

April 7, 2006

From the 22nd to 30th of March, we joined our church group at Pasadena Community Church in St. Petersburg, Florida, on a tour to the Holy Land. It was an amazing experience, both historically and spiritually. Places mentioned in the Bible came alive for us; many peaceful moments were spent as a church group sharing the scriptures, singing, and praying in places where Jesus had walked; and a much better understanding was gained of the present day Israel and Palestinian situation. Only within the last six months have tour groups started to return to Israel after a five year drought due to the violence. Everywhere our presence was appreciated.

Wednesday morning, March 22, we flew from Rome, Italy, to Tel Aviv, Israel, onboard El Al airlines. Instead of the normal airline check-in counter, El Al had for security reasons an entire room set apart for the check-in procedure. Once in the room each person, couple, or family was taken aside and questioned at a different location. Our interview lasted about twenty minutes as we didn't fit the normal profile. Not many people live in Rome onboard their sailboat planning to join their church group from Florida in Israel. Upon our arrival in Israel we took the local train to Netanya, about 25 miles north of the airport, where our hotel was located. We met our church group at breakfast the following morning.

There were thirty in our church group, and we were fortunate to be part of a very cohesive and loving fellowship. It made our memories of the Holy Land that more special. Besides our pastor, Cliff Melvin, we were led and ministered to by a Palestinian Christian tour guide named Sam, who was knowledgeable in both history and the Bible and fluent in five languages including both Hebrew and Arabic. He made each place mentioned in the Bible come alive for us. From Sam we learned that with the conversion of Queen Helena, Emperor Constantine's mother, to Christianity in the 4th century A.D., many churches were built over Christian holy sites in the Holy Land, and inscriptions were marked into the mosaic floor documenting for posterity many of the places in Jesus' ministry. This practice continued on throughout the entire Byzantine period. Many churches we visited on our tour were built over sites marked by these early Christians.

Thursday, our first day of the tour, we visited Caesarea, Mt. Carmel, and Megiddo. Caesarea and its port were built by Herod the Great and named in honor of Caesar Augustus. It was in Caesarea that Peter baptized the Roman centurion Cornelius and his entire household, the first Gentile converts (Acts 10) and Paul was imprisoned for two years before being sent to Rome for trial. In our visit to Caesarea we saw the reconstructed Roman theater, the old port, and remains of the Roman aqueduct that carried water from Mt. Carmel to Caesarea.



Roman Theater



Caesarea Port

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Aqueduct

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It was on Mt. Carmel that Elijah confronted the 450 false prophets of Baal (I Kings 18). We visited the Carmelite monastery on top Mt. Carmel overlooking the fertile Jezreel Valley. Along the way to Megiddo we saw an ancient tomb like that used in Jesus' day, with a rolling stone in front to seal the opening.



So many civilizations have come and gone in the Holy Land throughout the ages. In Megiddo, because of its strategic location along the major trade route "Via Maris" between Egypt and Damascus, twenty-five layers of different civilizations have been uncovered, each represented by a layer of earth. At Megiddo archaeologists have uncovered a Canaanite altar used for burnt offerings dating back to the Early Bronze Age. Megiddo was also one of King Solomon's and King Ahab's fortified hilltop cities, and here archaeologists have uncovered Ahab's horse stables (note stone manger on left), plus a stepped water shaft and hidden tunnel built by Ahab to provide a water source inside the city walls. As a group we walked down 183 steps to the bottom of this hidden tunnel. Megiddo is also mentioned in the Bible as the site of Armageddon (Revelation 16:13-16). After leaving Megiddo we drove along the countryside of Galilee to our hotel in Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee where we were to spend two nights. Along the way we saw many Jewish and Moslem towns interspersed upon the landscape, all living peacefully next to each other, and in Tiberias that night we saw both Jews and Arabs walking the streets.

Altar



Manger



Ahab's Horse Stables

Friday morning we crossed the Sea of Galilee by boat to Capernaum. In the center of the lake our boat driver turned off the engine and we floated quietly on the placid waters. During this special time together as a group we read the scriptures, sang, prayed, and meditated on the same lake that Jesus had walked and spent time with his disciples. About 200 yards away another church group was in another boat, and often we heard their singing as we floated. So beautiful and peaceful these moments were on the water.



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Upon our arrival in Capernaum we headed to the Mount of Beatitudes. The Church of the Beatitudes was built on the hilltop near where tradition says Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount to his disciples. While sitting peacefully amongst its green surroundings, our guide Sam with his knowledge of both Hebrew and Arabic gave us a deeper and more majestic understanding of the Jewish word for “blessed.” As we overlooked the Sea of Galilee, it was easy to imagine Jesus speaking to us on the side of this hill. According to our guide, spring lasts only a short time in Israel, only about two weeks, and we were quite fortunate to be here during this period. Everywhere wild flowers were in bloom.



Church of the Beatitudes



Mount of Beatitudes



From the Mount of Beatitudes we drove through the fertile Golan Heights and along the Syrian border to Caesarea Philippi. It was here that Simon Peter acknowledged for the first time that Jesus was the Messiah, and it was here that Jesus mentioned that Peter would be the Rock of His Church. Originally this area was a Greek town called Panias named after Pan, the Greek god of the shepherds. Herod the Great renamed it Caesarea Philippi. Today it was known as Banias. At this site we explored some of the ruins of Caesarea Philippi and of the Greek Temple of Pan where votary niches could still be seen carved out of the hillside.



Looking into Syria

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Greek Temple of Pan Page 3

We returned to the Sea of Galilee along the road running parallel to the Lebanon border. After a lunch enjoying St. Peter's fish, the typical fish caught by Simon Peter and the other fisherman during Jesus' day, we headed south to Yardenit, a baptismal site along the River Jordan. Here many in our group, including Mary, remembered their baptism.



Saturday we drove north again to Capernaum, the center of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. In Jesus' day, Capernaum was a border town along the Via Maris highway with a customs post for the collection of revenues. The ruins of ancient Capernaum gave us a good picture of the close proximity of many of the houses and places mentioned in the New Testament. It was in Capernaum and its surrounding area that Jesus did much of his healing, and while at Capernaum we sat as a group and had a special time in quiet meditation and healing. On the Capernaum site was a 4th century synagogue built by the early Byzantine Christians over the original synagogue in which Jesus worshipped and taught; basalt stone remains of houses during Jesus' time; the ruins of Peter's house where Jesus stayed and where early Christians used to meet (now a large church has been built over this site with Peter's house showing underneath); and a mosaic exhibiting a boat typical of that used during Jesus' day.



Synagogue



Remains of Peter's House



Mosaic

From Capernaum, we made a brief stop to Tabgha, the traditional site of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Unfortunately the church was closed, and so we didn't linger long but instead drove on to the village of Cana where Jesus performed his first miracle by changing water into wine at a wedding feast. Here, along with the three other couples in our group, we renewed our wedding vows in the wedding sanctuary of the Church of the Miracle, situated over the site where Jesus performed the miracle.



From Cana we drove along the Jordan Valley to Bethlehem, the same route used by Jesus as he traveled from Galilee to Judea. As Bethlehem was a Palestinian Authority controlled city, we had to pass through the border crossing, and this was possible as both our driver and guide were Palestinian. Also, just like Sam, our bus driver was Christian. From the border crossing, we saw up-close the wall being built by Israel to secure and establish permanently its border with Palestine. According to our guide Sam, Israel plans to complete the entire wall in three years.

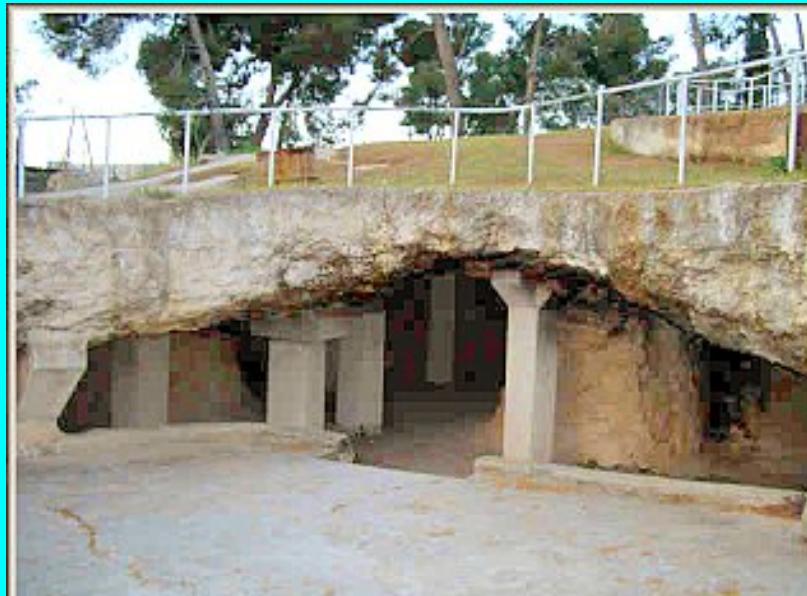


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In Bethlehem we visited the Church of the Nativity, the oldest church in the world still in use. From the outside, the church looked more like a fortress. Inside, the church was shared by five different sects of Christianity - Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, and Egyptian Coptic Orthodox - each with its own area of worship. Inside, steps led down to the Grotto (or Cave) of the Nativity where a silver star marked the place of Jesus' birth.



Afterwards we visited the Shepherd's Field just outside Bethlehem. Here there was a cave similar to the one the shepherds used for shelter the night Jesus was born. Just recently supports have had to be installed to support the cave. Outside the cave was a stone manger like that used for Jesus. Even now, shepherds still pasture their flocks around Bethlehem, and as we drove out of Bethlehem late that afternoon toward our hotel in Jerusalem we saw some shepherds with their sheep off to the side of the road.



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Sunday we drove first to Bethany to visit the Church of Lazarus, near where Lazarus was raised from the dead. Afterwards we drove to Masada along the Dead Sea and explored the amazing partially-restored archeological site of Herod the Great's hilltop palace fortress. This fortress was virtually impregnable. Here 967 Jewish zealots held off the Roman Legion for 3 years after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. When Masada finally fell, 960 chose mass suicide rather than capture by the Roman army. From on top Masada we had a fantastic view of the Dead Sea and the Judean Wilderness. The Dead Sea, the lowest place on earth, is 1292 feet below sea level. Because of increased over-exploitation by Israel and Jordan, the water flowing into the Dead Sea from the Jordan River has decreased in recent decades, causing more land to be exposed at this southern end.



Remains of Ramp Built by Romans to Access Top of Masada

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Dead Sea in Background

From Masada we drove to Jericho, considered one of the oldest cities in the world. More than twenty civilizations have been found here, and archaeological excavations have discovered the remains of a Canaanite tower dating to 7000 B.C. It was in Jericho that Joshua made the walls “to come tumbling down.” And today, just like in Biblical times, Jericho is an oasis in the middle of the desert. Once again, only because we had a Palestinian driver and guide were we allowed into this Palestinian Authority controlled city. It was hard to believe that just several weeks earlier Israeli soldiers had entered Jericho to retrieve a high-ranking Palestinian prisoner after the political scene had changed with Hama’s election into power; now only a demolished prison remained. But, most special of our memories will be the waves and smiles we received from Palestinian adults and children as our bus drove through the streets. Only a few tourist buses have returned to Jericho, and we, the tourists, signified their hope for a brighter future.



Jericho



Remains of Canaanite Tower



Remains of Prison

After Jericho we drove to ruins of Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls, hidden for almost 2000 years, were discovered in caves in 1947. Except for the Book of Esther, parts of all the Old Testament books have been found. Upon leaving Qumran we went “floating” in the Dead Sea, definitely an interesting experience as everyone “floats” with a salinity of about 28%.



Caves where Dead Sea Scrolls were found



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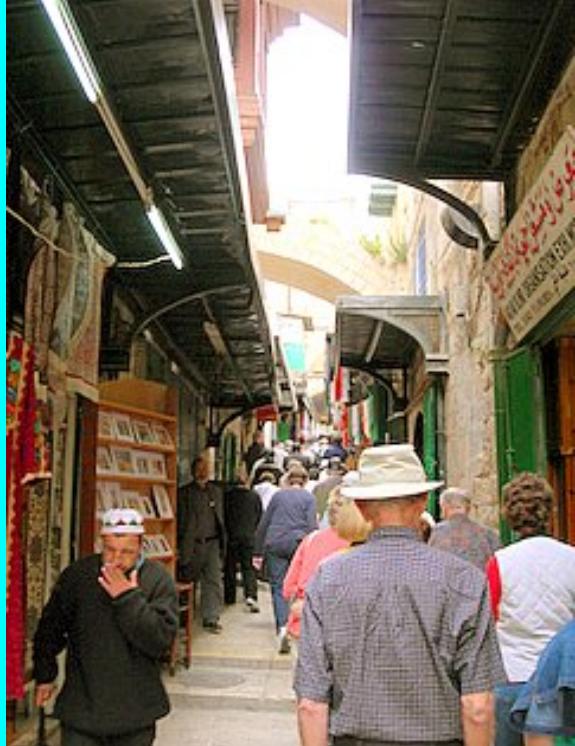
This amazing day ended with a Sunday sunset worship service along the Old Jericho Road overlooking the Judean Desert and the Greek Orthodox 5th century Monastery of St. George. For many of us, this will always stand out as one of our most inspirational memories. Here we were close to the place where Jesus had been tempted for forty days by Satan; we were near where the Prophet Elijah had hid in caves and been fed by ravens; and this valley was most likely the place where David wrote his 23rd Psalm. The trip back to Jerusalem took much longer as security was tight due to threats to disrupt Tuesday's Israeli election.



Monday, our itinerary was altered due to heightened security and the closure of Jewish sights on Tuesday, the day of the election. Our first visit was to the Western Wall, better known as the Wailing Wall, one of the most holy Jewish sites and all that remains of the Temple after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. We were planning to visit the Temple Mount and view the Dome of the Rock on our way to the Pool of Bethesda where Jesus healed the crippled man, just a short distance away. But, the Muslims that morning decided to close the Temple Mount to tourists due to the Israeli elections, and so a short walk ended up being a much longer drive by bus, especially with the roadblocks. After driving around Jerusalem from the Zion Gate to St. Stephen's Gate, we finally arrived at the ruins of the Pool of Bethesda in the courtyard of St. Anne's Church. From there we continued our walk along the narrow streets of Old Jerusalem, walking along the Via Dolorosa or "Way of the Cross," the traditional path Jesus followed bearing His cross. At each of the "Fourteen Stations of the Cross" we stopped to reflect. The last five stations were in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher where Jesus was said to have been crucified and buried. This church, just like the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, was shared by the same five sects of Christianity. After lunch we visited the Shrine of the Book in the Israel Museum containing the Dead Sea scrolls found at Qumran.



Wailing Wall



Way of the Cross

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Pool of Bethesda

Tuesday we traveled to the top of the Mount of Olives and descended along the approximate path Jesus walked that Palm Sunday almost 2000 years ago. At the highest point on the Mount of Olives we visited the Chapel of the Ascension, a small domed building marking the traditional spot where Jesus ascended into heaven. As we walked down the path we enjoyed spectacular views of Jerusalem, a most unique and holy city, important to three major religions - Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. There is not another city in the world that has been as coveted and fought over as much as Jerusalem. As we looked out over Old Jerusalem, most noticeable on Temple Mount was the Dome of the Rock with its gold-plated dome, located at the highest point on Mount Moriah. Here Abraham offered up Isaac as a sacrifice; the First and Second Temples were built; and Mohammed ascended to heaven. As this holy site is sacred to both Judaism and Islam, it is really the main point of contention in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Along the Old Jerusalem Wall and to the right of the Dome of the Rock is the Golden Gate, the gate of Jesus' Triumphal entry into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. This gate has been closed for centuries and is prophesized to not be opened until Christ comes again (Ezekiel 44:1-3).



Chapel of Ascension



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Our next stop was the Church of Pater Noster, situated over the grotto or cavern where Jesus often found refuge on the Mount of Olives and where he taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer. Here the Lord's Prayer was displayed in 120 languages. Further down and off to the side of the path was the Orthodox Jewish Cemetery. Since this is near the scene of the final judgment (Joel 3:2), pious Jews throughout the centuries have wanted to be buried here. The stones on top of the tombs signify one's visit. Next, we stopped at the Church of Dominus Flevit. This church had been designed in the shape of a teardrop as it was here that Jesus wept for Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). To reflect this, the altar of the church faced the Temple Mount and Jerusalem. We ended our walk at the bottom of the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane and the Basilica of the Agony (Church of All Nations). Here in this garden there were still ancient olive trees, and in a side garden our guide arranged for each of us to spend some quiet time in solitude, just like Jesus did that Maundy Thursday.



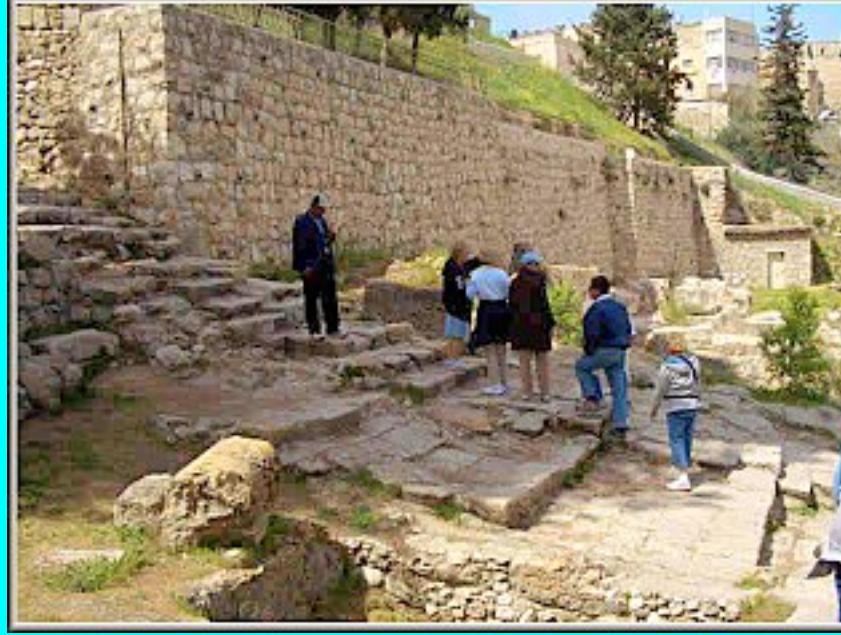
Garden of Gethsemane



Ancient Olive Trees

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From the Mount of Olives we traveled a short distance by bus to Mount Zion (City of David) and to the Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu (Cock Crowing) built over the site of Caiaphas' house, the High Priest at the time of Jesus' execution. Here we visited a basement cavern used as a holding room for prisoners during Jesus' day, and possibly the same place where Jesus had spent time. Along the side of Caiaphas' house were the original Roman steps that Jesus walked that Maundy Thursday from the Upper Room to Gethsemane and back again to Caiaphas' house as a prisoner. And so today, "we walked where Jesus walked." From the church we had an excellent view of the Temple Mount and of the Garden of Gethsemane (just behind the right corner of the wall). We could now visualize the journey that Christ took that last night. Next we drove to David's Tomb and the Upper Room marking the site of the Last Supper.



We ended this amazing day at the Garden Tomb. Here in 1881, General Gordon found a tomb dating back to Roman times fitting the description described in the Bible and located near a rock formation having the appearance of a skull signifying Golgotha, the place of Christ's crucifixion. So now, besides the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Garden Tomb is also a possible site of Christ's burial and resurrection. Here we had communion as a group, a most special memory. In the evening we enjoyed uplifting Israeli and Arab folklore dances.



No organized tour was originally planned for Wednesday, but about half of us decided to go with Sam, our guide, to a few other sites. After being in the city of Jerusalem for two days, it was wonderful again to be out in the countryside and to enjoy the peacefulness and beauty of the Judean Hills. The first site we visited was Emmaus (Abu Gosh) where the risen Christ appeared to two of his disciples. On this site a Crusader church, Emmaus Abu Gosh, had been built in 1180 A.D. but never finished due to the conquest in 1187 A.D. by the Moslem Turks. Today on these grounds we witnessed a sight that gave us hope for a possible brighter tomorrow. Here in a Moslem village and in a Christian church, under the care of the French Canadian Roman Catholic Fathers, Jewish soldiers had come (some carrying their guns) to learn about Christianity, and they were being sent by the Israel Ministry of Education. In this moment of contradiction, the Father said, "We all need time to trust each other," and how true that is.



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Afterwards we visited Ein Karem, the village where John the Baptist was born. Here we visited the Church of St. John, built over the birthplace of John the Baptist, and the Church of the Visitation, built on the site of the home of Elizabeth and Zacharias, John's parents. It was during the summer before John's birth that the Virgin Mary came to visit and help care for her cousin Elizabeth. We ended our day with a visit to Yad Vashem, the Jewish Holocaust Museum.



We flew back to Rome very early Thursday morning, March 30. Our pilgrimage to the Holy Land had been amazing; one we will always remember. We truly had walked where Jesus had walked. The quiet times we shared in the same places that Jesus had been will always be our most cherished memories. With our visit we now have a better understanding of Israel. During our stay we saw Moslems and Jews living side by side peacefully. We can only hope that sometime in the future there will be a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

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