

Journey to Jesus' Footsteps

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

Day Nine (Seven in Israel), February 29, 2008 Lenten Friday

7:29 AM. I have been up since 2 or 3 am this morning, in prayer. A good time with our God. I dedicate this day in honor of Andrew, my Guardian Angel.

We are on our way to Masada! Then to Qumran, Ein Gedi, lunch, swim in the Dead Sea, Jerusalem for Mass at the Grotto at Gethsemane, (the cave where Jesus would go to pray.)

How excited I am! I think of the writings of Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich. Of her visions of Jesus, throwing Himself down in the cave in the Garden, so great His suffering, the greatest of His entire passion. The cave is where He suffered through the sins, hate, rejection of all, for all, in all time. Terrible, terrible, deep suffering in the cave we will visit. According to Blessed Anne Catherine, Our Blessed Mother was privy to her Son's sufferings on this night throughout its entirety because their hearts were already in union.

We are recalling the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead as we drive south of Jerusalem, past Bethany, toward the Judean wilderness.

Jesus said to Martha, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. All who believe in Me shall never die.... Do you believe me?"

When Jesus saw the distress and mourning of Lazarus' sisters, He too was greatly distressed. He wept. How tender the Precious Heart of Jesus! As we drive past caves not unlike the cave that held Lazarus, we think about that day, when Jesus prayed aloud to His Father in heaven, "Father, I know You always hear Me..." and I think how, likewise, Our Heavenly Father always hears each of His children, even to this day. Jesus wanted us to know that for a certainty.

We are driving near a high, rounded hill, a low building on top. This is the traditional site of the inn where The Good Samaritan took the wounded man on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. As we drive past it, we see more hills, tall, round, grassy and without trees, studded with dirt and rock. This is Bedouin area. A sign tells us we have just dipped below sea level as we continue to head on a downward grade. This highway into the Judean Wilderness is really just a two lane paved road. On both sides on the highway, Bedouins graze their goats and sheep. The hills are farther away now and except for the occasional field of date palms or a hardy ragged tree or bit of scrub, all is dry and brown, smooth and barren. This is the Holy Land I had long pictured in my mind's eye. I can well imagine why the population has always been sparse here. People would naturally gravitate toward the high, verdant, fertile areas around Jerusalem and further north of the Golden city to the Galilee, where breezes are

refreshing, elevation is higher, temperatures are cooler and sweet water keeps crops growing.

7:56 AM--We are passing a distance from Jericho as we remember the blind beggar, Bartimeus, calling out to Jesus for healing, and short tax collector, Zacchaeus, who though wealthy and important, humbled himself to climb a sycamore tree just to catch a glimpse of the Teacher, (Luke 19:1-10). Both received the healings they knowingly or unknowingly sought from the Lord. "Zacchaeus, come down, I mean to eat at your home tonight." As we continue on, we say a Rosary, meditating.

The land continues to flatten, vegetation growing even sparser. This, now, is the place St. John the Baptist preached and baptized with water in the Jordan River.

I think of Jesus walking all these many miles from Galilee to this wilderness where He fasted and prayed for forty days, preparing for His mission. It looks like a place the devil might linger in. I imagine Jesus approaching a group at the River's edge. Hearing St. John call out, "Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand!" then, stepping into the water and walking calmly up to John, who becomes speechless before the Perfect Lamb. It is easy to imagine in the silence of this place.

To our right, tall and forbidding mountains are coming into view. They lie several miles to the east of the highway and are barren with many cliffs and outcroppings. Looking in the opposite direction, east of the Jordan, we see even taller mountains in the far distance. As the road turns west/northwest, Yossi explains that the hilly desert wilderness we see is the believed location of Jesus' wandering those forty days. How alone one would be out there! As we get closer, we have a clearer view of the steep sandy mountains, rugged ridges with sharp outcroppings separated by steep, narrow valleys. Due south, the land is utterly flat and treeless and beyond that, the Negev.

In only minutes, we are right beside the steep mountains. We see numerous caves of all sizes. We are very near Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. Only small clumps of hardy grass and scrub survive with a rare gathering of larger bushes and a few stalwart trees beneath water runoff from the occasional rainstorm. Yossi says flash floods are common in the area. Every year there are flash flood deaths of hikers climbing the steep valleys between these mountains. The waters pour forth suddenly and with great force.

We are now beginning to see the Dead Sea a half-mile away. More bushes, more trees and blooming reeds live along its shore. Yossi reminds us the trees and bushes are not fed by the sea, which is 30% salt, (the Pacific Ocean is 4%), but by underground springs. The Lord provides. We see dried up, washed out gullies descending from the exposed vertical rock of these steep mountains to the west. We see more date palm orchards. Some are many acres in size and quite beautiful. They give the impression of an oasis in this desert. I can imagine how blessed it would have been to the ancient traveler to come upon an oasis in this dry desert!

Maps fail to convey how massive the Dead Sea actually is! It is much like looking upon an ocean without waves. The sun breaks through the high clouds and sparkles across gray waters.

Out of the blue, we just passed a high tower manned with machine guns. That is a surprise.

Much conversation and joking on our bus, but I am too taken in by all we see to participate. There is so much to discover, exteriorly and interiorly. It is all so compelling and I am driven. Driven to see, discover, experience, and understand. All else pales dimly. Jesus is drawing us. The Holy Spirit is teaching us.

8:26 AM--On the east side of the Dead Sea is the country of Jordan. We can just see the tall mountains on the eastern shore. As the road becomes choppy and rough, Father Mike reads to us from 1 Samuel, last verse of CH. 23 and all of Ch. 24, about David in the wilderness of Ein Gedi, the land to our right at this very moment! This is so exciting! Many images come to mind with the many caves in these mountains. I can picture David unexpectedly coming upon Saul, the one at war with him, in one cave. David will not harm "the Lord's Anointed" so he cuts off a piece of Saul's cloak, using it later to taunt and prove His own faithfulness. It seems this would be a most difficult area in which to wage a civil war in ancient Israel. A war of Kings. How hardy and clever and strong these people were. I am in awe of them.

We can smell sulfur springs nearby, which pulls attention away from King David. Suddenly, I see a crescent moon. A crescent moon in the land of the Bedouins, just skimming the crest of the Ein Gedi Mountains. How fitting!

8:39--first view of Masada! This is amazing! I spy it through my telephoto lens. So much excitement! Is it really possible it is not yet 9 AM? We have seen so much already. With every mile or turn in the road, the tall plateau of Masada grows taller and clearer. Within minutes we pull off the very bumpy road. We have arrived at the Masada parking lot, in a flat plain far below the plateau's fortress. We will take the window-lined tram to the top, which is an exciting little flight on cables up the mountainside, with a breathtaking view looking up or looking down. (Don't be afraid of heights.) We can spy the Snake Path and it is all I can do to stifle myself from jumping up and down and pointing, begging at Yossi's ankles. What a terrific way to spend the day, hiking to the summit of Masada, then back down! As it is, we have only about an hour here, so the gorgeous Masada museum and the Snake Trail must wait for another hoped-for pilgrimage.

The first thing we see off the tram is a small guardhouse dating back to King Herod Antipas. Here, Yossi tells us something about the History of Masada. This mountaintop fortress was actually older than King Herod, but he requisitioned it and enlarged its entire facility, creating a palace/fortress/getaway for himself and those loyal to him if things did not go well during his reign and he had to flee. In the end, he never used the place.

One can read much about Masada from the writings of Josephus Flavius, the Jewish Historian turned Romanized citizen. It is in Josephus that modern man first rediscovered the story of Masada as the final stronghold of the Jewish nation after the desecration of the temple and near total destruction of Jerusalem (“...not a stone left upon a stone...” except for transportation infrastructure and a portion of the temple foundation we know today as The Wailing Wall.)

After Herod's death, the small Roman garrison that occupied the fortress was easily overtaken by a small band of Jewish zealots in 66 A.D., giving ample time to prepare the place for the arrival of families and compatriots, which followed. Nine hundred Jewish zealots, men, women, and children, fled to this fortress, easily living off the vast network of well-stocked storehouses of food and arms. Three years after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the Romans had had enough and determined to put a final end to the zealot cause.

Led by General Cornelius Flavius Silva, 5,000 Roman legions ultimately laid siege to the fortress. Roman legion camps were established around the base of the mountain. After failing to attack by the only possible entrance, up the narrow winding Snake Path, the Romans increased to 10,000 troops and brought in the Jews they had not killed from the surrounding area as slave labor to build a siege ramp to the mountaintop. Ultimately, led by Eleazar ben Yar, the zealots chose mass suicide over the fate that would befall them once the Romans breached their failing final defenses, thereby stealing the victory from the Roman troops. Josephus tells us that only two women and a few children remained alive, hiding in a storehouse, once the Romans arrived. It is believed that it was these women who were the source of the zealot side of the tale.

It is a gripping human story that can be read or viewed. In 1981, an amazing television miniseries, *Masada*, very accurately tells the story. I encourage every reader to see this miniseries, available online and on DVD.

As we walk the plateau, look over the side at the remains of four of the Roman encampments below, and can only think of the zealot people, facing the inevitable as they watched the siege ramp grow. They could not kill the workers. Their moral nature would not permit them to kill their brother Jews who were forced to do the building. What went through their minds? How the men must have suffered, knowing what had become of their brethren in Jerusalem and surrounds, then looking upon their own wives and children, wonder about the word “suicide” in this case and if it even really applies. It seems to me, the men were trying to save their loved ones, not extinguish them. Save them from fates worse than death. The Romans were brutal to their slaves and brutal in their killings. As we walk and scan the excavations, I pray for God's mercy on the zealots and their families.

Masada national Park is incredibly exciting. The state of Israel has been very busy excavating the plateau. Yossi explains that the ruins fell inward in every building,

so rebuilding has been a matter of putting the pieces back together like a puzzle. Along the walls of every structure an uneven black line is drawn showing the division between what was still standing when excavations began and what has been restored. There is still much archeological work to be done but Yossi explains that Israel intentionally moves slowly in these matters, wishing to save something new for each generation to uncover and discover. He also tells us that as techniques and the science of restoration improve, later archeologists will be able to unearth antiquities with ever increasing skill.

We see the ritual Roman baths with indoor water heating and tiny alcoves in the walls designed to hold the ancient clay oil lamps used in Herod's day. We see scores of single story warehouses and other structures. I spy a two and a half story tower near one side of the plateau thinking of the vantage point standing atop it would give, but Yossi says we are out of time and must head back to the tram. I must go to the top of that tower so I tell him I will meet up at the tram and head for the tower. I hear Yossi call to me, "Five minutes! We won't wait for you!" I sprint up grade to the tower and run the two flights to the top. Amazing! The 360 panorama is worth every deep breath I am now taking. I can scan the entire plateau and the wilderness all around. Inspirational. Breathtaking. Tearing myself away, I jog towards the tram station, and what do you know? I'm there before Yossi. (Out of breath, but there, and it was so worth it.)

10:30 AM--Back on the bus, heading north along the western edge of the Dead Sea. The water now appears a gray-turquoise in the deeper regions and a bright aqua marine near the shore, like tropical waters. Where there are sun breaks, the water turns a deeper blue and I realize the water color depends on the vantage point of the observer as much as the amount of sun shining. Along this stretch the shoreline is flat with a white salt encrusted edge. The salt shore varies in width and brightness from stretch to stretch. It is exotic and otherworldly. No life signs near these shores, then at 11:05, we spot a half-dozen Ibex grazing along the roadside. They are quite small, about the size of a beagle. There is also a particular species of crow out here, smaller than the huge crows in Jerusalem. In English, the Hebrew name for these little crows is "Free bird". I wonder how long they have carried that name. Did the zealots of Masada share the plateau with birds that were as free as those unfortunate people wish they could have been? Did they name these birds? How all peoples long to be free. I remember how true freedom only comes with the Holy Spirit.

We arrive in Qumran at the edge of the Negev. There are flat lands and to the east, mountains studded with caves. Yossi points out the very cave where the young Bedouin shepherd found the first Biblical scroll in 1947 when he was searching for a lost sheep. It was hidden there at the time of the First Jewish Revolt in 70 A.D. In the early 1960's, much excavation was done here uncovering many more scroll and other written materials, signs of inhabitants and personal artifacts dating back as far as 3,000 A.D. During the Second Jewish Revolt in 135 A.D., those fleeing the Romans deposited more personal items, documents and written notes here. It has been a treasure trove.

Qumran is also the site of the hub of the Essene community. The Essenes were a group of observant Jews that separated themselves from the wider community

because of their belief that the Jewish community had become sacrilegious and tainted. They were fed up with the Temple priests and viewed the established priestly behavior as hollow and an incorrect following of the Law. Originally, it was thought the Essenes were a strictly male monastic-like community, but more recent archeological findings have indicated the Essene community was far more widespread and inclusive of females than originally thought. Members of Jesus' family are now even thought to have had links to the Essenes by virtue of their personal religious lives and other indicators. These include St. Elizabeth and Zachariah, St. John the Baptist, St. Joseph, Saints Anne and Joachim. It is believed that single members of the group took the vow of celibacy, and perhaps married couples, too.

The Essenes at Qumran had a distinctively different way of life than other Jews of their day. They largely lived as ascetics in the caves of the area and daily came to the Scriptorium to write the scrolls, apologetic books and commentaries. In the flat land beneath the caves, an entire community of buildings served the Essene community, including ritual baths that were an important part of their lives. We see a purifying bath, which looks like a large stone hot tub with steps. This bath combined spring and cistern (holding tanks that contained rain or mountain runoff) water. We see plastered aqueduct channels and a number of cisterns.

Yossi shares a line from one of the apocalyptic scrolls which talks about future events, mentioning "...the son of light against the sons of darkness..." There is a question of whether this reference concerned Jesus or Israeli statehood. Many theories.

12:50 PM-- We leave Qumran for the Dead Sea, just 2 miles south. Another experience we have all really been looking forward to.

As we drive in to the public beach, it is clear things are not too fancy at the Dead Sea. We put on swimsuits in changing rooms much like campground bathrooms in unimproved campgrounds. Then we take a short hike down hill to the seashore. There is a covered refreshment area about halfway down where Mom, Brother Stephen and a few others in our party decide to relax, have a fruit drink or snack and watch the sea and the bathers. The sun has melted away most of the clouds and the water sparkles. Because the Dead Sea is the lowest point on earth at 1,300 feet below sea level, we do not need suntan lotion, even in the noonday sun. The extra atmosphere actually screens out burning rays according to the guidebooks. I leave off lotion as a test and later discover the books are right. No burn or tan!

The Dead Sea was called The Salt Sea 2,000 years ago. Sodom and Gomorrah are believed to have been somewhere near the south end of the sea. Nothing at all can live in this water, the ultimate end of the Jordan River.

I think Father Mike beats everyone else to the water! When Sandy and I arrive, he is already floating a distance from shore, looking totally relaxed and happy. The shore is covered with very coarse sand, tiny gravel, actually. Jerzy and Viola, et al, are already in the thick of it, mudding themselves up. The mineral properties of the very

sticky black mud are legendary. Hype? I don't know, but I'm not even slightly tempted to put that thick slimy stuff on my skin. I'm thinking we have Mass this afternoon. I could look a disaster and scare everyone. ("Vanity of vanities. Everything is vanity!")

I put my feet into the water. It is pleasantly cool, easy to get used to under the warm sun. I stop to look around. A young man says to me, "You can't stand there." I wonder, "Why not?" He says it again more urgently. I don't understand his problem. Then he says with authority, "You can't stand in this water. You sink in. Keep your feet moving." Dummy me. I realize he's a lifeguard and notice his feet in constant motion. I try to pick up my right foot, which is already stuck. It's up to the ankle in mud. After some effort, I get both feet dislodged, nearly losing both water socks, sit down as instructed, and push myself backwards into deeper water. By the time it's knee--deep, I'm floating like a cork, still sitting. Unreal! I keep sitting and scull to get into ever deeper water. Sandy is nearby, laughing also at the attempts to figure out this new kind of swimming. Fr. Mike goes floating past; stretched out, face to the sky, happy and peaceful as a clam. We watch our Polish friends, now almost completely covered in mud on the shore, having a great time. Sandy gives herself a little mud facial, but rinsing off is not so easy in this brine. Even a few drops of water in the eye stings sharply. I try different floating positions: Indian cross-legged, lounge chair, vertical. What relaxing fun! We could spend all afternoon out here and say that out loud. Fr. Mike, still floating serenely, agrees, but alas, we are called in from shore.

Out we slog through the slippery mud, across the rocks, and sand to the outdoor shower to rinse shoes and feet, then up the hill into the showers and changing cubicles. There is no privacy here, but we do our best. I throw away my swimsuit, T-shirt and shorts that I wore into the water. The black mud has stained them all. Don't care. Three less things to pack. We join the group at the refreshment stand where I taste the most delicious ice cold hand squeezed orange juice in the world!

2:24 PM--We are driving north towards Jerusalem. We pass a Bedouin encampment on a flat, desolate hill near the highway. I see a number of squat huts pieced together with wood, corrugated sheets of metal, and other materials. A few hungry looking goats and a couple of skinny donkeys graze on the hillside. An elderly man stands with a very thin little boy, looking at the highway. Their clothes look more like rags than clothing. So very, very poor. My heart breaks as we pass by. It seems as if the man and boy are watching us pass. I feel ashamed. I have so much and they have so little. If I could toss my bag, my jacket out the window to them, I would. It hurts to see such need and just pass by. If I see another beggar, I'm giving them whatever I have left, I decide.

In a few minutes we see another man on a very, very rocky hillside grazing a flock of sheep. Not an easy life for man or beast.

We pass another Israeli Army checkpoint with young men and women carrying the ever--present Uzi. It's just something we're not used to seeing. I try to imagine American soldiers with machine guns outside our cathedral in Portland, at the Oregon

Zoo, around the mall, at a Blazer's game. Very unusual for us, but somehow, it makes me feel quite safe. These young soldiers exude a sharp and serious confidence.

2:41 PM--Back in Jerusalem for Missa in the Grotto in the Garden of Gethsemane. A little Priest who Yossi knows unlocks the grotto and lets us in. Others want to follow but are kept out. It is a private Mass they are told. I wish they would just let everyone in. This grotto is a huge cave with a beautiful mural painted on the back wall behind the small altar. The mural depicts Jesus praying in the cave with His disciples. It is painted in dark, moody colors and is very moving. Yossi tells us oral tradition has always said this is the spot Jesus chose for privacy in prayer whenever He was in the area and that it was here that Nicodemus received his nighttime instruction. Seems logical. The space is large enough to accommodate a few dozen people. We set up folding wood chairs and for me, the most spiritually significant Mass begins.

It is Fr. Soney's turn to say Mass. Before we get past the Opening Prayer, Father pauses. He is deeply moved and struggles to compose himself. It is a beautiful testimony for us all as he explains the impact of this pilgrimage on his faith, the renewal, and faith reinforced, brought to a higher level, how His Priesthood will never be the same. There are tears everywhere. We all seem to feel that way. Without words, we understand. Then Father proceeds and Mass is everything it should be.

As Father Soney announces the Kiss of Peace, something stunning occurs. I begin to turn towards my Mother when suddenly, it seems as if everything has shifted in time. For a split second, it is the First Century and we are all in long gowns, early followers of The Way, celebrating Missa in secret, in this cave, turning to one another offering the Kiss of Peace. It is just an instant but the agape is so intense my heart could burst. It is a shock, surprising and enthralling. Here in this grotto where Jesus is believed from earliest times to have prayed to His Father.... and we are here, celebrating the Bread that is broken for all. After that instant, all returns to normal and we are all actively seeking one another out, hugging, weeping, loving, and giving peace. I don't know if any of us wants this, our final Mass as the entire group, to end, but it does and we quietly depart. At 4:04 PM we are back on the bus.

Tonight is our final group dinner. Some of us will leave for home tomorrow. Our wonderful time out of time will be ending. Others will move on together to Jordan and Petra. The group as we have known it will exist no longer. It is too sad to ponder. I try not to think about it, to live in the moment if only for this evening.

Yossi has arranged a special dinner for us tonight as a farewell at the restaurant where his elder son is a chef. After refreshing ourselves with showers and clean clothes, we meet at 5:55 PM, Yossi time, and head out for the restaurant.

It is in a very attractive shopping area of Jerusalem. The evening air is cooling quickly as we walk from the bus to the restaurant down two narrow lanes. We pass retail businesses of many kinds, kids hanging out near their apartments, couples strolling, and see lots of people beginning their Sabbath. It is Friday evening, the family

evening in Jewish culture. Not a time for individual pursuits. Families dine together. Many enjoy this as a ritual family dinner out. As we walk, it is enjoyable to be moving among the real people of modern Jerusalem, living their lives in comfortable and relaxed familiarity. I'm loving every moment.

The restaurant has been expecting us. Long banquet tables are joined and ready. We are seated and enjoy a choice of delicious wines. The servers and hostess are so delightful and everyone speaks perfect English as well as their Hebrew. This facility with languages is something to be admired.

We begin with four amazing appetizers: a bean sprout/spinach/tomato salad with a tangy vinaigrette, a fresh vegetable salad of greens, small tomatoes, zucchini, red onion in another vinaigrette, a substantial mixed grain bread with two dipping sauces--olive oil/balsamic vinaigrette and a mayo/mustard/aoli--delicious!!, and an incredible stuffed eggplant. I'm in culinary heaven! Communal pots and plates and bowls are set out. Very Middle Eastern, even if the cuisine has a more exotic mix of Euro-style blended in. As it's a Friday in Lent, I am thrilled no meat is served among these delicacies.

Main Courses: a special pasta with a tomato-cream sauce, gnocchi stuffed with potato in a rich cream sauce and drowned in large shavings of fresh parmesan (my choice-exquisite!!), or fish grilled with large vegetables, which, I am told, is the most terrific dish served tonight. Those who order the fish rave. No matter. My gnocchi could not be more perfect.

Dessert: Three communal desserts were served--a plate of sesame seed ice cream (fantastic!), a slice, I think, of halvah, a Jewish candy I've eaten and loved since childhood (at least it tasted exactly like) with fresh shaved coconut over a generous dollop of Crème Fraich, and three sorbets that taste so ripe fresh they tingle the tongue--raspberry, mango/orange, and coconut. Indescribably good, all. Five star dining!

Yossi gives us all a goodbye Gift of an authentically made ancient Hebrew oil lamp and a certificate. He speaks nicely about the past week, introduces us to his lovely wife and younger son, who are dining with him this evening, and to the owner of the travel company. Both men speak of the special nature of this particular pilgrimage.

Yossi tells us his inspiration has been his "Hey, June!" which he has sung all week to the tune of John Lennon's *Hey Jude*. And he is right. At eighty, Mom did something most people say can't be done: take a wheelchair to the Holy Land with two knee replacements and do it all. Everyone applauds in agreement. The owner of the travel company is a distinguished, well-spoken man. He explains why it is so important for people to come to Israel, to see, to learn, to go home and share.

Through the speaking, I grow so sad I just can no longer talk. I have grown to love these people, both my traveling companions and the people of this great nation. I love these delightful folks, Arab and Jew, these clever, funny, contentious children of

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God. I can see why He loves them so much and I don't want to leave them nor this Land of the Bible. It is quite painful. As Yossi walks down the line saying goodbye to us, I try to thank him, tell him how I've appreciated his good work, but start to cry. He is tender and understanding. Pats me gently on the shoulder. It is bittersweet and it all must end, as everything in this life does.

Yossi leaves. The agency owner leaves. We return to our hotel and say goodbye to those going on to Petra. We will miss them very much. Wish we could linger but we have a very early wake--up call for the 23-hour trip back to California.