

IMPRESSIONS FROM THE 2019 PILGRIMAGE TO JERUSALEM AND THE LAND OF JESUS



Rod and Dianne Simmons in the Golan Heights with Mt. Hermon in the background. Photo by Tracy Millar.

As pilgrims in the Holy Land (Jerusalem and Old Palestine), what stands out is how long and how masterfully humans have worshipped God. The focus of our pilgrimage was to walk the path of Jesus, and in doing so to know him and his teachings better. But in Jerusalem, one must especially honor the devotion and struggles of those before us centuries ago who heard God speak to them to form three great religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—that have so much in common. Our reflections on the pilgrimage are colored brightly by the historic illumination of Godly love that created such a rich canvas of faith in action.

We were 22 pilgrims, 14 from St. Mary's and eight who have ties to someone at our church. Our guide, Iyad Qumri, an Arab-Palestinian Christian (Anglican), and our driver Omar Badash, an Arab-Palestinian Muslim, form a wonderful team that has shepherded numerous pilgrims throughout the Holy Land. We began in Jerusalem, followed by four days in Nazareth and environs. Our last two days were spent back in Jerusalem to focus on Jesus' last week on earth.

Iyad first took us to Mt. Scopus, giving us our first breathtaking view of Jerusalem. From a single vantage

point, we saw the Dome of the Rock, the Western Wall, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, close neighbors in the Old City and the birthplaces, respectively, of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Walking to the other side of the mount we took in the rolling green pastures and were so mesmerized to see shepherds tending their sheep that some of us almost missed our ride. Lunch that day was a *zarb*, a Palestinian barbecue in which chicken and vegetables are roasted in a clay oven sealed with mud, producing an aromatic feast in a local home.

The following two days were devoted to walking tours in the Old City, which is close to St. George's Guest House where we stayed. It is hard to describe entering a city first built in the 4th millennium BCE that has suffered numerous attacks and has been destroyed twice. We learned to identify eras of rebuilding by the size and shape of the stone we could see at the entrance gates. "Professor" Iyad helped us identify key periods of Jerusalem history—Roman, Byzantine, Crusader—by the architecture.

During those two days we prayed at the Western (Wailing) Wall, walked to the exquisite mosaic Dome of the Rock Mosque, and visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the 4th century church built on top of two sites: Calvary (or Golgotha) where Jesus was crucified and the nearby tomb that serves as an approximation of where he was buried and resurrected. Hundreds like us were there in reverence, faithfully lighting candles, blessing personal items, and absorbing the artistry on the walls of this holy site tended by Christian denominations: Latin (Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant) and Orthodox (Ethiopian, Coptic, Syriac, Greek, and Armenian).

Our day in Bethlehem brought strong emotions. The pastoral notion we have of Jesus' birthplace 2,000 years ago is in sharp contrast to the Bethlehem of today. The Church of the Nativity is built on the site of Jesus' birth, but it is also the center of a very crowded, walled city with plenty of graffiti art—testaments to survival, stories of travails, and humor. Pilgrim Donice Gilliland suggested we leave prayer notes at the wall, as we did at the Wailing Wall, which was a blessed way to channel our sadness into solidarity.

In week two, we ventured to the pastoral region around Nazareth. Our first stop was the Wadi Qelt (dry ravine), where we had a sunrise service overlooking the ancient road Jesus took to Jerusalem. Many, if not all of us, felt the presence of God and his son in this majestic place. It was still, it was peaceful, and it was inspiring beyond words. Even the Bedouins, who arrived with colorful wares to sell, kept still in seeming reverence of our communal worship.

From our guesthouse in Nazareth, the hometown of Joseph (the Just) and where Jesus grew up, we spent two days visiting ruins at Sepphoris and Capernaum, Tabgha church, where we collected healing stones on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and cruised the freshwater lake on a fishing boat. We renewed our baptismal vows in the Jordan River and celebrated Eucharist on the Mt. of the Beatitudes.

Nazareth is a true gem. Located on a high hill, this city of 20,000 is home to Arab Christians and Muslims where the Muslim call to prayer was clearly heard five times a day. Cameron took us to her favorite cellar spice shop in a very old building run by the same family for generations. A treat was to have St.

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Mary’s parishioners Mai and Nabih Asal join us for lunch at Christ Church, the home church of Nabih’s family, adjacent to our guesthouse run by the Sisters of Nazareth.

We returned to Jerusalem, better informed to appreciate Jesus’ final journey. We traced his footsteps downward from the Mt. of Olives to the Garden of Gethsemane into the city to the site of his incarceration. On our last day, we walked the Stations of the Cross and arrived back at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where Jesus was crucified and rose on the third day. Walking in Jesus’ steps at 5:30 in the morning was powerful indeed.

Alas, our pilgrimage was done, and we returned home. But, in many respects, we are still there—in heart and mind. We keep with us the sacrifices made by Jesus Christ and so many others who struggled to grow all three religions which have, as their foundation, love of God, love of neighbor, and justice for all. We indelibly remember the glorious colors of icons and murals and stained glass windows, and our hearts are grateful for so much, and for this opportunity to witness the divine—of all we saw and in each one of us 22 pilgrims. We are thankful to Cameron and St. Mary’s for devoting so much time, working alongside Iyad, to create a beautiful journey. But, we are also chastened by what is left undone in a region rife with struggle. A Holy Land dissected by pre-

fabricated walls and armed checkpoints is a holy land unfinished. We aren’t exactly sure how a few of us can make a difference in a region where injustice has long reigned, but we are discerning God’s call, and one answer is to entreat others to go see for themselves.

Stay tuned for the dates of the next St. Mary’s pilgrimage.

With love and gratitude,

Pilgrims Dianne & Rod Simmons

P.S. See more photos at www.StMarysArlington.org/Jerusalem



The Most Revd. Suheil Salman Dawani, Bishop Coadjutor of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem (center) with the 2019 Pilgrims: Sydney Avent, Barbara Andrukonis, Susan Cowart, Brad Davenport, Suzanne Davenport, Kathleen Dunbar, Rosanna Esposito, Leyda Fajardo, Dana Martin, Donice Gilliland, Michael Gilliland, Marsha Evans Holme, Daphne Jefferson, Brenda Lawrence, Andrew Merrow, Cameron Merrow, Tracy Millar, Dianne Simmons, Rod Simmons, Louise Valteau, Melissa Wiley and Lauri Willner. Photo by Iyad Qumri.

GOOD FRIDAY OFFERING



The city of Jerusalem viewed from Dominus Flevit, where Luke notes that Jesus wept (Luke 19:41)

Without a living Christian presence, Christianity in the Middle East will become a collection of museum sites rather than a vibrant and life-affirming presence of Christians whose faith tradition dates to the first Pentecost.

As an expression of our solidarity, St. Mary’s will donate its Good Friday Offering to our sisters and brothers in Christ who keep the faith alive throughout the Land of the Holy One.

Good Friday offerings will help the four dioceses of the Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East. Their primary ministries are pastoral care, education, and health care, which are a vital and effective force for peace and understanding among all of God’s children.

All cash plate collections from St. Mary’s Good Friday services are designated for this offering. Additionally, you may mail a check to the church with the notation “Good Friday” in the memo line.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Open my eyes, God, that I may become alert to gratitude throughout the day. Help me bridge the gap between knowing about gratitude and living in thankfulness. Free me from guilt about the gap, replacing it with the joy of discovery and an eagerness for change.

—Diana Butler Bass, *The 7 Day Guide to Gratitude.*

On the first Sunday in Lent, many families received a new United Thank Offering (UTO) blue box with a note explaining that especially during Lent and extending to Mother’s Day, May 11, each day is an opportunity to count one’s blessings by adding coins to the UTO box for each thing we notice to be good in our lives.

Did you know that you can bring in your box before May 11 if your box is full? Or that you can write a check for the amount collected to St. Mary’s with UTO in the memo? Did you know that 100% of what is collected supports innovative mission and ministry throughout The Episcopal Church and Provinces of the Anglican Communion?



Many thanks for your shared blessings.