

Journey to Jesus' Footsteps

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

Day Eight (Six in Israel) February 28, 2008 Thursday

The Old City of Jerusalem

Our day's plan is to go to The Church of the Holy Sepulcher for a tour and Missa, carry our cross over the Via Dolorosa, examine portions of Mt. Zion and the Upper Room, Caiaphas' house, dungeons, and more. I offer this day in honor of Saints Jude and Therese.

We disembark our bus at the Jaffa Gate, the main access to the Old City from West Jerusalem. Inside the gate we look around, people hurrying everywhere in all manner of dress. It has been 40 years since Jerusalem was reunited and we enjoy this fact as we take a long interesting walk through the border of Jewish and Christian sectors of the Old City. The Old City is still enclosed within the mighty city walls built in 1538 by the Ottoman Turkish Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent. It has a number of sectors: the Muslim Quarter, the Christian Quarter, the Armenian Quarter, and the Jewish Quarter, each similar and unique. Other than the Jewish Quarter, the "dominating motif" here is definitely Arab. There are open shop stalls lining every narrow, unlevelled, winding, cobble stoned way. Above the shops are tall stone buildings where people live. Quarters are very close. There is a wonderful, fascinating, warm feeling here in these cluttered passageways, more walkways than streets.

Much chattering, bargaining, noise, and music fills my ears. Our group must walk single file to weave our way through the streets and I try hard to keep up, as my natural inclination is to linger here and there. I wish we didn't have to rush so I could visit with these people. We pass a beautiful Arab family, well dressed, passing us in the opposite direction. The teenage daughter is simply beautiful. I wonder if Mary looked like this. I watch another cluster of men down an alleyway, hoisting a refrigerator up to a higher story doorway. Looks an impossible task. One must be ingenious to live and thrive here, overcoming challenging logistics. Several times we must get out of the way of young men hurtling through the street with heavy wooden carts. No one in the Old City tolerates ambling. This is a place where everything moves fast. Everyone is in a rush. Through the Christian Quarter we arrive at the church at 8:55 AM.

St. Helena began the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in 326 AD. It was completed nine years later. Like most of the other churches, it was destroyed in 614 AD, later rebuilt, and then taken by the Muslims. It was destroyed again in 1808 by a terrible fire. The Greeks brought in marble and in 1811, built a mausoleum, then "The Room of the Angel", all with similar stone. After the 1926 earthquake, the entire structure was braced with metal supports. The inner most room within the church is the sepulcher, which we enter, head bowed. Beneath the altar there is a hole. On my knees I crawl under the altar and reach down deep into the hole, feeling stone. A rectangle is

hewn out of the rock beneath the altar. The hole is approximately 10" x 8". As I feel it, I realize this may well be the actual spot in which the vertical beam of the cross was placed. It is much to think about. On either side of the altar, I see more rock under Plexiglas.

Yossi explains that this whole section of the city was built on rock that most of the rock was quarried in ancient times to build the city, but this rock was useless so left untouched even in Jesus' time. It was considered "junk rock." It has fissures throughout and could not be cut into square blocks. It would crumble, split, etc. So, its useless mass was used only for executions, particularly crucifixions.

We touch and kiss the pink stone slab it is said Jesus was laid upon after being taken down from the cross.

As we leave the church, Yossi points out that the entrance has eleven columns. No column for Judas. The eleven columns signify the eleven pillars of The Church--the Apostles.

Now it is time to walk the Via Dolorosa. Yossi arranges for us to carry a half-sized wood cross. We begin at the First Station, The Church of the Flagellation. Here, we are standing on the actual downhill bedrock that served as the very center of the Antonia Fortress, next to the Temple Mount in 30 AD, and home of the Roman Legion stationed in Jerusalem at that time.

Inside the church I have a powerful spiritual, emotional reaction. Our Lord, even with this suffering, experienced a sense of relief. It was finally commencing! The act! It comes at last. I can't help but think of Jesus' suffering and how He managed it with resolution, conviction, the deepest LOVE, interior prayer, confirmation, determination to complete what He had begun, what He was born for, what He must!

Back outside the church, I get a lay of the land. Within the confines of the Antonia Fortress, we see two churches facing each other across a span of exposed bedrock and a small courtyard-- The Church of Condemnation and The Church of Flagellation. Other buildings run along both sides of the churches and space between.

We begin to carry the cross in groups of three. It is about 6' long, polished wood, remarkably heavy, a very uncomfortable burden on my shoulder. I imagine the pain in Jesus' body carrying that holy, blessed Cross! I am eager to carry it with all my other belongings. I want the burden. I want to comfort my Lord, my Savior, the Lamb of God who I love beyond all life, who I see in others, of Whom I am too unworthy to even have the privilege of comforting. Still, the joy of comforting Him Who suffered so much for me.

We take turns visiting all the remaining stations, many marked with a metal sign posted on buildings. We sing, "Were You There?" We pray silently. We follow the way

with little booklets sold by vendors along the way. It is beautiful, meaningful, an imprint upon our souls. When we are done, we hate to surrender our cross.

12:55 PM -- Mt. Zion, Peter denies Jesus in Caiaphas' courtyard, the tomb of King David...So much right here!!

We begin this tour in the Upper Room, site of The Last supper, the first Missa, the institution of the Priesthood, First Eucharist! Yossi also believes Pentecost took place here, seven weeks after the Resurrection. The Apostles were without a shepherd for about ten days after the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. Although Jesus had spent the prior forty days with them, teaching them, they were still afraid, confused, sheep hiding out, not knowing what to do next. They gathered where they had experienced the great miracle of Eucharist, the Upper Room, and the Holy Spirit came with a noise like "a strong driving wind" (Acts, 2).

The present Upper Room we now see was built in the middle ages as a prayer room upon the actual footprint of the original house. It is a surprisingly large space with stone floors, high multi--arched corniced ceilings, many columns with ornate capitals and bases, walls a couple feet thick. The many ceiling arches meet in a number of places in the center at ceiling level and in these spots chandeliers once hung. Some windows bear Hebrew and Arabic inscriptions. First, it was a Jewish home, then headquarters of the first Christians, later a Catholic house of prayer, then a mosque, and finally, a place of pilgrimage. Holy Father John Paul II visited this room in his wheelchair.

Yossi explains that in Jesus' time, this place was owned by a wealthy family. It had a basement and two enclosed stories. Rare at that time. Only the wealthiest Jews lived thus.

Yossi tells us that there were three important religious populations among the Jewish men of Jesus' day-- the high priests (Levites) who lived in upper Jerusalem, where the Upper Room stands; the Pharisees, of which he says Jesus was one; and the Essenes (such as St. John the Baptist, whose family is thought to have had close ties to the Essene community), some of whom lived in a distant community in the Judean wilderness and some who lived among the people. The Essenes are believed to have been a largely celibate group, fed up with the corruption of the times. King Herod tried to court all three of these groups. He married the daughter of a high priest, took land from the rich and gave it to the Essenes, and paid attention to what the Pharisees had to say. He was a clever politician. Tried to please all the Jews while courting the Romans, as well.

Yossi's theory is that the Upper Room belonged to the Essenes. I scratch my head. He says that only once in the Bible do we see a man carrying water, when Jesus told His disciple to "follow the man carrying the water". Yossi takes this to mean that the Last Supper was an Essene function in an Essene building. He also sites the lack of women present to support his idea.

I differ. Archeological digs of the past 40 years have established the likelihood of Essenes having women among them. While carrying water was "women's work", would not a single man or slave do the same? Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich said the Upper Room was divided into a number of chambers and describes how the women participated with food preparation, etc. and how they enjoyed their own meal, near but separate from the men. This seems likely since a space as large as the one we stand in only existed in great palaces. Even rich Jews had no ascending arches to hold up ceilings in 30 AD. Such a large room would require a number of walls to support the roof. It would be more likely that such a room, such a house, belonged to someone like Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus; one of influence, hidden familiarity, and sympathy to the ministry of Jesus. Much more logical, I think, but I don't want to interrupt Yossi. He's on a roll.

Then Yossi explains that for more than a thousand years, it was Jewish custom at Passover to bless the wine first, then the bread, but Jesus did the opposite, blessing the bread first. Yossi takes this as a sign from Jesus that He was breaking tradition to demonstrate that He was doing "something different from the standard of the day." I have to agree on this point. How I wish Yossi realized the full measure of Truth in His words! The mystery of transubstantiation! Definitely a change from tradition.

We move on to Caiaphas' house only blocks away. We walk down stone steps into the dungeons, which lay beneath where the house once stood. Horrible, Dark. Impossible to imagine living above them.

But now a question is answered. I always wondered how, late at night of that first Good Friday, Caiaphas was awakened and present and all the people gathered so quickly to challenge Jesus. Now I understand. They all live nearby and Caiaphas didn't need to move far from his bed. All the dungeons were hewn from bedrock. We stand in one particularly high dungeon cave. It has an ancient cistern in the roof, a hole that let in a bit of light and also, rain. There is a large picture showing a prisoner suspended from the ceiling with ropes or chains looped under His armpits. It would have been utterly miserable, dark, damp that time of year, perhaps even in standing water, cold, miserable.

Fr. Mike read Psalm 88 aloud:

*"O Lord, my God, by day I cry out; at night I clamor in your presence.
Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my call for help.
For my soul is surfeited with troubles and my life draws near to the nether world.
I am numbered with those who go down into the pit; I am a man without strength.
My couch is among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave,
Whom you remember no longer and who are cut off from your care.
You have plunged me into the bottom of the pit, into the dark abyss.
Upon me your wrath lies heavy, and with all your billows you overwhelm me.
You have taken my friends away from me; you have made me an abomination to them;*

I am imprisoned, and I cannot escape.... But I, O Lord, cry out to you; with my morning prayer I wait upon you. Why, O Lord, do you reject me; why hide from me your face? I am afflicted and in agony from my youth; I am dazed with the burden of your dread. Your furies have swept over me; your terrors have cut me off. They encompass me like water all the day; on all sides they close in upon me. Companion and neighbor you have taken away from me; my only friend is darkness."

We all stand in silence after the reading. I think of the long night Jesus spent, the intense interior prayer that must have occupied him. The night of dark and silence.

We walk on to the original steps, beside Caiaphas' house, down the side of Mt. Zion to the Kidron Valley below. I trace the sharp, steep steps and imagine that night. As Yossi points out, Jesus walked from the Upper Room, down these steps, across the narrow valley below, and a short way up the Mount of Olives to the Garden of Gethsemane. I can see the route the rabble took with Judas to arrest Him. Imagine the Temple soldiers pulling and dragging Him back up these steep hard steps in the dark late night, jostling, pushing. I see Jesus stumble and scrape His legs. After all these years, the steps are still sharp-edged. I imagine Peter and John following behind at a distance. Taking this all in, it is so immediate and real. I imagine the courtyard, Peter's denial....I don't want to leave this spot as I scan over the number of other roofless underground stone cells carved in the rock. I need to pray and since we are near the Church of St. Peter, I go in to pray before the tabernacle, to be with Him, be quiet with Him. Others from our group do the same. The church is filled with magnificent huge mosaics. It is a place we all seem to want to be at this time. It is comforting.

2:37 PM, we are on our way to The Wailing Wall. We drive past the Damascus Gate in the Arab Quarter, then past the much smaller King Herod's Gate as we round the Old City. Finally, we pass The Lion's Gate in the Western Wall. We see people in all manner of modest dress.

I am most curious about the ultra-orthodox Jews, the "Hassidim". Most Jews in Israel are observant, orthodox like Yossi. He wears a prayer shawl under His clothes, keeps His head covered, is prayerful and follows the Law. The ultra-observant wear an identifiable manner of dress with the black coat, pants and brimmed hat, the large prayer shawl hanging below the hem of the coat, the long, curled hair locks in front of their ears. This manner of dress began during the Diaspora in Portugal at the time of the Inquisition when Jews were required to dress differently and later took hold among the Jewish population of Eastern Europe. The ultra-orthodox live primarily in one sector of the city and Frommer's Guide explains that drivers are advised to avoid that sector on the Sabbath. An uninformed Sabbath driver in the ultra-orthodox neighborhood will likely find their car pelted with stones, police looking the other way. You don't mess with the ultra-orthodox!

We arrive at the Wailing Wall area and see many little ultra-orthodox little boys with their teachers on a field trip. Beautiful children! Each is beautifully and carefully dressed. I can see how loved these children are. Their hair is cut very short, but each

has long, curled hair locks that bounce as they quickly walk along. The short hair makes their lovely dark eyes look even larger. Teachers, like mother hens, herd them toward their destination.

Our eyes turn to The Wall. Yossi describes it as the holiest place in all the world to the Jews, a "Hotline straight to God. It is considered by Jews to be a place where prayers placed within the cracks of the stones are almost guaranteed to be answered. Yossi gives us a half hour here. (He says 20 minutes, but I know we can squeeze the visit to 30.) A moveable wall divides the Wailing Wall: 60/40. The larger side is for the men and boys. A smaller side is for women and girls. I see many more females than males. There is lots of room up at The Wall for the men. The women's side is eight women deep.

Mom and I move up the plaza on the women's side with Mom's wheelchair. We get as close as we dare then both have the same thought. The wheelchair will go no further. We leave it, Mom going to the left, I to the right. We thread through women, young girls, little girls, all praying at different distances from the Wall. Some stand, some sit on the little white plastic chairs we have seen everywhere in the country. Some read from hardbound books of Psalms. Many rock slowly and gently as they pray. The men rock back and forth much more aggressively. We are dressed in long sleeves and pants, but most of the Israeli women and girls wear long skirts here with long sleeves. All are very prayerful, serious, showing by posture and manner the regard and holiness with which they hold this place. Even the smallest little girls are obedient and perfectly well mannered. I admire these children and their lovely mothers.

Slowly I weave my way through the layers of women and girls until I am easily before the stonewall itself in just a couple minutes. The stone is porous, soothingly cold, and polished like glass from the millions of hands touching and stroking it over the ages. This is an awesome moment. I had been told The Wailing Wall "is very powerful", but until now, I didn't have a sense of what that meant.

Knowing God was listening, I pulled out the prayer I had written back home for this time. More a set of petitions than a well composed prayer, my list consists of my plea for our good God to hear the pleas of all the people and groups on my list and to please answer them. The list contained the names of all my family, family friends, the Holy Father, the College of Cardinals, Archbishop Vlazny and Bishop Ken Steiner, every Priest I know or have ever known, folks from prayer group, Bible study, Life is Sacred, all working in pro-life activities, neighbors, and others. I had typed it up in a tiny font, cut it out and rolled it into a tiny scroll so it would fit into a crack. My prayer is for all the people listed to have their prayers heard and remain in this place of prayer for as long as the Lord wishes.

As I read my list, the list turns to deeper prayer, listening, loving and knowing our loving God is also listening and loving. The depth of the unity of prayer grows more intense. I no longer am aware of the others around me. No more self-consciousness. It seems as if Jerusalem is the heart of the world and this wall is its heartbeat. This is

quite unexpected! I feel as if I am within the core of that heart with a beam straight to heaven. The depth becomes so intense I begin to weep. The love becomes so vast I can scarcely contain it. I lower to my knees. It seems right. This is a holy place. Pressing my hands, forehead, body against the wall, I hug it. I do not move, but immerse myself in communion, praying without words, listening. After some minutes I remember we have a time limit. It is time to leave. I don't want to. It seems as if I will be leaving my very heart behind. The thought of leaving brings fresh tears even as I remind myself He is with me always in Eucharist, as He promised.

I struggle to find a crack to hold my prayer scroll. The cracks are thoroughly filled with prayer papers of every sort. Finally, there is a crack at the very bottom. Fitting, I think. "He who is last..." no more lingering, I must go. I say one more prayer, asking God to allow me to keep this stone, this wall, this place in my heart always. Perhaps I have found another way to pray. On my knees I kiss the wall as if I am kissing the heart of God, stand and slowly, following the custom, back away, and away, and away, until I can turn around and look for Mom. As I do, I realize there will be no adequate way to describe this experience. Words do not even begin.

We all unite to head back to our bus. Many Israeli soldiers are milling about. Jim Mullen asks one something about their large presence at this location today. The soldier signals the school buses parked near our bus and mention the soldiers are there to guard the school children. I think of the beautiful little boys we had seen as we walked to The Wall and feel sadness that it would seem necessary to send soldiers to protect little innocents; how that contrasts with American children on field trips; what it must be like as a Jewish mother to send one's child off for a day, knowing it will be necessary to have soldiers stand guard. Compassion and deep sadness. What does mankind do to each other?

4:12 PM-- we are on our way back to our hotel. Rush hour traffic. Now we see Jerusalem traffic at its crazy busy height. We have only a few miles to go but the drive takes some time. Still, the most noticeable thing is how beautiful the city is when the sun is low in the western sky.

5:30 PM--Room 825. Gene and Melinda host another cocktail hour, this time in their room. A perfectly wonderful evening! The best hosts. Everyone comes, including Yossi and Nedal, Nedal, having a splendid time! Mom brings wine she had purchased and nuts we had brought along as our contribution. We are able to exchange addresses, look at family photos. Mom and I are amazed at the lovely room with a view. Everyone else is on the 8th floor, too, and has a similar room. Mom and I are on the second. Without discussing the depths of how bad our room is, we realize we have really been staying in the dungeon of the hotel. We have to laugh at the joke on us. How wonderful to be here and celebrate our faith with these blessed people! Not even our room can get us down.

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At 7:30 PM, we finally eat dinner downstairs then head to bed; one more day to go. It is a merry party! No one wants it to end, so much have we all shared together. May all these souls be forever fed.