

Journey to Jesus' Footsteps

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

Day Six (Four in Israel) February 26, 2008 Tuesday

9:15 AM, on the bus and we are making our way out of Nazareth. (Almost without Mom's and my luggage! We caught the error in the nick of time. Viola has been able to purchase some new clothes courtesy of British Airways. Her luggage is still MIA.)

Leaving the idiosyncrasies of this hotel for Jerusalem. We're ready to go but sad to leave Galilee.

Impressions of Nazareth:

Rough land surface; rocky, rugged, mountainous; uneven, narrow winding roads--both country and city; new construction; flat-topped multifamily two story dwellings; no concept of front and back yards, parks, private or common green spaces and playgrounds in residential or city areas; pale colored buildings, white, sand-toned, pale gray; frequent Muslim calls to prayer, beginning at 4:30 each morning, with varying degrees of tonal quality and singing ability--(one of the mullahs at a minaret near our hotel was a terrific tenor while another was symphonically challenged.)--the wonder of fluffy pita bread and rich cottage cheese; new flavors of very sweet Israeli juices, zesty black olives, perfectly pickled fish, sweet red wine, breakfast eggs with sugared syrups, white butter, mild and meaty raw almonds, amazing salads, mouth watering fish and chicken dishes, excellent rice, no ice, fabulous falafel and hummus at every meal; humor in housekeeping; the deadpan stare of the hotel front desk hostess; the bright smiles and friendliness of shop keepers; first encounters with begging, enthusiastic and engaging street sellers, Arabs, a real Kibbutz, bargaining for purchases, searching for electrical receptacles to plug in the curling iron near a mirror, tissue napkins, paying to potty, meeting other pilgrims from Nigeria and Mexico, England and Eastern Europe, touching authentic stones and mosaics of antiquity, observing the Middle Eastern way, grazing goats; wondrous experiences--the certain sense of God's Holy Presence from the Ages in numerous locations, placing feet where He may well have stood, gazing upon landscapes He would have seen, imagining, asking, and awe.

We travel back down the narrow two lane, hairpin turns of the road out of town, down the mountainside, back to the Valley of Jezre'el. We are going to Mt. Tabor, (Or "Tavor", as the signs say), the site of The Transfiguration. We will have morning Mass there. It is still a bit overcast, but looks to be a bright day. There is filtered sunshine sifting through the thick high cloud cover. Father Mike leads us in a Scriptural Rosary. Yossi mentions the elevation of the mountains surrounding the valley. Some are as high as 2,500'. There are many cliffs and rocky outcroppings with falls as high as 100', he explains. Such was the cliff the pigs of "Legion" could well have fallen off of, and likely, it was one such cliff the people of the small village of Nazareth tried to push Jesus off after he had preached in their synagogue that the prophecies were fulfilled before their

eyes. We see one such cliff as we leave Nazareth. Below it is very, very rough rock below. Such a fall would have been quite deadly.

Just drove past a building with a large mural dedicated to the Oklahoma City bombing of April 19, 1995! There was a painted copy of the famous photograph of the firefighter carrying in his arms the baby girl who did not survive the bombing with the burning building behind him. I am taken by surprise. Has anyone else noticed? While it seems a world away here in the Galilee, to see that sign of solidarity with our national tragedy touches me deeply. Jim Mullen taps my shoulder. Did I see the mural we just passed? We both say very little but it seemed to mean much to both of us.

As we drive to Mt. Tabor, Yossi mentions that it was on this mount, about 1,000 BC, that the woman Jael, killed the Old Testament Canaanite General, Sisera, within her tent, as foretold by the prophetess Deborah (Judges 4). I look it up in my Bible. It's a rousing story. Eleven miles west of The Sea of Galilee, the mount is located at the eastern end of the Jezre'el Valley in Lower Galilee. It rises 1,843 feet above sea level. It's importance for the past 3,000 plus years has been its strategic location, the junction at the north South, East--West travel corridors through the area.

9:30 AM--We are driving past Nein ("Nane"), within the Jezre'el Valley. Father Mike reads to us from Luke 7:11--17, the story of the widow's only son brought back to life by Jesus. In my Bible, it says the town was called ""Naim" at that time. It was at this point where Jesus ministry gained new force because the people present spread the tale far and wide "throughout Judea and the surrounding country."

As we drive on, we can see Cana, far off in the distance, up high in the mountains across the valley from where we are now. Cana is up high, just like Nazareth. I wonder why towns were established higher rather than lower. Was it self--defense? Was it cooler weather?

The day we arrived in Israel, we were seeing Mt. Tabor from many vantage points as we drove along and it was a great curiosity, due to its commanding presence and the important events that took place there. Now we have arrived at its base. There is partial sun, but it is a blustery, chilly morning. For some reason, it seems quite pleasant! We disembark the tour bus and mingle at a way station of shops and snack store, along with many other pilgrims, awaiting our smaller transport vans to take us up the mountain's narrow winding road to the summit. It's either wait for a van or walk. As we drive up the narrow road, we see people walking, but realize that would be a dicey trek, sharing the small space with vehicles coming and going. Our group takes two vans up the mountain. We will be celebrating Mass at the top.

As we walk down the lane towards this beautiful Church of the Transfiguration and its gorgeous grounds covered with trees and flowers and magnificent views and gardens, Yossi explains something about these incredible churches we are visiting. Every church in The Holy Land was first built either by St. Helena, mother of King Constantine, or within the centuries shortly after, the 4th--7th centuries, the Byzantine

Era. Helena came, the first noted Holy Land pilgrimage, obviously with a considerable contingent of builders, architects, assistants, and more, to undertake the search and discovery of holy places, and holy artifacts, then to commemorate those places by the building of churches.

After Helena, many of these churches later suffered damage or destruction by Moslems moving in from the east, (They first captured Jerusalem in 638 AD), and also by Byzantine iconoclasts, who began removing all Christian images and destroying churches in 730 AD, during the early schism of eastern and western Christianity.

The First Crusade, 1095-1099, was launched by Pope Urban II and ended with the European Christian recapture of Jerusalem and established a Latin Kingdom here. Many churches began to undergo reconstruction at that time. Islamic incursions continued and the Second Crusade, 1147-1149, failed to hold back the tide of the Islamic movement west. The Third Crusade, 1189-1192, also failed to recapture Jerusalem, but after it, a truce was arranged so Christians could visit the holy places surrounding Jesus' passion and death in Jerusalem. (There was a Fourth Crusade, but it had little to do with The Holy Land and more to do with the conquering of Constantinople.)

The Church of The Transfiguration was first mentioned in the writings of Church Father, Origen, in the Third Century. The first basilica was a Byzantine church built in the 4th or 5th Century, as were nearly all the major Catholic churches in Israel. And like the others, it was rebuilt in 1101 when Crusaders controlled the area. About 1100 AD Crusaders built a magnificent fort on Mt. Tabor, which they held until 1187, when Saladin conquered the area and overtook the fortress. In the 1600's, the Franciscans sought to purchase the summit of the mount and they built a small chapel atop the ruins. This present church we are visiting this day was rebuilt again upon the rubble of the previous one, completed in 1924. It is absolutely gorgeous. As we walk in the entrance, we see two small chapels, one on either side of the entrance, one in honor of Elijah, and the other to honor Moses. Walking up the center aisle toward the main altar, there are viewing windows to allow us to see portions of the original Byzantine structure. We see stone ruins, a pillar, and walls. It is amazing to be so close to such ancient ruins that real people crafted! Up on the high walls around the sanctuary we see incredible mosaics presenting various occasions of Jesus' life: His birth, Holy Eucharist, the Passion and Crucifixion, the Resurrection. They are marvelous and uplifting to gaze upon. Two beautiful mosaics are above the side altars, one on honor of Our Blessed Mother and one in honor of St. Francis of Assisi.

Like every church here, we drop a few dollars into the collection box at the entrance. It is clear these churches rely on our donations to survive. I make a mental note to increase donations to Holy Land churches at the special collection for them held on all future Good Fridays from now on. They are too important to neglect.

We head up to the garden area above the church building, under a canopy of trees. At an outdoor altar in a wide spot along the paved path, Fr. Henry presides over

our Mass. (Or "Missa", as Yossi calls it. Missa is Latin for "Mass".) We have Polish singing at This Mass, thanks to Viola, Ela, and Jerzey. It's lovely and uplifting. (Being Polish, myself, doesn't hurt.) The sun peeks through the clouds; birds are twittering nearby, breezes feather our hair. It is a very special, beautiful and memorable Mass. I notice Yossi hanging nearby, observing us respectfully. I say a special prayer for him.

After Mass, we all get a little time to explore the grounds and the fabulous view of the two Arab towns and the valley below. My Mom and I enjoy the gardens and the amazing view of the entire valley. Viola checks out the view and while taking photos, makes a daring leap into a thorny patch of plants.

We make our way back toward the church. From a spot near the church, we survey both formal flowering gardens to our left and get an excellent view of the nearest town below. It appears to be almost exclusively multifamily dwellings and is highly reminiscent of the old thick-walled, very square structured Biblical towns I remember seeing in my Father's old books at home.

As we walk back to the spot where the vans will take us back down the mountain, I can't help but wonder about the day of the actual Transfiguration. It is a very steep mountainside. The original trail must have been a series of narrow switchbacks, rocky and rough. I wonder how long it took Jesus, James, Peter, and John to hike up the mountainside to the top. What did they carry? Water? Some food? Were the others waiting at the bottom or did they all go up part way? How long would the hike have taken? My guess is they were tired and thirsty when they reached the top. Did they spend the night up here after all was said and done? Did they carry fire for light? It was not a simple walk, but took a bit of preparation. What were the apostles thinking as Jesus led them? What did they think they were doing, going up there? Lots of wondering... and I find a few great rocks, one which will find its way into the pocket of a friend, a Transitional Deacon soon heading back to Rome to complete His final year of Priestly formation. Its presence will bring to mind the miracles of The Lord.

12:26 PM-- We are on our way to a restaurant that serves pork. (!!!) Truth is, I don't care about pork. Just as happy without it. The big news gastronomically speaking, for me, is the fabulous fresh fish, the juicy kiwi, ripe citrus of all kinds, fresh almonds, dates and persimmons, the crunchy cucumbers and lettuce. Several times, Gene and Melinda buy bags of tangerines which they generously share with one and all and which we joyously appreciate! All the produce seems to be at the very peak of freshness. Guess they don't ship green to their domestic market. Just wonderful!

Every day, Yossi gives us each a gift. This is a daily delight. On the first day, he presented us with long-stem perfect pink roses. Mom kept ours alive and fresh in one of our water bottles. We sniffed their sweet fragrance every day. The second day, Yossi gave us a baseball cap and a set of informational maps. The caps were appreciated and the maps, very interesting! The third day, we each received a tiny wooden chalice. This is so much fun!

Lunch is a buffet at a little Israeli-style strip mall restaurant, Gift shop, and grocery store. The food is identical to the daily evening hotel buffets we have been eating, so nothing new here but, I found a diet Coke! With ice!! First ice I've seen since leaving British Airways. As much as I am enjoying and appreciating the new cuisine, this ice-cold diet Coke is a real treat! There are many, many people eating here: other tour groups, locals, and lots of people. There is seating indoors and out, under umbrella tables. When we finish, Mom and I sneak into the grocery store next door. Within a minute, Yossi is behind us. We feel like wayward children getting caught, but we persevere in our naughtiness, picking out some cookies, other munches, and an Israeli sausage that does not require refrigeration as a Gift for my husband. Yossi checks the sausage out and pronounces it a good type. Then he tells us to skedaddle quickly through the checkout and back to the bus. And by the way, have we seen Fr. Sonny or Ed? (He's trackin' 'em down.)

2 PM--We are headed west through the Valley of Jezre'el, Armageddon. The mountains of Carmel are to our right (north) and the other mountains are to our left (south). I remember reading that the descendants of the Samaritans still reside throughout this area, many still practicing similar religious observances as so long ago. They even continue to sacrifice flocks around Passover. Interesting.

We must drive west all the way back to the Mediterranean coastal highway, then south, then back to the east to get to Jerusalem, rather than south down the central valley highway. We can't drive straight south because that would have us driving through the new Palestine Authority territory.

We pass Meggido Prison, the site of current controversy between prison officials and the Israeli Office of Archeology. Yossi explains while work was being done on the prison recently, there was an unexpected discovery: an ancient mosaic floor and signs of Roman encampment. There is even some kind of sign on this uncovered floor with writing, paying tribute to "Rabbi Jesus". This dates back to within 100 years of the Crucifixion. This indicates a following among Roman soldiers very early in the life of Christianity.

In minutes (2:06 PM) we are passing west through the same low rocky mountains we came through on our first day, back to the coast. Everywhere, houses are carved into rock hillsides. They have big, thick retaining stone and concrete walls, primarily flat, squared--off roofs. There are many soft colors: pale yellow, tan, white, cream, peach, and one bright blue. Many are left unpainted. Most exteriors look like stucco. Others are stone or block. A great many hillsides are terraced. I wonder if this is a natural erosion or man made, for easier tilling, to prevent greater erosion, to better serve livestock.

Entering Israeli Route 6 is interesting. It is our first toll road. There is a sign-- "Keep License Plate Clear." As we drive through a double gate, our license plate is photographed and drivers or companies are sent the bill. That's efficient!

3:05 PM--After an hour of driving between Palestine and Jewish Israel, we visit one of the possible, but unlikely, locations for Emmaus. This place is twice as far from Jerusalem as the Bible states, which is approximately 7 miles from the holy city. We were fortunate to get to view a long protected site that featured some new archeological findings: two types of First Century AD Jewish burial tombs hewn from rocky hillsides. Also on the site are the remains of a 4th Century church.

Yossi tells us how bodies were placed within until only bones were left, and then the bones were gathered up and placed in little clay ossuaries in perpetua, so the tombs could be used over and over. He makes a case that these small tombs, (hollowed out tubes, actually, just wide enough and long enough to slide a tightly wrapped body into and slip a crafted tight--fitting stone into the opening to seal it) are likely exactly like the one Jesus was placed in.

I asked a couple questions but saw he was convinced of his position. I know this is incorrect. These are clearly tombs of the "everyman", not the privileged or wealthy. Matthew 27:57-60 clearly states Jesus' body was placed in the "new tomb" of Joseph, the "wealthy man from Arimathea", which was then covered by "a huge stone." The stones of these small tombs could be described as heavy but not huge. John 19:39-40 tells that Nicodemus brought a hundred pound mixture of myrrh and aloes which they wrapped around Jesus' body with oils and fresh linens. That would have made the body too wide to slide into the small tomb tubes we see here. The Gospels also mention various people entering the tomb to look around, and more. It clearly was a bigger space.

Now we are on our way to a surprise, unscheduled treat--a stop to Mini-Israel. This is a thrill! The Frommer's Guide had mentioned this, a 7 1/2 acre site of miniatures and important landmarks from throughout Israel, built to a scale of 1:25. Very well done. Impressive in the tiniest detail. It is amazing to see it all, the walls around Jerusalem, the churches we've already visited, Masada, Caesarea...so many places perfectly miniaturized. We arrive near the close of the day at this attraction and almost have the place to ourselves. We are able to gain a full perspective of each site as though flying over it in a hot air balloon. It is very wheelchair friendly. Mom just glides over the paths. Much fun and so very interesting! Ten times better than the childhood delight of viewing the famous Mott's Miniatures at the original Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park.

4:47 PM--On to Jerusalem! The excitement on our bus is palpable. I think of the famous Jewish prayer each year by the Jews of the Diaspora, "next year in Jerusalem!" It is wonderment, what effect this city has had on so many peoples throughout the ages. I look forward to discovering why. Again I am surprised. The first view, first gaze upon this mountainous, huge city (700,000 souls) is just a glimpse as we approach from the southwest. The closer we get, the more anticipation we feel.

We stop at a lookout high above the city, just below one of the campuses of Hebrew University. Many others are gathered in the same spot, but there is plenty of room and a terrific scene before us. Looking to the west, we see the city "high up on a

hill", as the orange sun begins to set. We see the old city walls wrapping the base of the Old City, the entire expanse of The Temple Mount--the Dome of the Rock. There are so many buildings gleaming white in the sunset. It glows!

Yossi gives us plenty of space to look and appreciate. He knew exactly what he was doing when he brought us up here. Great guide.

This reminds me of the first time I stood on the edge of The Grand Canyon. Can it be real? Too amazing. Must be a picture. Takes my breath away. We all just stare, pointing out different items of curiosity or interest, and quietly wonder about the joys to come in this amazing place. Jerusalem!

We tear ourselves away to find our new hotel, the **Novotel** on St. George Street. It is in the Christian Quarter of the Old City, not far from the Jaffa Gate. It is one of three modern hotels in a row with a beautiful lobby, very pleasant, smiling desk clerks. Everyone in our group is on the 8th floor. Mom and I have been placed in a "special" handicapped room on the 3rd floor. The Lobby is actually the 2nd floor. The 3rd floor is terrific because I can often skip the kamikaze elevator doors in favor of a quick run up or down the stairs. Our room is, indeed "special", but we won't discover quite how much until we visit Gene and Melinda's room on our final evening here.

We learn the procedure for dining here, as we must present ourselves to the maitre'd for seating assignments. It works well. The dining room is enormous and the food, similar to Nazareth, but more variation in the hot entrees. The food is very good and the servers work extremely hard. We all seem to enjoy it very much, say good night to one another, and then collapse in our beds.