

Journey to Jesus' Footsteps

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

Day Seven (Five in Israel) February 27, 2008 Wednesday

8:28 AM--Yossi let us sleep in a bit this morning. We all enjoyed a fine breakfast and are now on our way to the Mount of Olives. I notice for the first time, Israelis drive on the right side of the road like we do! (Everybody else probably noticed it right away.) I thought, as a former British protectorate, they'd be driving on the left. The other thing I notice this morning is how terrible my handwriting is in this journal, writing as I walk, as we drive over bumpy roads, as I climb stairs....Guess I'll have to type it up later. No one else could follow or read it.

Today's plan is to walk to the Garden of Gethsemane (I am too excited to speak!), then on to Ein Karem, home of Elizabeth and Zachariah, birthplace of St. John the Baptist, (It just gets better and better), then Bethlehem! A thrilling day. Our bus pulls over to a wayside where we disembark to begin our walk to the Garden. Nedal will drive Mom down to The Garden entrance and help her there, where we will meet up with her so save her the walk.

As we begin walking, we view the Valley of Jehosephat and Yossi explains we are taking the very path used by Jesus, by centuries of travelers, by the countless caravans of traders up to and through the Golden Gate at the outer wall of Jerusalem. This was the very path Jesus took on Palm Sunday. A little way along, we stop at a church marking the very site, according to earliest Christian tradition, where Jesus looked upon the great city and wept, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you slay the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How have I longed to gather your children together as a mother bird collects her young under her wings, and you refused me!" (Luke 13:34-35) We view the holy city from this vantage point and I can't help but fall into deep meditation, thinking upon Jesus' words in His lament, His deep feelings of love and the betrayal already begun, His goodness and His giving...I feel that sadness in prayer, that regret for souls who miss the message.

It is said among the Orthodox Jews that at the coming of the Messiah at the end of times, it is in this valley, The Kidron Valley, filled up the sides of both Mt. Zion and the Mount of Olives with separate graveyards for Jew, Muslim, and Christian, that God will raise up all the dead first. (Yossi tells us that the German hero of WW II who saved so many Jewish people in his factory, Oscar Schindler, is buried in the Christian Mt. Zion Cemetery.) I stand staring at this place between the Garden of Gethsemane on the lower half of the Mount of Olives and the giant walled-up double door Golden Gate in the wall that surrounds the Old City of Jerusalem on Mt. Zion, and think of that scene to come. Staring at the Golden Gate and the wall that upholds it, the wall built by Turks after the final Crusade, I listen as Yossi explains why this beautiful Golden Gate is bricked up and no longer accessible to any person: "We believe that when Messiah comes, He will come through this gate. Until then, it is open to no one else." The Kidron

Valley is also called "The Valley of Resurrection" and "The Valley of Judgment." Muslims, Christians, and Jews (all three faiths) believe in the arrival of the Messiah at the end of days, and a final judgment.

A note about Jewish cemeteries around Jerusalem: this mountainous region is solid bedrock below shallow soil. Bodies can only be buried in 3-foot deep rectangles hewn from the rock, so bodies are placed within large thick stone sepulchers set into the rock with a large thick flat stone cover on top. The inscription is upon this stone lid. Family and friends eschew leaving flowers in favor of placing a stone atop the flat stone lid. Floral arrangements and bouquets cannot survive in the heat and steady winds and breezes of the area. Rocks remain a silent and permanent testimony to the love of those who remain but remember.

Slowly we walked down the steep way to the Garden, almost a 45--degree angle, again the very way Our Lord walked. A holy path, I think to myself, as we begin to view the great-sized olive trees in the area, some dating back over 2,000 years. We are not yet in the garden but approaching it. I can't keep my eyes from more distant views, imagining Jesus' final days. I pray here. I ask Jesus about Palm Sunday, what it was for Him, what He experienced, what He felt. I had always pictured it as a joyful event full of Hosanna's and great flourishes of palm fronds and song, but now I am filled with a penetrating sadness as I discover this event was not one of joy for Him, who brings joy to us all. Instead, it came rushing upon me that He was filled with crushing and deep sadness about the contrast between what the people were doing on that day and how so many would turn and almost all would betray Him in only a few days. His sadness was for what He knew was to come, for the people He loved so tenderly.

Jesus thirsted for them, their souls, and for us, for our souls, from His very infancy. I asked Him if it had been hard for Him to wait all those years until age 30 to begin His public ministry and I understood that, indeed, the waiting had been very hard for Him. I asked about the time He remained behind in the temple at age twelve.

He had said, "Did you not know I must be about My Father's work?" He was eager, even then, to begin, but knew obedience. He had to wait until the age of cultural male maturity. How hard that waiting was! Yet, I am sure He never betrayed His sacrifice in the waiting. I think what a good lesson this is for me, the most impatient of souls. When I must wait, I will remember how Jesus waited for 30 years, how Our Blessed Mother waited so often, how St. Joseph waited. Many lessons, many examples.

In Gethsemane, a very small garden actually, we meet up with Mom and together we wander the square garden paths. Mom buys a sprig of olive branch from a nice young man with a handful of them. It is overpriced, but Mom doesn't care. For so many people, this is their livelihood, selling trinkets and whatever they can. It is a joy to be able to interact with them, to help in any small way, to exchange a smile, and to love them. Mom can press the sprig in her Bible as a permanent reminder of her trip to the wondrous Garden.

In the church at the Garden, we view a number of massive rocks, not a surprise since this is a very rocky country. Any one of these rocks could have been the rock Jesus prayed upon, or the Apostles slept for grief against, or that Jesus might have been arrested near. It is meaningful to ponder.

A short space below The Garden of Gethsemane, we view St. Stephen's Church. It is the site of the martyrdom of good St. Stephen, who St. Luke called "a man filled with grace and power" (Acts 6:8), first Christian martyr not long after the Crucifixion of Jesus. How far the distance St. Stephen was dragged before His stoning! I think about St. Stephen's discourse (Acts 7) and His demeanor at death. What a valiant saint!

We also continue to have incredible views of so many places from numerous vantage points: the Turk wall around the city, the Golden Gate, the Old City, the slope on our left as we stand facing the Golden Gate. At the time of King David that slope across the valley and to the left of the city wall was the original location of Jerusalem. The area is called "The City of David", (not to be confused with the *other* City of David, Bethlehem), and is the city area King David conquered and where he made the capital of his kingdom. We also have a terrific view of the fabulous, and to my mind, most beautiful exterior of any church anywhere, the spectacular Church of St. Mary Magdalene, with its five shiny golden domes that signify its Greek Orthodox origin. We also have an amazing view of the Dome of the Rock, with its enormous gold-clad dome. The original covering of the dome was stolen centuries ago and it wasn't until King Hussein of Jordan donated new gold to restore the dome's golden cover that it recovered its original brilliance.

A note about the Dome of the Rock: this holy place is believed to have been built on the Temple Mount, the location of the original temple built by King Solomon, which Muslims believe was built upon a rough wide rock with holy History. Muslims believe the rock that gives the Dome of the Rock its name was the very rock upon which Adam was formed by God and where Abraham took His son, Isaac, to be sacrificed.

It is interesting to note that as one of the holiest places in all Islam, there is a blessing to Jesus located inside near this rock. The blessing inscription begins, "Bless Your envoy and Your servant, Jesus, and His mother, Mary..." It is on this temple mount, in Solomon's Temple, where the original Ten Commandment tablets were kept, and Jewish tradition says that the prophet Jeremiah hid the Ark of the Covenant under the temple and that other temple treasures have long been hidden beneath the mount, perhaps by the priests saving holy items as the Romans sacked the city in 70 AD. Gabi Barki, Jerusalem's top Archeologist, does not believe any of the hidden treasures are left. He believes looters took them long ago. Still, there is a thread of tradition that holds to the possibility of these items remaining hidden below the temple mount, below the Dome of the Rock, which is riddled with a large network of tunnels, many dating as far back as the time of King David, and many with interior chambers sealed by massive cut stone. No excavation can be done because Muslim law and sensibility forbids it. Some

of this area, both above ground and below, housed Crusaders like the Knights of the Templar for a short time as they, too, searched for Biblical treasures.

From the Dome of the Rock to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to the Wailing Wall is called "The Holy Mile."

We now board our bus for the ride to Ein Karem. We are very near The Valley of the Cross, where it is said the cross for Jesus' crucifixion was prepared. As we set out, Yossi points out the Knesset building up on a hill, looking very grand. It is a giant square building, a place of political power. We drive through Yossi's neighborhood in Jerusalem. It is lovely with tall trees lining the streets; many small stone apartment complexes nestled among a park, a bakery, "butchery", a small supermarket, and a pizza place. It is immaculate and orderly; a very pleasant area. Yossi loves His neighborhood community and it is easy to see why. We continue to drive down from Jerusalem and I can see the lay of the land more clearly. Just on the backside of the Mount of Olives lays Bethany, the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. How close it was to Jerusalem!

We drive through mountains and some lovely forests, arriving in Ein Karem. Yossi was born here and points out His old neighborhood, childhood school. The mountain beauty of the place, its steep, rugged rock-terraced slopes, strikes me. This is the Judean hill country. There are rock retaining walls everywhere with steep roads and paths. Many churches are built on the sides of the steep slopes facing the narrow valley of the town center. The surrounding slopes and mountains are forested with many evergreens that have been part of the reforestation campaign in Israel.

Yossi's dear Mother still lives in His childhood home. We see her on her balcony and she comes down to greet us. It is a special moment for Yossi and a real treat for all of us! She is darling and speaks in her native Polish to our fellow pilgrims from Poland, Fr. Henryk, Jerzy and His wife, Elizabeth, and Viola.

We disembark and first visit the Church of the Visitation near the winter home of the wealthy Elizabeth and Zachariah. They had two homes, one in the lower center of town for winter, when it could be frosty with snow, and the home up in the hills, their Summer home, where the air was cooler and the breezes were steady during the long hot summertime. We walk downhill from the church to a well, another "Mary's Well", the very spot where it is believed Mary first greeted her kinswoman, Elizabeth. It is a simple structure now with a small roof and a solid back wall, open front.

Then we begin the long, steep climb up the opposite hill to what is called the Site of the Visitation, the "Summer House" location. It is not an easy walk up this steep hill and now I understand why Yossi said my Mother could not walk it or be pushed up it in her wheelchair. It would be impossible uphill and crazy--dangerous down! The church here, under Franciscan care, is simply beautiful with enormous murals depicting many scenes: a young St. John in the desert alone as a young toddler, Mary and Elizabeth

greeting, Zachariah offering incense in the temple, the slaying of the infants.... the murals are executed with lovely and varied color, extremely beautiful and graceful

There is a legend that when Herod had the baby boys killed, St. John escaped because one of the mountains opened up and he hid in the mountain, covered by a particular rock. There is a large rock in this church, probably more than 100 lbs., we can see in a niche under glass. It is said to be the rock that covered the little St. John as he hid. It is also said that the likelihood is that Herod ordered the death of infants over a wider part of His domain than just the town of Bethlehem. It is now considered to have been an order that crossed throughout his territory of Judea because of the large numbers of infant remains uncovered in various locations. Many adults were also murdered, protecting their infants.

It is easy to imagine the life of Elizabeth in this lovely setting. Ein Karem was truly a privileged place to live; a naturally beautiful and healthy setting.

12:36 PM--We have done so much this day! We have driven past Jerusalem and are now on our way to Bethlehem without Yossi. As a Jewish Israeli, he cannot lead us into Bethlehem, sadly. Nedal is in charge of us now and will drive us through the Israeli /Palestine Authority checkpoints and deliver us to our Palestinian Bethlehem guide, Ephraim. Before he departs the bus, Yossi leaves us with this little gem: Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David's great grandmother, Ruth. Thus the City of David.

As we drive past Jerusalem on the way to Bethlehem, Yossi tells us Jerusalem is called "The Golden City". It is certainly a mighty city! There is a sense of solidity to this city, permanence in perpetuity, solid as a rock, as the rock it's built on. As I view the city from a distance, it appears almost entirely white in color. The sand, the stucco, the cement, the limestone and sandstone, all sparkle in the sun. There are occasional bits of color-- a golden or gray dome, a red tile roof, a yellow wall, but primarily the city is pale and bright.

There are many satellite dishes and black water collection drums for heating water on every rooftop. Street curbs are painted several colors, either red and white 3' wide stripes (no parking) or blue and white stripes. Windows of homes have exterior metal coverings that either slide down to cover the windows or are louvered to close over them. Most are closed and I wonder if the interiors are very dark with the light sealed off. I am told these window coverings keep the homes, (almost entirely 4 to 8 family, multifamily dwellings and apartment complexes,) cooler in the hot season, but they also seem to be a way of blocking out more than sun. Perhaps they also provide a sense of security within the home.

Every planter everywhere is watered with drip irrigation which is very efficient. Irrigation hoses thread everywhere throughout the country.

Going through the Security Wall that separates Israel from Palestine Territory is an interesting experience. First, there is a large sign: "Peace" in English, Hebrew and

Arabic. There are watchtowers that look like prison towers and a second sign, "Jerusalem – Bethlehem -- Peaceful Cities", beneath that: "Peace Be With You", again in the three languages. The security is unbelievable. We are told it easily can take 2 hours for a Palestinian to cross from Bethlehem to Israeli territory, which is why so many people feel trapped behind the wall. On the other hand, there has not been one car bombing since the wall went up. I can't judge the decision to put up the wall, but still, it saddens me. I look back as our tour bus easily enters through the checkpoints. The intense level of security is a serious matter. The young soldiers with Uzi contrast with the dark and angry graffiti painted across the Palestinian side of the wall. We must pray for these people every day.

We are now in West Bank--Palestine Territory. The economic degradation of the city's economic vitality is obvious. Buildings look in disrepair and people look thin, impoverished. There are more trash heaps beside buildings. We were to meet our Bethlehem guide, Ephraim, a Syrian Orthodox Church member, a brother in Christ, but for some reason, there has been a change and we meet "Willit". I am not sure of the spelling. We call him "Willie" at His request and he is a lovely man with a wide, joyous smile, a Palestinian and a practicing Muslim, who was educated in Catholic schools by Franciscans. He has great respect and understanding for and of the Catholic Faith he tells us. Our bus drops us off at "Nativity Square", which are actually two huge squares bisected by the main street. At one end of the double squares is the Church of the Nativity. At the far opposite site is the most important mosque in Bethlehem. It seems fitting that they share this square. In between is a Palestinian Authority police station.

After having our group picture taken my attention turns to the front door to the Church of the nativity. It is an entrance unlike any other. The tiny door is maybe 4 1/2 feet high. To enter one must bend low. The original door was more like a 10' x 20' opening. The Crusaders filled in the large entrance with huge stone blocks, leaving only this little opening. Some say they did this to require pilgrims to bow low when entering this holy site, but there are a number of theories on their motives.

Upon entering, we find ourselves in the Armenian Church of the nativity with its elaborate network of chandeliers and candles and huge paintings. Continuing forward, we enter the Greek Orthodox Church of the nativity, about half the size of the Armenian Church, lit by many, many long white tapers in wide sand vases on pedestal floor stands. So beautiful, so quietly holy. I gaze at the walls, filled with numerous icons of Mother and Holy Child, each unique, all compelling, flickering in the candlelight. There are no words. I just wish to imprint everything into my memory forever. I find a small sand vase, all alone, with no candles in it, so I put some money in the collection box and light a single taper and place it in the sand. This is for my family, I pray. A memory for God, that we, in the person of myself, were all here in faith and hope and love; a prayer that He will remember each of us when our earthly lives end. That He will bring each and every one of us to Himself.

There are at least two or three altar alcoves suitable for Missa, dedicated to different people, the most striking of which is to St. Jerome, who translated the Bible

over a period of years, first the new Testament books from Greek to Latin. Later, in various places in The Middle East, he undertook most of the books of the Old Testament, beginning with the First Book of Kings, translating them from Hebrew to Latin. This first Latin Bible is the Vulgate. St. Jerome studied Hebrew by night from a Jewish scholar under the greatest of secrecy. In this place, with the assistance and care of St. Eusebius, (not an uncommon name, as Jerome's birth name was also Eusebius). St. Jerome lived in a cave beneath the church and died here, as did St. Eusebius, whose remains still rest beneath the chapel altar.

The word, "Bethlehem" means "House of Bread." Our Blessed Mother and good St. Joseph traveled to the "House of Bread" to bring us the Living Bread.

In This city surrounded by a forbidding fence, the Franciscans run The Church of the Nativity. St. Helena, Mother of Constantine, had the first sizable church built here in the 4th Century over the remains of two prior churches marking the spot of the birth of Our Lord. One of the two prior churches was actually a pagan temple to Adonis, built by Emperor Hadrian in 135 AD, to squash Christianity. Hadrian did this to other Christian churches, too. We can be thankful to him, because he only did this at churches marking important places in Jesus' life, thereby providing important markers that corresponded to early tradition, assisting St. Helena in relocating these sites. Awfully nice of Hadrian to provide such obvious sign posts.

This church of St. Helena is the only one in The Holy Land never to be destroyed. When the iconoclastic Turks destroyed everything in the early 7th Century, they let the Church of the Nativity be because they saw the mural on front with depictions of the Three Kings. These looked to them, very much like Arabs, so they thought it best be left alone. Did they think it was a mosque or have some other reason, I wonder?

We walk down, down steep stone steps to the actual place, according to tradition, where Jesus was born. The area was once ground level, but is now deep underground. There is a network of caves here, all connected, some with very high walls. We see the cave said to be Jesus' birthplace. Under a small altar is a metal star atop the marble floor. We each kneel down beneath the altar and reach into the hole in the center of the star, feeling the stone under the marble floor. We are told this is the very spot of His birth. I wonder how they know. Willie explains that this large cave would have been the livestock cave, where a manger would have been placed. It would have been full of unpleasant smells, manure, bugs, etc., but it would also have been the warmest cave. The animals' body heat would have kept the place at a comfortable temperature. A baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, nestled among hay in a deep manger would have been very warm and comfortable. God placed in a manger--the food troth of the animals--"a fitting place for the Living Bread--"as He would soon become Eucharist for us.

Adjacent to this large birth cave is another, smaller cave known as "Joseph's Cave", where we are told St. Joseph slept and where the angel came to him to tell him to flee with Mother and Child.

{This does not surprise me. After reading "The Life of the Virgin Mary", a portion of the private revelation dictated by Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich, what I am seeing fits quite well with what she shared from her near-constant visions. Interestingly, Blessed Anne Catherine could not have known this as she was ill, bedridden, and never left her native Germany. I am seeing the truth of Blessed Anne Catherine throughout our pilgrimage, thanks also to "The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord, Jesus Christ."}

There is another cave where burial remains of a great number of infants and adults were found, connected to this place. Willie says these remains are verification of Herod's slaughter. Willie says his theory is that 500 souls were slain and the slaughter was violent. All the remains were given proper burial.

This experience is deeply spiritual in every way. I even see some Muslims paying respects here. I learn that this church is also considered a place of sacred pilgrimage in Islam, where Mother Mary, "Miriam", is revered and Jesus is considered a major prophet.

Back upstairs; we enter the Roman Catholic portion of the church. We are surprised to see a wonderful long procession led by many, many seminarians. Wonderful incense is floating through the air. The Cardinal who oversees "the Oriental Churches" is here this day for a special visit. Fr. Soney is especially pleased. Fr. Soney, from India, is an order priest and this Cardinal is His superior. Fr. Soney gets to meet the cardinal a little later.

Outside the church, I think on what an amazing experience this is, being here. In the square, I look around, thinking of the graffiti--angry "Wall", the many poor in this city, which is 80% Muslim, 20% Christian. I know the numbers used to be opposite, but Christians are feeling forced out of Bethlehem. I can feel only love in this place. So much sadness and so much love! I pray to God to help them treat each other with the dignity and kindness each deserves.

There are so many Palestinian Authority police all over the area, extreme security, especially in the nativity compound. Having the police station next door is handy. It is time to leave but we must walk up hill quite a distance to reach the bus, something my Mother cannot do. Her wheelchair is on the bus. A couple of us remained with Mom while the others head up the street for the bus. I think Willie asked a policeman to stay with us because "our" police officer is sticking quite close. He is lovely. A delightful personality, he speaks excellent English. The late afternoon is darkening to evening. The streetlights go on. The moon is out. I can't get over the fact that I am here. Right here. Standing on a sidewalk in Bethlehem, just chatting and watching and absorbing, watching the sky turn from blue to black. What a moment! What a Gift! I never want it to end.

Street people come out, begging. I want to give them money but the policeman shoos them away and warns us not to open our purses. He suddenly tells us how he loves American. "America is a great country!" he exclaims with a genuine smile. He has family living in San Diego, a sibling in Phoenix, an aunt in Brooklyn. "Come to America", I urge him. "You are welcome. Much opportunity. Come!" He nods and smiles, then explains it's all a matter of money. "Save and come", I urge. He looks like he is seriously thinking about it and has for some time.

Coming face to face with beggars for the first time in my life is very hard. I have seen a few in Nazareth and Jerusalem, but these beggars in Bethlehem are the poorest! These Palestinians have so little! At first, in Nazareth, I didn't know what to do, then in Jerusalem I grew bolder and didn't care if others told me not to give. On one occasion I couldn't reach my money quickly enough. On another, I had only a few large bills. These instances broke my heart. How I wanted to give to that bent little old man on crutches. He was genuinely crippled. These skinny, dirty street children here in Bethlehem. I see their faces and hope to see them the rest of my life. I don't care about worldly cautions and skeptical attitudes. I just want to give to them. To love them.

It seems fitting that I had offered this day in honor of The Holy Family, hardly wealthy, and particularly in honor of St. Joseph, a poor man. I wonder at the lessons God is teaching on this day as we ride back to Jerusalem.

Returning through the wall checkpoints is effortless for us, but we all watch as a young woman attempts to cross over in her car. She is questioned, inspected, questioned, inspected. An ordeal. We all feel sorry for her and for what man does to man.