

Sunday, May 4, 2008

Easter 7

Topic – “Israel – God Bless Her!”

Good Morning!

I thank Fr. Ward for this opportunity to share with you some of Barbara’s and my observations and reactions to our awesome trip to the Holy Land.

Some of you may be asking why we went on a separate trip and not with Fr. Ward, Dn. Reitz, and Deacon Ed. Many of you may remember Jim Lee, who, with his wife Valerie and three children, once lived next door to the rectory. Even though Jim moved to Phoenix more than 30 years ago, we have maintained our friendship via e-mail and occasional visits.

Some 13 months ago, Jim called us and asked if we would like to go to Israel with him and his wife, Anna (Valerie died shortly after their move to Phoenix). Barbie and I agreed. Thus, we booked our trip some 8 months before the others. However, it worked out that we were only a week behind them in our trip.

The plane ride to and from Israel was long, but a good one. We took Austrian Air over, stopping in Vienna before arriving in Tel Aviv. Coming home we traveled Germany’s Lufthansa Air Line. As we traveled five days in Jordan following our visit in Israel, we flew home from Amman to Frankfurt, and then from Frankfurt to JFK, New York City on a 747. That plane is huge!

Our hotels and the wonderful selection of food served were excellent. Our hotel in Tel Aviv was directly on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Before dinner that night, we walked along its shore and waded into the cold but beautiful waters. What a thrill to see and touch what the Bible calls “The Great Sea.”

The next morning, we met our Israeli guide for our stay in Israel. Her name is Yael Meretz, a woman of more than 25 years of guiding experience, and this experience showed. We came to not only appreciate her, but to admire her depth of historical **and** Biblical knowledge – both Old **and** New Testament. At most sites visited, Yael read passages from appropriate scripture concerning that particular site. At other sites, Yael invited those who had bibles with them to read appropriate selections to add meaning to our experience.

We traveled north from Tel Aviv to the ancient ruins of the Roman city, Caesarea, lying on the Mediterranean coast. Caesarea was built by King Herod in honor of Caesar Augustus. Caesarea was one of Herod's eleven palace fortresses built throughout the Mid-east.

The opulence, the lavish luxury offered here – unbelievable! We were shown a large stone on which the words carved validate Caesarea as the official residence of Pontius Pilate during Jesus' time. It is recorded that Pilate was residing in Caesarea when Jesus was brought to trial in Jerusalem. He was summoned to quickly travel to Jerusalem as a riot was developing. Paul and Peter also stopped many times in Caesarea. (Acts 21:8; 23:35)

The archeological development, or uncoverings, in Israel in the last 60 years is nothing short of amazing. After stops at Mount Carmel (1Kings 18:19-46) and Megiddo, we moved northeast to Tiberias, on the western coast of the Sea of Galilee. Our route took us across the Jezreel Valley (Hosea 1:5). My brothers and sisters in the Lord, this valley is so huge that all the combatants scripture says will be in this valley for the future battle of Armageddon will have no difficulty having space to maneuver (Rev. 16:16).

Our hotel in Tiberias was directly on the shoreline, providing us from our window balcony a magnificent view of the Sea. The boat ride on the Sea of Galilee the following day proved to be an inspiring emotionally-filled spiritual experience for me.

We motored out from the shoreline about 500 yards or so, the pilot stopped the engines, and we drifted. I moved to the bench that overlooked the shoreline, just sat there, gazing up at the hills filled with vineyards, orchards, and fields of crops. To the left was the Mount of Beatitudes, upon which Jesus delivered what we know as the Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5:1-ff). I just sat on this bench, eyes gazing across the water, mentally envisioning Jesus walking the hillsides, Jesus sitting on the Mount, sharing with his followers. Tears filled my eyes.

Jesus declared his hometown to be Capernaum, located on the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee. It is said that Jesus found comfort and peace in Capernaum. I, too, sensed spiritual comfort and peace there. Capernaum also is the home of Peter. Here in Capernaum are the ruins of a fourth century synagogue said to be built over the synagogue site in which Jesus worshipped. To walk this place, to walk in the very area Jesus worshipped, to envision Jesus worshipping in a synagogue not completely unlike the one I was standing in, well... you can imagine what my spirit was doing. My favorite picture of all the 1,600 I took on this trip (aren't you glad I am not showing them to you this morning?), is one of this synagogue, with the palm trees in foreground and the sun shining warmly on its front wall.

Traveling north along the Hula Valley toward Caesarea Philippi, Yael shared with us the events of the 1967 war with Syria, Jordan and Egypt. The Golan Heights, a ridge of high hills running north and south along the Israeli-Syrian border, were less than a quarter mile outside the right side of our van. Yael told of Syrian snipers sitting on these hills, picking off Israeli farmers as they worked their fields. We stopped at a kibbutz for gas, and just a few yards from where we parked, we observed two "bomb shelters," still ready for use. Yael told us that every family living in the Golan area must be able to get to a shelter within one minute of any attack. A shelter is located every 2-3 houses. Any new house built must now have a bomb proof room within the house.

We then drove down a road that was strangely different from any road we traveled so far. This road was tree-lined, tall leafy branches forming a canopy over the road. These trees were planted to provide travelers and Israeli troops a protective sight shield from Syrian snipers.

What truly brought the seriousness of the political situation even closer to home, a reality check if you will, is when we asked why the fields to our left and right were fenced with barb wire and also the meaning of the orange triangles attached to the wire. Yael shared that the fields beyond the barb wire were still active mine fields left over from the '67 war. We earnestly prayed for the driver to stay on the road.

Interestingly, after we arrived home, I read on a computer blog site that Israel was considering returning the Golan Heights to Syria in exchange for a peace treaty. In her well written article dated April 30, journalist Melanie Phillips, writing for the Spectator in the United Kingdom, stated her concern about such a peace treaty. My thinking is that such a move would be pure suicide for Israel. Didn't Israel learn anything from the '67 war? I surely hope so. Golan in Hebrew means place of refuge, which Israel ought not to give up.

In the far north of Israel lie the uncovered ruins of Caesarea Philippi, a pagan community at the time of Jesus. Caesarea Philippi was the northern most known locale that Jesus visited. It is here that Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mat 16:13; Mar 8:27) It is here that many scholars believe that near-by Mt. Hermon, the tallest mountain in Israel, is the site of the transfiguration of Jesus. It is also from here that Jesus turned his eyes south to Jerusalem and to the cross. Interestingly, this also is the locale of the source of the Jordan River. The waters are crystal clear, cold and swift moving.

From Caesarea Philippi, we, too, turned our sights south and to Jerusalem.

At Megiddo and especially at Masada, I marveled at the engineering ingenuity of the ancient people. Water is life, and in Israel, water is not an abundant resource. We are all familiar and greatly impressed with the Roman aqueducts. But Megiddo and Masada are outstanding examples of unique feats of engineering and construction to collect and store water by hand-dug underground tunnels, cisterns, and channels dug out of the sides of mountains. Truly amazing.

I then thought about the prominence of the Jordan River in scripture. If you are picturing a river somewhat like the Niagara River, you'd be greatly disappointed. The Jordan River at times, is nothing more than what we would call a creek. But water is so precious a commodity, especially in southern Israel, rivers such as the Jordan assume an important prominence and impact heavily upon the people and their culture.

The Garden of Gethsemane, where we saw in awe a small grove of olive trees that are said to have been growing there at the time of Jesus. Picturing Jesus kneeling, praying among these trees... a spiritually moving experience indeed.

A truly profound professional and spiritual experience occurred for me on the morning of our last day in Israel, when we visited an area called the Garden Tomb, an alternate site to the place where Jesus was laid when taken from the cross. A few days before when we were in Tiberius, Yael sat with the four of us at dinner. She asked questions about us, our work, family, etc. When she learned that I was a priest in the Anglican Communion, and that Jim was a Deacon, she asked if I would celebrate at a Communion service Monday morning at the Garden Tomb. I dropped my fork and just looked at her, stunned at what I just heard. What an awesome privilege.

Service assignments were shared: Jim would read the Gospel and deliver a short homily; a third clergyman, a Presbyterian minister from near Erie, Pennsylvania, would read the lessons; I would be the celebrant. Yael, said that she would provide

wine and a chalice, which happened to be her wedding chalice, on which was inscribed in Hebrew, “God is the creator of the wine.”

But, now Jim and I had a problem. Although we brought clergy shirts, neither of us thought to bring a stole! After dinner our first night in Jerusalem, we walked to the Jaffa Gate and to the Christian quarter of Old Jerusalem. Entering Old Jerusalem for the first time left goose bumps riding up and down my spine. Told that a store we were looking for was “just up the street,” we began our adventurous walk. “Just up the street,” proved to be at least a 20 minute walk in narrow, twisting, obviously unfamiliar, streets. Some doubt did creep into our boldness, but eventually we found the store recommended to us. Result – this stole I am wearing this morning, purchased in Old Jerusalem, and used in the celebration of the Eucharist in the Garden Tomb on the final day of our stay in Israel. What a way to finish our tour of Israel; so richly blessed.

Following the Eucharist, we visited the “Wailing Wall.” Yael told us that even though this wall is not sacred ground, people believe it is. The holy ground for her is on top, the Temple Mount on which the temple was built. The Wailing Wall is but a very short section of the wall that formed the foundation for the Temple. Yet it was still awesome to feel the warmth and roughness of the stone shining in the sun and to be at a structure of great history more than two thousand years old. I prayed at the wall, wearing my clerics and a black yalmicah. Men had to have their head covered. I placed in the cracks of the stone prayer petitions given me as well as those of mine own. We were told that these thousands of small pieces of paper are removed every month or so and buried in the Garden of Gethsemane. Quite appropriate.

To be able to see, touch and smell places that scripture names and where Jesus walked – just awesome! To pause and reflect on Jesus living there, walking with and teaching his disciples. To see and walk in areas named in scripture. To see the area

of the Wadi David En Gedi Oasis and the type of caves in the mountains where David hid from King Saul and in Qumran, where the Dead Sea scrolls were found. To see the desolate, and I mean desolate, land of Moab and the Dead Sea area, and reflect upon the journey that Naomi and Ruth walked. What brave courageous women! For me, scripture now becomes a much deeper spiritual reading experience. I am now able to place names and envision places. Thank you, Jesus.

But I have a prayer request for you. Israel celebrates its 60th birthday on May 8. In her short existence since 1948, Israel has developed into a prosperous nation, much coveted by her Islamic neighbors. Israel is known world-wide for its fruits and vegetables. Intensive and uniquely developed irrigation systems were and continue to be developed. Barbie reminded me of the "Trees for Israel" campaign of the 50's. Israel still is planting trees through its countryside. Developing agriculture is a very high priority for the Israeli government. Israel is the leading diamond cutting and polishing center in the world. All this success wasn't easy. She fought two major wars and many skirmishes in her short sixty years. Political tension is always on high alert.

The entire nation has been placed on alert with the threat that something big and nasty will occur on May 8, Israel's 60th birthday. It is our understanding that President Bush is attending this anniversary celebration as well. God's own Word tells us that Israel is the apple of God's eye. Pray that she may continue to grow in God's favor and be protected on the occasion of their 60th anniversary. Pray for Israel that she may withstand the constant military skirmishes she faces. Pray that Israel's leadership will continue to stand firm in the face of tremendous adversity brought by the world at large.

Let us pray...