

Sojourn in the Land of the Bible
A Journal of my Sabbatical
February 27-May 14, 2009

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Saturday, March 07, 2009. The weather has turned beautiful. It's unseasonably warm, in the 70's, with a clear blue sky. It doesn't mean that the rainy season is over, and surely the locals are hoping it's not over, because they have received to-date only 40% of the rainfall they hoped to have this winter. We were reminded this week that the palm branches we use on Passion Sunday were originally waved by this agrarian people to remind God of the wind that brings rainfall, which in turn makes the land fruitful of grain, grapes and olives (bread, wine and oil). Instead, the nice weather brings tourists, Jews and Christians mostly. But you still cannot do without water; every tourist has his or her water bottle. This beautiful weather will test my virtue in staying in my room to write this journal. On the previous Saturdays my room was the only warm place I could find. Today, the world outside is beckoning. We shall see.

I am taking stock in this letter because the one-third mark of this program was reached on March 3. On that day I presided at the house liturgy, partly because it was my birthday, partly because it was my turn. The readings were Isaiah 55:10, "So shall my word be/that goes forth from my mouth;/It shall not return to me void,/but shall do my will,/achieving the end for which I sent it"; and Mt.6:7-15, "This is how you are to pray..." The effectiveness of God's word to us; the encouragement of our word to God, provide a good starting point for reflecting on where I am at this point in the biblical formation program.

This is where the courses stand:

Footsteps of History	18 hours, complete
Gospel of Mark	12 hours, complete
Book of Amos	15 hours, 4/5 complete
Letter to Romans	15 hours, 3/5 complete
Judaism (customs, etc.)	5 hours, 3/5 complete
Gospel of John	24 hours, 3/8 complete
Understanding Islam	4 hours, ½ complete
Oriental Churches	4 hours, not started yet
The Torah	24 hours, not started yet
The Book of Job	12 hours, not started yet

Summary: of a total of 133 hours, we have completed 65, almost half. (In the program remaining, we have two major excursions, one to Galilee for six days, another to Sinai for three. This explains why the bulk of course-hours are spent at the beginning of the program).

I would like to say a word about the mini-course concept in the study of sacred Scripture. These courses do not have the discipline or the depth of a graduate level course which would have class time of three hours a week over a fourteen-week period, nor do they require papers or

exams. But they have tremendous value in keeping students abreast of developments in the field, and of introducing students to distinguished professors whose books they may have read, or are encouraged to read, and of helping preachers to examine the text carefully to discern its revelation and instruction for life. For example, at the Georgetown University Scripture Institute, which I have attended for most of the sessions over the past twenty years, I have met Walter Breuggeman and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor op, Joseph Fitzmyer sj, and John Donohue sj and many other teachers. It has been a lifeline for me personally and as a preacher, and has indeed prepared me for the courses in this program. I will go home with notes and a bibliography that will take me years to work through, a new platform for studying, preaching and teaching. Recently, at a meeting of the participants of our program, we were asked by the director to express what has been the best experience of the program for each of us, thus far. For me, it was the studies, rather than the geographical proximity to the places of the Bible events. I believe these places would have little value if scholars of Christianity and Judaism had not gathered here over the centuries to work on their sacred texts, to translate and to interpret by translating, so that the rest of us would have a link with the acts of God and the formation of the people of God, the story of which is told in relation to this land.

I know there are many ways to God and to Jesus. I am probably most likely to meet Jesus in the temple, listening and asking questions. (Luke 2:46) Or, to use another image, I am sitting under the fig tree, having a conversation with friends. This image is taken from the Book of Zechariah; it is referring to messianic times when a person will be able to afford a fig tree, and the leisure to have friends over for a visit. "On that day, says the Lord of hosts, you will invite one another under your vines and fig trees" (Zec 3:10) It is referenced in John's Gospel as a messianic allusion in the call of Nathanael as a disciple: "Before Phillip called you, I saw you under the fig tree." (Jn 1:48)

I want to be patient with my experience in Jerusalem, and not jump to conclusions about its meaning or purpose in my life. Here's a good lesson from Henri Nouwen, The Path of Waiting (Crossroad, 1995):

"A waiting person is a patient person. The word "patience" means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Patient living means to live actively in the present and wait there. Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her womb."

I want to mention two special advantages of studying in the Holy Land. One is the emphasis on the Jewish identity of Jesus and the early Christian Church, and the link between the Old Testament and the New Testament. (An aside here: at times in these letters I have used the

expression “First Testament”, rather than “Old Testament”. But “old” can indicate a special value, such as, “this necklace is very old, it belonged to my grandmother.” We avoid the name “Jewish Scriptures”, or “Hebrew Scriptures” because that language may fail to express that Christians also hold the “Hebrew Scriptures” to be the inspired word of God, and are part of our sacred Canon. So I will go back to using the word “old”, not meaning discarded, like an old shoe, but in the sense of something that is made more precious precisely because of its age and history.) We have been dealing with the Jewishness of Jesus and the beginning of Christianity in the Gospel of Mark, of John, and the Epistle to the Romans. It is a fact which politics and history have at times obscured, but here, is a constant point of reference. I will say more about this at another time.

Reference is made here to the work of Susannah Heschel, professor of religion at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, [The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany](#), (Princeton University Press) that looks at the popular school of Protestant theologians in Germany in the 1930’s and 1940’s that presented Jesus as an Aryan who sought the destruction of Judaism and fell victim to the Jews. It should be noted that Dietrich Bonhoeffer tried, unsuccessfully, to get his colleagues in the Confessing Church to sign a statement in support of the Jews, but very few would. Bonhoeffer was killed in the spring of 1945 in a concentration camp.

The continuity of Christian life with its Jewish foundation is basically the rationale for the recent instruction from the Congregation of Worship and the Sacraments that the sacred name of YHWH should not be spoken aloud in the assembly in Lectionary readings or in hymns, in keeping with the practice of the Jews and the early Christians, who held the name of God in such reverence that it could never be uttered. Instead, the titles *Adonai*, or *Kyrios*, or *Dominus* were substituted. For us, this is not just a question of political correctness or of interfaith diplomacy, but a reverence for the holy Name such as was witnessed so faithfully by the Jews and early Christians. Also, we have Jesus teaching that we should call God “Our Father” (Mt 7:9) or “Father”. (Lk 11:2)

Another distinct advantage of studying the sacred texts here is that this is the geographic setting for the telling of the story of the Bible. The readings for the 2nd Sunday of Lent illustrate the point. In Genesis 22 God puts Abraham to the test in the scene we call the Binding of Isaac: “Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah.” Moriah is identified with the holy mountain of Jerusalem. The story of how God revealed that infant sacrifice did not please him, but instead, the sacrifice of a believing and obedient heart was the offering he wanted, is told on Mt. Zion. In addition to reading and studying the sacred text, a pilgrim can go the high promenades around the city of Jerusalem, look toward the rising that is the city of Jerusalem, and imagine the enlightenment of Abraham’s call, and pray for the faith to follow. Isaac is the image and type of Jesus, the only Son, the beloved of God. What is the Father revealing about Himself in the voice that came from the clouds in the scene of the Transfiguration. “This is my beloved Son...”

On Wednesday, March 4, we had an excursion to the Mount of Olives, under the direction of Raphael Carse, a Roman Catholic originally from New Hampshire, now living in Jerusalem. He has a doctorate in Pilgrimage, which combines history, theology and geography. The Mount of Olives is a high limestone ridge to the east of Jerusalem. Seen from the city wall, it is made more dramatic by the huge cemeteries beginning just under the wall (Muslim), and then separated by the road, going up the mountain side (Jewish). The graves are raised, with marble boxes appearing to contain the dead body. But these boxes are just decorations; the burial of the body is in the ground. Ancient legends and commentaries from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions tell us that the dead will rise first on the Mount of Olives; that's the reason the location has always been sought as a burial site. It was a cemetery before the time of Jesus, and it is through this cemetery in the Kidron valley that he walked on the night he was arrested. It was as each tomb spoke to him of his hour of destiny. This is the location of the Garden of Gethsemane, the place of Jesus' prayer on the night before he died. The word means Olive Press, symbolizing the weight of his mission. There are olive trees there that are over eight-hundred years old. The geography of the site is significant, because the crowd who came to arrest him, came from behind. Jesus was not trapped. He could have escaped easily, as he had done before. (Lk 4:30) The geography accents the doctrine of Jesus' freedom: "This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the power to lay it down, and the power to take it up again." (Jn 10:17)

The bus drove us to the top of the mountain and we walked down, visiting various sites as we descended. At the highest point, we came to the imposing concrete wall enclosing Bethany, the town which was the site of the raising of Lazarus in John's Gospel (Jn11:1-44) This was as far as we could go. Our guide advised that soldiers may approach us and ask that we leave; if they had done so, we were prepared to obey. The wall is about twenty feet high, topped off with barbed wire in big rolls, the wall going along the road for as far as the eye could see. Bethany, which is one of the "daughters of Jerusalem" and a supplier of farm produce to the city, is effectively cut off from its traditional market, and its people, Palestinians, are segregated and marooned. It was at this location that our guide asked one of us to read the gospel story of the raising of Lazarus. We each had a hearing device so the reader's voice could be heard from a distance. So there we were, not clustered together, and motionless in our scattered places, in the shadow of the great wall, as the story was read with the command of Jesus: "Lazarus, come out!", and "Untie him and let him go".

About a block away from the Bethany wall stood the remains of a large Palestinian house that had been demolished. The Arab houses can be distinguished from Jewish houses because they are built with flat roofs, as in warm climates, instead of peaked, tile roofs which the Jews build following European custom. Since 2000, the municipality of Jerusalem and the Interior Ministry of Israel have demolished about 700 homes in Jerusalem, and there are thousands of warrants yet to be carried out for further destruction. The homes are demolished because they were built without a permit. It is commonly known that the residents of East Jerusalem (Palestinians) have for decades been forced to build illegally on their own property because of the policy of the city planning authorities who simply do not have a blueprint for how to issue such permits,

so the residents just go ahead and build at their own risk. One of the students we met at Bethlehem University last week, had his home destroyed twice by the authorities. When we asked him how he coped with such a tragedy, twice, he remarked that all sorts of people had come forth to help, his family was very moved by the compassion they had experienced.

A headline in the Haaretz of Wednesday, March 4, said: "Israel Prize laureates urge end to demolition of E. Jerusalem homes". The story reported that twenty-one Israel Prize laureates called for an end to the razing of homes in East Jerusalem, blaming official policy for the abundance of illegal construction in that part of the capital. In the Thursday edition of the paper, a strong editorial repeated the same appeal to the authorities on the basis of basic human rights and property rights. Untie them, and let them go! Even if one just looks at this practice as one of waste: if you took all the cement that went into building the walls, and instead put it into building homes, there would be found the good stewardship of resources for the benefit of human beings and families. When Hillary Clinton was in Israel last week, she made specific reference to the intolerable practice of the demolition of Palestinian homes. The mayor Jerusalem dismissed her remarks, causing the U.S. State Department to issue a statement that the mayor's remarks had been "insulting" to the U.S. Secretary of State. It is refreshing to see the Obama administration correcting the blindly pro-Israel policy of the Bush administration.

Another site of interest on the Mount of Olives is the church (now a mosque) commemorating the Ascension of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The Christians built a church here which was in circular form, surrounded by columns but open to the sky (to facilitate looking up at the heavens). The Muslims kept the site as a commemoration of the Ascension of Jesus, which belief they share with us, and around the rock on which Jesus left the earth, they built a circular mosque with a concrete dome. It's just about twenty feet in diameter, so the thirty of us just about fit in. The dome has perfect acoustics, so, together we sang the Taize chant "*Laudate Dominum, omnes gentes*". In that place, with those acoustics, it's like singing in the chorus of the Met. The tradition is that the pure of heart can see the imprint of Jesus' left foot on the face of the rock where he ascended. Naturally I won't tell you if I could see the image; but I will disclose that Jesus' sandal size was nine and one-half.

We also visited a cave which was a meeting place of the Christians before 325, where, in secret, they commemorated the Ascension. When the church was free to practice the faith openly, the commemoration of the Ascension was moved to the summit of the mountain, to the site I described above. This left a cave without a purpose. It became a place to remember "the secret teachings of Jesus", a doctrine of the sect called Gnostics, who believed that Jesus imparted to some of his disciples a special knowledge (*gnosis*) that was not disclosed to all. In this belief they relied on a particular interpretation of certain passages of John's Gospel, such as: "The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of earthly things. But the one who comes from heaven [is above all]. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony." (Jn 3:31) Jesus himself counters the charge of secrecy in his hearing before Annas: "I have spoken publicly to the world. I have always taught in a synagogue or in the temple area where all the Jews gather, and in secret I have said nothing"

(Jn 18:20) As if to counter the gnostic sect, the cave is now called the Pater Noster Shrine, with a large open courtyard surrounding the cave, and on the courtyard walls, the Our Father on ceramic tiles in every language imaginable. So the open revelation of God as the accessible Father to all, prevails over the sectarian notion that only a select few get the full revelation.

There is much more to be said about the Mount of Olives, especially its place in Jesus' entrance to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. But I will save that until later, when I describe the events of Holy Week, 2009.

I want to mention two other events of the week. On Wednesday we had a model Seder in our dining room, conducted by Ophir Yarden, a Jewish teacher. It was very faithful to the ritual seder, lasting three hours. The Seder is intended to be a teaching session in which the next generation is told the story of the people and of God's loving providence in their regard, partly by the use of questions and answers, and special foods. I think that in the Seder everyone becomes a child, regardless of age. There is a feeling of inclusion and of being beloved by the Holy One who blesses your life and your family.

The other event of the week was attendance at the Friday evening Sabbath service at a reform synagogue called Kol Ha Neshana. This was in an upscale Jewish neighborhood in West Jerusalem, at 8pm. It was quite different, I believe, from the service we would have seen there on Saturday morning, which would be more like our Liturgy of the Word, with a sermon. I would describe this service as a semi-charismatic Vespers, the entire liturgy chanted, with a variety of chants some like Jewish folk music and one Taize Alleluia. It was well attended both by the congregants, who seemed to know all the music and words, which were in Hebrew, and by three visiting groups, two of which were Jewish pilgrims from the States, and the other being our Biblical Formation Program.

I'm finishing this letter on Tuesday because I did go out into the sun on Saturday, which I do not regret.

JR