we drive, Yossi takes the opportunity to teach us. He refers back to the Valley of Jezre'el, Israel's "breadbasket". "Jezre'el" means "God will plant." The Jewish life had a rhythm that was punctuated by the three High Holy Days of Judaism: Passover, Pentecost, and The Feast of the Tabernacles. Springtime followed Pentecost and ended with the Feast of the Tabernacles. It was customary to celebrate the weeks after Pentecost by again rereading the Torah.

{These seven weeks were crucial for the farmers, and therefore, all the people, as this was a time of waiting for the success or failure of crops. Tilling and sowing were complete and now, the farmers were utterly dependent upon God. They had no control over the wind, the rains, the sun, or the temperatures. Would their crops grow? Would they prosper? Or would the seedlings wither? Would it be a year of plenty or desperation? The story of Ruth features this time of year. (Book of Ruth, Chapter 2) When Ruth met Boaz, it is during this period of time.}

Since farmers had nothing but time on their hands, they studied their Scripture. Wives and children returned to families for extended visits. This was a special time for families to reunite. Fathers traveled to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost and said special prayers. Young boys traveled with their mothers.

Joseph was not a farmer. Did he travel to Jerusalem, too? Did Jesus and Mary return to Ann and Joachim? Was Jesus missing His Heavenly Father as well as His earthly Father?

9:10 am--Almost to the River Jordan. I have long awaited this! We will repeat our Baptismal vows. Some will put on white gowns and submerge in the River. I go barefoot and roll up my pants. I must feel the cold water on my feet. It is quite chilly, but refreshing. But no rocks here. More like a swimming pool. Not so meaningful to me. I am a little disappointed. I was hoping to walk along the actual River bank, thinking of Jesus, but there is no actual River bank here. This is not the spot where John the Baptizer encountered Jesus. That is far to the south, on the edge of the Judean wilderness. Yossi says we use this prepared location for "security reasons".

We are at a location where the River has been widened, paved, steps with handrails created, for tourist Baptisms. Too inauthentic. Others, some in our group and some in other groups, undergo intense spiritual experiences. For them, the place, the actions are genuine. Still, I long for a more private, more serene location along this holy

River--moving water, rocks, reeds, grasses, shrubs, trees. Oh well, surrender to the Lord's providence. He is central and that is what is important.

10:50 am--we are driving east along the Sea of Galilee, heading for the area of "Legion." This is a thrilling prospect. Everyone knows the story of the wild man, possessed by demons, whom Jesus freed. I look forward to learning more about that story. We will be on the north eastern shore of the sea, directly opposite the shore where The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes took place. This eastern shore was Gentile land. (Hence, they raised pork.) It is covered by very high hills (low mountains). We are approaching but don't quite reach the area now named "The Golan Heights".

There is so much to learn from Yossi. So much to take in, looking out the high bus window; so many thoughts relating to Scripture. There's a lot of talking, jolly, laughing on our bus. Happy people. I'm in another world. We stop at the site of "Legion", the healing of the Geresene demoniac. (Luke 8:26--39) Yossi explains that this man, crazed and naked, had been terrorizing the countryside along this stretch of the shore for some time. People were terrified, could not pass through the area. Perhaps that is why Jesus ventured out this way. It is an area of grasses and low trees, rocky and a bit wild. After Jesus commanded the demons, which called themselves, "Legion", out of the man, He permitted them to take possession of a nearby herd of swine. The pigs became crazed and rushed off a cliff, falling to their deaths in the sea below.

We walk along the area. There was an ancient church built here and we can follow its foundation, see where its baptismal font was, and survey the remains. Some of us take the path beyond, up a narrow way to a high cliff, once the site of a little chapel; I think I heard Yossi say. It is quite a view from that height. The sun breaks through the hazy sky and feels warm. I don't see another cliff quite like this one. Yossi explained that it is believed this is the very cliff the swine fell from. The water is some distance away now, but the water level of the sea was much higher 2,000 years ago. Wonder why. Irrigation needs? This is just amazing! We are called back. As I walk I see the red wildflowers close up. Delicate, poppy--like, but with another name here. The yellow mustard flowers are really congregations of tiny yellow flowers bunched together on spiny stems. I debate picking a flower. It would be lovely to press in the pages of my Bible. It would be a "forever keepsake" that would always bring back the sites and smells, the sun's warmth on the high ledge. I hesitate. I'm regretting this as I board the bus, and then realize someone else is meeting with Yossi's wrath for picking a single flower. I feel sorry for that person. It could have been any of us. It should have been me. I understand the desire to possess that flower. Guess if we each picked a flower, there would soon be no flowers left here. I press my face against my window and sigh.

It is time for lunch and excitement reigns. St. Peter's fish! Yossi explains we will have the opportunity to eat a real St. Peter's fish. The name tells all. The Sea of Galilee is teeming with life. Easy to imagine Peter and Andrew, nets full of shiny, flapping fish, just like the ones we will be eating. This is a thrilling prospect! The restaurant is part of a beautiful kibbutz on the Galilee seashore. Very nice. I had read about kibbutzim and the gallant people who created them. To share even a brief time at this one is a privilege.

(Looking out the bus windows at the occasional kibbutz as we drove past demonstrated the order, fruitfulness, care and tidiness.)

This kibbutz restaurant is no different, incredibly attractive and comfortable. Service is prompt, friendly, and delightful. The fish is perfect-- fresh, well prepared, delicious with a spritz of fresh lemon. We also enjoy a particularly fine hummus with that fluffy pita bread and some great side salads. As we eat, we look out the windows to a lovely patio common area with seating, plantings, graceful trees and the sea beyond, with docks and boats and seagulls. This is my favorite meal of the entire trip! (But then, the whole trip is filled with favorite moments.)

Next, it is time for our boat ride on the sea.

{A minute to discuss this name, "sea": So many names have this body of water owned, as have many places in this holy land. John the Evangelist called it The Sea of Tiberius, a name still placed on many maps, along with Lake Tiberius and Lake Kinneret (Frommer's Guide). In ancient times it was called a sea. Modern geographers take exception to that because it is a fresh water, inland body, fed by streams. My take is that this body of water meant life to the ancient peoples all along its shores, generation after generation. If those people chose to honor it with the distinction of "sea", who are we to minimize it's designation? I vote for "sea".}

As we walk past our restaurant, past our brand new Mercedes Benz tour bus, down the boat dock toward the water, we see two boats, one on either side of the dock. On the left is a modern, white fiberglass model. Hmm, I think with dismay. On the right is a simple, dark, wooden craft, bobbing with waves lapping against its wood plank sides. Oh gosh, I hope. Then, here is Yossi, scooting quickly past us, ushering us aboard the wooden model. My heart jumps for joy! How could we ride across This Sea in fiberglass?! Seems so wrong. The wooden boat is perfect in every way. Open bow, long wooden seating along both sides and seating in the center. Seagulls are already circling, squawking, calling out to us in an eagerness that matches our own. Everyone seems excited, delighted, happy to be aboard, taking up seats along both sides and bow. I pick the center. I think this gives me a 360 view of all about us.

Yossi winks. "Best seat", he says, smiling. The water smells sooo good; clean, fresh, like every alpine lake I've ever known in Oregon. It is teeming with life! In the distance, we see fish feeding at the surface, choppy waters splashing with eating frenzy.

We pull out from the dock gently, and then pick up speed. It is a coolly pleasant day. Overcast but no threat of rain. On the water, it feels exhilarating! As the gulls dip and swirl above us, we are given huge bags of bread to feed them. Everyone shares in the joy, tossing bread chunks in the air. Sandy and I have a particular blast, like little girls, giggling and tossing bread up high until not a crumb is left. (Except all over the boat.)

I wonder; did the birds follow the boats of the simple fishermen? As we move along, all grow quiet but for the humming of the boat and the delightful music played by our boat's captain and crew. They welcomed us aboard with a fine grace and make us most welcome throughout the ride. They raise the American and Israeli flags and we salute both countries with joy and respect.

I turn my attention to the shoreline and can imagine Our Lord, squatting before a charcoal fire, roasting fish and waving toward our boat. "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" (John 21:5) It is the very shore I gaze upon, I think to myself. I see Peter and Andrew, with wet feet, damp clothing, dragging their boats the last few feet to the rocky shore, dragging filled nets behind them. Sometimes, the nets are torn and need mending, but this time, they did not tear. Those images are sweet in my mind! How thankful to be here, to see it all, to hear it, to smell it, to taste and to touch!

Yossi talks about the "singing of the soul" and I embrace that thought; that practice. Here in This boat, as the birds call out from a distance and the engine hums softly, I resolve to keep This new idea close to my mind. Whatever I do, wherever I am, nothing can prevent my soul from singing. I ask for This Grace.

Korazim-- we arrive at the town that Jesus cursed, near the Mount of the Beatitudes. We have just driven up to the mount. Scrambling out of the bus to gain a better look, I am breathless with amazement. I'd had no idea of the spectacular view we would see of the Galilee and the sea, from this mount. No wonder people collected here! No wonder, dear Lord, You were so inspired. How You must have loved this place. I can feel this as I stand here, gazing out. (Matt:5 3--11, Luke 6: 20--23).

We have time to wander the sidewalks of the beautiful church on this mountaintop, and then we come together, at a special, quiet altar to celebrate Sunday Mass. We prepare to receive The Eternal Word.

The Mass is simple, beautiful, intimate. Sunday Mass on the Mount of the Beatitudes. Imagine! Such a blessing. At This Mass, I realize I feel a particular love for fellow Christians, and more particularly, for fellow Catholics. For a moment, I worry. Why not love all with the same love? The Lord reassures that this is OK, even good that it be so. He reminds me that even He prayed harder for His Apostles and close followers even while He loved all. He loved and loves His followers with a special fervency. While all need love and prayers, He explained without words, Christians need them even more, as they are more culpable, more is expected of them, and that Catholics, with all the Graces of the Holy Sacraments, all the teachings and Tradition, with all that we know and are given, are even more so! "To whom more is given, more will be required." How much we each need the prayers of one another!

After Mass, we all seem to be in a quiet, contemplative mood. Grace is everywhere. We wander again, a bit, through this beautiful, lofty landscape, and then Yossi calls us back to our schedule and back on the bus.

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It is 4:33 PM and we are off to Tiberius. As we drive, we pass the ancient stone ruins of the town of Magdala, Mary Magdalene's home.

I wonder how Mary came to follow Jesus and His mission. There are so many stories, but truth, it seems, is illusive where this Mary is concerned. Was she the woman to be stoned? The woman possessed? A wealthy widow who helped fund the cause? A kinswoman of one of the apostles or a quiet soul befriended by Mother Mary? I don't know. What we do know is that Mary remained faithful against all odds, even to the tomb. Was she there at Pentecost, among the 120? Likely. Did she set out after with John and Mother Mary to Ephesus, with Joseph of Arimathea to Britain, or west to Spain with Lazarus, Mary and Martha? Many legends. The answer will be a wonderful discovery in heaven.

Then, on to the diamond factory. I understand why it is meaningful for us to go. The film is interesting, (but it's an hour and a half of my life I will never get back!) Late dinner and bed at 8:38 PM. We all need that bed very much!