

**Pilgrimage to the Holy Land**  
**Skidaway Island United Methodist Church**  
**May 25 – June 3, 2015**

**Day 1**

Following a pleasant flight, our group of 30 pilgrims led by Jim Giddens arrived in Israel at 3:30 pm. We then enjoyed a two hour bus ride from the city of Tel Aviv to Tiberius, which is on the Sea of Galilee.

Our Guide, Hannah, pointed out many sites along the way, including Mount Carmel, where Elijah is said to have killed the prophets of Baal. She also explained many Israeli customs to us, and even share tips on how to make our trip more enjoyable.

Of special interest was the regional harvest that is about to take place. Hannah explained that the harvests of the year often fall on or around special holy days. This one coincides with the recent feast of Pentecost.

When we arrived in Tiberius, the first site to greet us was the beautiful Sea of Galilee. It is much smaller than many of us had imagined, but inspirational none the less. Sitting 600 feet below sea level, it is one of the lowest points on earth.

The area surrounding the Sea of Galilee is where much of Jesus' ministry occurred. Tomorrow we will learn more about that, and even have the opportunity to go out on a boat.

After checking into our hotel, we joined the others in our group for dinner. Many turned in early after a long day of traveling. Tomorrow's adventure begins at 6:00 am and we can hardly wait!

## Day 2

Most in our group were summoned today by a 6:00 am wake-up call from the front desk of the hotel. Others were awakened by i-phones or personal alarm clocks. However, a select few of us were privileged to be aroused by a chorus of very loud songbirds outside of our windows. (It is important to note that the birds begin their rehearsal at 4:15 am, before the sun rises!)

Starting at 6:30 am, the hotel serves a wonderful breakfast buffet. Because of Jewish dietary restrictions, there are no meats served at breakfast. However, the beautiful array of fresh breads, fruits and vegetables quickly makes up for the lack of grits and bacon! (The coffee with steamed milk is also quite nice!)

Once on the bus, Jim started our day with a reading from the 100th Psalm. Hannah then taught us a new "buddy system" to help us keep up with each other. She also taught us how to say "good morning" in Hebrew, which she pointed out sounds very much like "broken toe" in English.

We then rode through the hills of Galilee in route to the Mount of the Beatitudes. Along the way, Hannah pointed out various aspects of the landscape, which helped us to have a deeper understanding of and appreciation for some of the imagery used in Jesus' parables (i.e. the field descriptions in The Parable of the Sower). Portions of the landscape are also very beautiful, and many flowers are currently in bloom.

As we traveled along, one could not help but be struck by the compact nature of this area. When you read the Bible as a child, it is so easy to imagine these towns as being very far away from each other. However, in reality, they are extremely close together. (At no point today did it take us more than 10 or 15 minutes by bus to reach the next holy site.) Hannah says that 80% of Jesus' ministry occurred in the small area around the Sea of Galilee.

On our way to the Mount of the Beatitudes, we passed through the small town of Magdala, the home of Mary Magdalene. When we reached the top of the mountain, our bus pulled off the road so that we could get out and overlook the Sea of Galilee. It was here that we read portions of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and sang "Great is Thy Faithfulness" together.

After a period of personal reflection, we entered the complex of an adjacent Benedictine monastery, which was constructed to commemorate the site where Jesus delivered his famous sermon. In the midst of the monastery's beautiful and well-maintained garden is a small chapel built in the Byzantine style. Once inside the chapel, we had the opportunity to sing the "Doxology" together, which sounded glorious in the acoustic of the all stone church.

We then made our way down the mountain to The Church of Peter's Primacy. It was on this site that Jesus is said to have told Peter to "feed my sheep." While there, we had the opportunity to walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. We also had the chance to observe pilgrims from

other countries as they worshiped, prayed, and sang. It was especially meaningful to witness a handicapped member of another group being carried into the water and prayed over by his loved ones.

Next, we traveled to the city of Capernaum. (Which, by the way, Hannah says we have been mispronouncing for centuries!) It was here that Jesus is said to have resided during much of his ministry in Galilee. Hannah even referred to it as Jesus' "headquarters."

In Capernaum, we had the opportunity to see the ruins of a fourth-century synagogue, as well as the recently discovered foundations of homes thought to be from the time of Christ. Hannah quickly pointed out the very narrow door openings of the homes. She then related this to the story of Jesus and the lame man who had to be lowered into the house from the roof because the door was too narrow.

Underneath a very modern church in Capernaum we saw the remains of an older church, which was built on top of the ruins of Peter's mother-in-law's house. This is where Jesus is said to have gone after he taught in the synagogue. Archaeologists are confident in the authenticity of this site due to historical graffiti and the amount of fishhooks that were found on the floor. (Remember, Peter was a fisherman!)

Our next stop was a museum which houses a recently discovered boat. The boat, which is thought to be from the time of Christ, was removed from the sea and restored. It is now on display in a moisture and humidity controlled area.

After a little shopping in the museum's gift shop, we made our way to the nearby docks for our boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. The boat, which is designed to look much older than it really is, had a motor and was large enough to seat all of us comfortably. Soon after we pushed off from the shore, the crew played a recording of the "Star Spangled Banner" and raised an American flag up the mast. This was greatly appreciated by everyone.

Out on the water, we could see the entire shoreline surrounding the lake. This gave us a real sense of what Jesus would have seen during his regular boat rides on the sea. Once we reached the middle of the lake, the crew shut off the motor and we had a time of quiet devotion. Members of our group read the scripture accounts of Jesus calming the storm and walking on the water. We then sang a few verses of "Eternal Father, Strong to Save" and "Lord You Have Come to the Lakeshore."

Once we reached the other side of the lake, we enjoyed a group lunch at a local restaurant. The meal, which was served family style, provided us with the opportunity to relax and discuss the events of the day. The highlight of the lunch was the famed Saint Peter's Fish, which was a freshly caught tilapia from the Sea of Galilee. It was very tasty, but very hard to eat! Also, the eyeballs made a few of the ladies in the group a little uneasy.

After lunch, we enjoyed a bus ride around the perimeter of the Sea of Galilee. Our next stop was at the Church of the Loaves and Fishes, built on the spot where Jesus is said to have fed the 5000. The church, which was built in the 1980s, was designed to look like a much older building. Hannah pointed out an ancient mosaic floor that had been incorporated into the new church.

Our final stop for the day was the baptismal site where the Sea of Galilee empties into the River Jordan. Even though we do not know the exact location of the baptism of Jesus, this complex provides an excellent location for pilgrims who are seeking to be baptized in the same river.

At the site, eleven members of our group changed into white robes and made their way into the water to be baptized by Jim Giddens. (As United Methodists, we believe that you can only be baptized once. Jim explained to the group before he began that what we were doing was "reaffirming" our baptisms.) Jim was even asked to baptize a young lady from another American group. We were all surprised and excited when her boyfriend promptly proposed to her after her baptism! She said yes!!

We returned to the hotel exhausted and overwhelmed by all that we had seen today. After a bit of time for cleaning up and resting, we enjoyed a wonderful buffet dinner in the hotel's restaurant. Members of our group took the opportunity to call and/or Skype home before turning in to bed. What a fantastic day!

### Day 3

After another sensational breakfast, we boarded the bus for our hour and a half long journey to the Mediterranean Sea. In route, Hannah gave us a brief version of 4000 years' worth of Israel's history, and pointed out many unique factors about the region's current status; both political and religious.

Once at the Mediterranean Sea, we entered the city of Caesarea, which was built by King Herod the Great in 9 BC as a memorial to Cesar. The city, which was once the capital of Judea, was intended to be a major center for trade. It was also heavily influenced by Roman culture, in both its engineering and architecture. (We visited this site because of its significance to the ministry of Peter, as recounted in Acts 10.)

Upon arrival, we watched a very informative video, and then made our way into the open air theatre. The theater, which very much resembles the Roman Coliseum, is the most ancient of all theaters found in Israel. Built to accommodate over 4000 spectators, the space is known for having phenomenal acoustics. (Hannah and others in the group encouraged me to go on the stage and test them out. I sang the chorus of "How Great Thou Art" in a normal voice and it filled the entire space as if I were using a microphone. Amazing!)

We then toured the remains of Pilate's Palace, as well as the Hippodrome, which was used for horse races. Hannah made sure to point out the ancient "toilets" that were placed near the entrance to the Hippodrome. One brave member of our group even climbed up and demonstrated how to sit on them!

We then boarded the bus and made our way a few miles down the coastline to view the remains of an aqueduct. This impresses system was original 11 miles long and carried water from Mount Carmel all the way to the city of Caesarea. It was at this point that we enjoyed a leisurely stroll along the beach and some even chose to dip their toes in the Mediterranean.

Next, we returned to the bus and traveled northeast for about an hour. The road we traveled, which was once a major trade route, eventually came to a narrow point between two mountains and then emptied into a large valley. It was here that a large fortress was built on the hill of Megiddo, allowing whoever resided there to control the trade route, and thus control the country.

The large valley, which has been the site of numerous battles throughout Christian history, is known as Armageddon (meaning the Valley of Megiddo in Hebrew.) It is here that the book of Revelation predicts the final battle between good and evil will take place.

Apart from its apocryphal connotations, Megiddo actually has a very interesting history. The first humans to occupy the site arrived 7000 years ago, and Megiddo was not completely abandoned until sometime in the fourth century B.C.

This did not mean, however, that the site enjoyed peace and prosperity for all of that time. Due to various wars, natural disasters, and numerous occupants, Megiddo was rebuilt a total of 25 times. Not only was it rebuilt, but it was rebuilt on top of itself. Recent archaeologists have been able to peel back all 25 layers of the site, providing us with valuable information about Megiddo's history.

This was probably the most physically taxing site that we have visited on our trip so far. After having lunch, touring the very nice museum, and watching a short video, our group made the climb to the top of the hill of Megiddo. It was there that we were able to see real evidence of the site's 25 layers of history. Not only did we see the ruins of the city gate, pagan temples, homes, and Solomon's horse stables, but some of us were also able to walk down the 160 steps into the ancient cistern, which supplied the hilltop city with water.

When we reached the bottom of the hill, we were exhausted, but also so glad to have had the experience! After most of us found the restroom and water, and Jim Giddens found some ice cream, we made our way back to the bus for our hour long journey to Nazareth.

Nazareth, which was the hometown of Jesus, has grown from 200 residents during biblical times to 60,000 residents today. The highlight of our visit to Nazareth was the opportunity to enter the Church of the Annunciation, built on top of the house where Gabriel is said to have announced Christ's coming to the Virgin Mary. (Luke 1:26-38)

This Vatican II church, built in 1969, is very contemporary in its architecture and design. Special features include its rose-like dome, its light house inspired steeple, and its large and beautiful mosaics, each given by a different country and depicting the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus. (I would also like to point out that this church had not just one, but THREE pipe organs!!)

Our final stop for the day was a visit to the Mount of the Precipice. Just outside the city of Nazareth, this is the place to which Jesus was driven, and where he was ridiculed by members of his community after teaching in the synagogue. From the top of the mountain, we could see all of Nazareth, all of the Valley of Armageddon, and Mount Tabor, from where Christ is said to have ascended into heaven.

After reading the lesson from Luke 16 regarding Jesus' negative experience in Nazareth, we all sang "Blest Be the Tie That Binds" before making our way back to the bus. On our way down the mountain, we could clearly hear the Muslim calls to evening prayer echoing throughout the region.

On our journey back to Tiberius, we passed through the small Galilean village of Cana. It was here that Jesus performed his first miracle by turning water into wine. Once we reached the hotel, many in our group enjoyed cocktails in the lobby before dinner. Almost everyone went to bed early this evening, tired after a long but wonderful day.

## Day 4

After breakfast, we loaded our luggage on the bus and bid goodbye to the region of Galilee. Our journey began with a reading from Psalm 122, which is a prayer for the peace of Jerusalem. In the same spirit, Hannah taught us the Hebrew word for peace (Shalom), and even taught us a song to help us remember.

As we traveled southwest along the Jordan River (which is more like a creek than a river), Hannah pointed out the Mountains of Gilead and shared with us more information about Israel's geography. She gave special attention to the division of lands resulting from recent conflicts.

On our way to Bethlehem and Jerusalem, Jim Giddens made special arrangements for us to stop at the ancient city of Beth She'an. Much like Megiddo, this city was originally built 3,000 years ago on top of a very high hill. According to I Samuel, we know this to be the site of the death of King Saul. Beth She'an was conquered many times throughout history. However, it continued to grow and change; becoming a Roman city of 30,000 residents by the time of Christ. The site was abandoned completely in 743 A.D. after being destroyed by an earthquake. It was not until the late 1970's that archaeologists begin to discover the remains of the ancient city.

Upon entering the city, Hannah led us to the 7000 seat open-air theatre. (This one is twice as big as the one we saw yesterday!) Once again, I was asked to demonstrate the phenomenal acoustics. (This time I sang "I Walked Today Where Jesus Walked.") When this site was discovered over 40 years ago, only the top of the theater was visible from the surface. When you take into account that the theatre is one of the highest structures, you realize how much digging had to occur in order to unearth the city. However, as impressive as that sounds, and as enormous as the remains of the city look, Hannah told us that only 5% of the city has been uncovered.

We then walked through the downtown portion of Beth She'an on clearly defined stone and mosaic streets. Along the way, we had the opportunity to see the Roman bath house and the central marketplace, as well as various other architectural elements from the city's historical periods. Before leaving, some in our group were brave and decided to climb the 160+ steps to the top of the city's hill. It was here that a very famous scene in "Jesus Christ Superstar" was filmed.

After a little shopping in the gift shop and a quick restroom break, we boarded the bus and continued on our way. As we traveled, Hannah pointed out and described the concept of a kibbutz community. She also described in detail some of the recent conflicts in the Middle East. (By the way, we have all felt very safe on this trip. However, Hannah reminded us that tensions are ever-changing in this region of the world and one can never be too careful.) Other sites along the way included the Mount of Jesus' First Temptation and Mount Nebo, where Moses died. We also had a short glimpse of the Dead Sea, which Hannah says we will visit tomorrow.

We then had the chance to drive around the city of Jericho. This was the first city conquered by the Children of Israel after their exodus from Egypt, and it is considered one of the oldest cities in the world. As we rode, we could not help but sing a few refrains of "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho!" (It is important to note that the walls did not come "a tumblin' down" when we finish singing!) Hannah reminded us that Jericho was also where Jesus met Zacchaeus. (I bet you can guess what song we sang next!)

Before reaching Jerusalem, we passed along the town of Bethany. In biblical times, this was the official entrance road to the city. It was also the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and the start of Jesus' triumphal entry. As we approached the city, Hannah gave us some background information (including the fact that 10% of the nation's population lives there) and reminded us of the city's spiritual significance. As the bus reached the top of a hill, and the city of Jerusalem came into view, our bus driver played a nice recording of "The Holy City." It was a very powerful moment and everyone on the bus was in awe. (As you know, I have sung that song many times. But I must admit that I was not prepared for how much of an emotional experience that would be.)

As beautiful as Jerusalem was, Bethlehem was actually our next destination. The town of our Savior's birth is slightly south of Jerusalem (much closer than many of us realized), so we had to pass through the city in order to get there. When translated, Bethlehem actually means "house of bread." It was most likely given this name due to the large amount of wheat that was grown there during biblical times. However, we as Christians know the name to be especially significant in that Jesus was known as the "Bread of Life. Even though we think of it as being a "little town," Bethlehem today has 180,000 residents.

Before reaching Bethlehem, Hannah asked our bus driver, Ishmael, to pull over so that we could have a good look at the city. We then sang the first stanza of "O Little Town of Bethlehem." It was at this point that our guide, Hannah, had to leave us. Since Bethlehem is under Palestinian rule, she, as an Israeli citizen, is not allowed to enter. Our new guide, Johnny, met us upon arrival and remained with us for the duration of our visit.

After a very interesting lunch, we were invited to visit the gift shop of the Olive Wood Factory, which is owned by a group of local Christians. This site is where many of the beautiful wooden nativity scenes are made. I knew they were expensive, so I went in planning to spend around \$500 for an authentic Bethlehem nativity scene. I was very shocked to learn that the medium-sized nativity scene I wanted cost almost \$20,000! So, I settled for a keychain instead. Even though I was not successful, I think that many in our group were able to find Christmas presents for family members and friends.

After our shopping spree, we made our way to the Church of the Nativity. As we walked, the streets were full of merchants trying to sell things to us. Thank goodness that Hannah told us earlier in the day how to deal with them! They were most persistent! Once we reached the



church, we didn't have to wait long at all to enter the building. However, it was very crowded inside.

The Church of the Nativity is built over what many believe to be the birthplace of Christ, though no one can say for sure. Originally constructed by Constantine at the request of his mother, the site is one of the oldest Christian churches in the world. The main church, which is the second building on the site, is owned and operated by both the Greek Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The structure is currently undergoing a massive restoration, which will be completed in 2016.

To enter the church, you must go through a very small door. This door is known as the Door of Humility. During the times of the Crusades, it was thought that Christians should be made to "bow low" before entering a holy site. Even though scaffolding was everywhere, we could still see and appreciate the beauty of the building. I was personally impressed by the 36 limestone columns in the nave, the intricate wood carvings on the doors and ceiling, and the abundant use of painted/gilded icons throughout the space.

While we were there, a mass was being celebrated in one of the side chapels. Our tour guide pointed out that the priest was using frankincense as part of his ritual. (How appropriate!)

The actual place where Christ was born is located in a grotto underneath the high altar on the east end of the church. To get there, you have to go down a small and narrow set of stairs. The stairs then empty into a large cave, which was the biblical equivalent of a stable.

This portion of the trip was very disappointing to me. Not so much the site itself, but the way the people behaved in it. I was amazed at how irreverent and rude many of the Christian pilgrims were. On more than one occasion, we had people push us out of the way or cut in front of us in line. People also talked very loudly and seemed to give no respect for the sacred nature of the space.

On the same campus is the 1881 Church of Saint Catherine. Completely owned and operated by the Catholic Church, this congregation also lays claim to the birthplace of Christ. In the cave underneath their altar, we find the graves of many of the innocent children slaughtered by Herod, as well as the grave of Jerome, who is said to have first translated the Bible. It was here that our group sang a stanza of "Silent Night.

After our visit to the Church of the Nativity, we boarded the bus and took a short drive outside the city to one of the shepherd's fields. On this site stands a small 1954 chapel, which was built to resemble a shepherd's cave. It was here, in a glorious acoustic, that we read the Christmas story from Luke 2 and sang a few stanzas of "The First Noel." We then made our way out of the chapel and on to the hillside. From this point we could look out and see all of Bethlehem and parts of Jerusalem. After a time of quiet reflection, Jim Giddens offered a prayer, and we started to make our way back to the bus. But first, a few in our group decided to explore the shepherds

caves located within the hillside. These caves were quite large and seemed to have clear divisions of space. Some in our group even joked about where the master bedroom was located.

Before getting on the bus, we said goodbye to our guide, Johnny, and he took a moment to explain to us the basic differences between the various religions of the Middle East. We appreciated his words and realized how much we don't understand. He pointed out that there are good Muslims and there are good Christians. He also pointed out that there are bad Muslims and bad Christians.

We then made our way back to the city of Jerusalem. On our way into the city, we picked up Hannah, who was glad to see us again. Before taking us to our hotel for the night, Hannah wanted us to have one more opportunity to look over the city of Jerusalem. She took us to high point located near the office of the United Nations. From there, we could see Mount Moriah (The Temple Mount), The Kidron Valley, The Mount of Olives, Mount Zion, and the Dead Sea. Hannah used this opportunity to point out the different geographical divisions of the city by religions.

Hannah then told us the Old Testament story of how King Melchizedek welcomed Abraham to the city of Jerusalem with a toast of wine. So, in an effort to welcome us to her city, Hannah distributed glasses of wine to our group. She then taught us a blessing in Hebrew before toasting our friendships. Following the toast, we had a reading from the first chapter of Isaiah. This reading tells what it will be like when peace finally comes to Jerusalem. It seemed appropriate to end our time overlooking the city by singing "Let There Be Peace on Earth."

We then traveled to our very nice hotel, which is right in the heart of the city. Upon arrival, our hospitality couple (A retired United Methodist minister and his wife) came on the bus and gave us instructions for how to check in. One special instruction had to do with the use of the hotel's elevators. Since this evening marks the beginning of the Sabbath, certain elevators will be stopping on every floor as they go up and down. This is so that the Jewish people do not have to push any buttons. We are told that this would be considered a type of "work," which is unacceptable on the Sabbath!

After a short time to rest, cocktails in the bar, and a lovely dinner, we all turned in giving thanks to God for another wonderful day.

## Day 5

When we boarded our bus today, we could tell a major difference in the weather. While in Galilee, the temperature was in the high 90s. However, in Jerusalem it is much cooler, and there is a nice breeze. For our devotion this morning, Jim read to us from Psalm 128, and Hannah taught us a traditional Sabbath greeting ("Shabbat Shalom").

Our first stop was an outlook on the top of the Mount of Olives. From there, Hannah pointed out the locations of the Eastern Gate, the Garden of Gethsemane, the original entrance to the temple, Pilate's judgment hall, Caiaphas' house, the Upper Room, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and the Garden Tomb. (We will visit all of these within the next few days.) She also pointed out the route used for the procession on Palm Sunday, which we then read about in Matthew 21. Before leaving the outlook, we took a few group photos (one with the TWATL), and a few brave members of our group enjoyed a quick ride on a camel!

On our way down the mountain, along the Palm Sunday procession route, we stopped at a Jewish cemetery. While there, Hannah took the opportunity to point out many interesting facts about Jewish burial traditions. She also pointed out that there are Christian and Muslim cemeteries in the same valley. She explained that the Bible says the second coming of the Messiah (or the First Coming if you are not a Christian) and the resurrection of the dead will occur between the Mount of Olives and the city of Jerusalem. This makes the valley a popular burial site.

About halfway down the mountain, we came to the Church of Dominus Flavis. This is the location where Jesus is said to have wept over the city of Jerusalem. The modern church, which was built in the shape of a tear, is a small space with a very nice acoustic. As we entered the church, we could hear a group of Africans singing. It turns out that they were United Methodists from Zimbabwe, who were on a pilgrimage just like us! How neat it was to share that special moment in the Holy Land with fellow United Methodists from around the world!

After bidding goodbye to our brothers and sisters in Christ, we remained in the chapel for a moment to read the account of Jesus weeping over the city from Matthew 25. Before leaving, we sang the first and last stanzas of "It Is Well with My Soul." After learning about the significance of the Mount of Olives and the valley below, the phrases "sorrows like as billows roll" and "the trump shall resound" seemed to leap off the page as we sang!

We continued down the mountain and eventually came to the Garden of Gethsemane. This is the place where Jesus prayed with his disciples before he was arrested and sentenced to death. As you might have imagined, the small garden is full of olive trees, with exotic plants growing in between them. Some trees on the site are said to be offshoots of the trees that grew there during Jesus' day.

Before going into the church built on the site (known as the Church of the Agony), Hannah took a moment to explain to us the symbolism associated with the garden's name. Gethsemane means "olive press" in Hebrew. And just as the olive press puts "pressure" on the olive in order to get the oil burned to create "light," Jesus had "pressure" put on him in the garden so that he could become the "light" of the world.

Outside of the church, which is at the foot of the mountain and on a very noisy highway, we read Luke 22: 39-54. Upon entering the church, we were all struck by how dark it was inside. Hannah pointed out that the architect did this on purpose so that it would feel like "night time" in the garden. Under the altar table is a large rock, said to be the one on which Jesus prayed "not my will, but thine." After kneeling down to touch the rock, and spending some time in prayer, we made our way back to the bus.

We then rode through the city of Jerusalem to the site of the Upper Room, located just outside of Zion's Gate. Along the way, Hannah showed us how the city had grown over time by pointing out the new city wall in comparison to the old city wall. Once we arrived at the upper end the city, we had to walk a short way to the site where the Last Supper occurred. As we walked, we passed a young harpist who was playing beautiful music near the tomb of King David (also a harpist). After climbing a small set of stairs, we came to the place where Christ is said to have celebrated his last Passover meal with his disciples. To our disappointment, Hannah explained that this was most likely not the original location of the Last Supper. However, scholars know that it was in the general vicinity, and the current site has been designated as a holy place since the fourth century. It was here that we read Mark 14:12–20.

After taking a moment to pay our respects at the tomb of King David, we walked a few blocks to the Church of Saint Peter Gallicantu, built over the house of the high-priest Caiaphas. Archaeologists know this site to be authentic due to the large size of the house, as well as the dungeons found underneath. Leading up to the site are the remains of stairs which Jesus would have actually walked up on his way from Gethsemane.

The church on this location, which was built in the 1930s, has a rooster on the top of its dome. This is to honor the three times that Peter denied Christ before the cock crowed. We paused briefly to read John 18:15-28 and then made our way into the dungeons underneath the church. It was here that we read Psalm 88 (the words Jesus would have prayed while in captivity) and sang three stanzas of "Amazing Grace." The verse about "many dangers, toils, and snares" was especially poignant.

After lunch, and a little more time for shopping, we traveled by bus to the Israel History Museum. There, we were able to see a large outdoor model of what the city of Jerusalem would have looked like 2000 years ago. The intricate model was built on a scale of 1-50. This was really great in that it helped us to connect the sites that we had seen to the actual Biblical account.

We spent the remainder of the afternoon touring the inside of the museum. Highlights of their exhibit include the Dead Sea Scrolls, the skull of a Galilean man from 250,000 years ago, and the sarcophagus of King Herod. The museum also has an extensive archaeological collection, which brought to life many of the historical periods and cultures discussed so far on our trip.

After enjoying a little ice cream, we boarded the bus and made our way back to the hotel. Before dinner, Hannah reminded us that tomorrow would be the day we visit the Temple Mount. In order to get an early start, our wakeup call is scheduled for 5:30 am! With that, I will bid you an early goodnight.

## Day 6

After our 5:30 am wake up call, we enjoyed a quick breakfast and then boarded the bus. For our morning devotion, Jim read to us from Psalm 24, which states, "lift up your heads, ye mighty gates!" This seemed most appropriate since most of our morning would be spent on the site of the ancient Jewish temple.

Once we arrived on the site, which is located at the top of Mount Moriah, we had to go through a security checkpoint. Hannah warned us that we would not be allowed to take our Bibles onto the site due to the fact the Temple Mount is currently controlled by Muslims. Because of this, Jews who are brave enough to visit are accompanied by police at all times. Hannah also instructed us not to show affection while on the site. She told us that even putting an arm around another person for a picture would offend the Muslims.

The site of the original Jewish temple is the third most holy place on earth for the Muslims. It was there that Mohammed is said to have had his night journey. To commemorate this, the Muslims built a gold domed shrine in 691, making it the oldest Muslim shrine in the world. (This is the one that you see in all of the pictures of Jerusalem.) Since 2000, only Muslims are allowed to go in the shrine. However, Hannah took a moment to describe the inside of the shrine, which includes warning against the teachings of Jesus in the dome. The top of the dome has a closed Crescent (most mosques have an open crescent), which signifies that the shrine was built to commemorate something.

Before leaving, Hannah pointed out some things about the Temple Mount that were relevant to Christians and Jews. These included the area where Jesus would have had his altercation with moneychangers, the location of the Holy of Holies, and the site where Abraham is said to have sacrificed Isaac.

On our way out, Hannah took a moment to point out the Eastern gate, which was built in the seventh century. It was originally built to honor a grand procession into the city, but it is also the place from which Jesus will supposedly enter the city at his second coming.

We then made our way to the Church of St. Anne. This structure is built over one of the many locations believed to be the birthplace of the Virgin Mary. (The church is named after Jesus' grandmother and is also said to be the Church of Grandparents.) It was built by the Crusaders, and used as a school by the Muslims for a period of time. Since the church is located so close to the Pool of Bethesda, we paused for a reading from John 5 about Jesus healing the lame man.

Hannah then gave us the opportunity to sing a few songs. We started with the "Gloria Patri," and then sang the first stanza of "Holy, Holy, Holy." (I pointed out to the group that today was Trinity Sunday and that all of you back home would be singing this as your opening hymn.) We then sang "Surely the Presence" and I closed our small time of worship by singing "The Lord's Prayer." We all agreed that this church had the best acoustic yet!

Hannah then led us to the actual Pool of Bethesda, which was right outside of the church. In the Bible, the Pool of Bethesda is said to have had five sides. But how is it possible for a square pool to have five sides? Hannah pointed out that the pool was actually two pools side by side, with a fifth wall dividing them in half.

We then left the old part of the city by way of the Lion's Gate, which is sometimes called the Saint Stephen's Gate. This is because it is believed that Saint Steven (the first martyr of the Christian church) was stoned just outside. This gate is also where troops entered the city at the start of the relatively recent Six Days War.

We then made our way to the Jerusalem Archaeological Park. We first entered the Visitor's Center and enjoyed a very nice video about what it would have been like for an ancient Galilean to travel to the Jerusalem. According to tradition, all Jews were expected to make their way to the temple three times a year in order to offer their sacrifice.

After leaving the Visitor's Center, Hannah pointed out the school building across the park, which was designed by the same architect who designed the Jepson Center in Savannah. Hannah then showed us one of the original entrances to the temple, and we even had the opportunity to stand on the stones of the original road.

We then moved to the front of the temple and admired the ritual bath. (Jews were expected to cleanse themselves before approaching the temple.) We then had the opportunity to walk up the original steps of the temple, which was part of the gate entrance. Hannah called to our attention that some of the steps were uneven on purpose in order to slow people down. This allowed them to contemplate on their spiritual journey as they approached the temple. She then told us a story about when Neil Armstrong visited the temple steps in the 1980s. He later commented that walking those steps meant more to him than the steps he took on the moon. Before moving on, we read the account of Pentecost from Acts 2 (believed to have occurred on that site) and sang "We Are Standing on Holy Ground."

Next, we made our way to the Wailing Wall, which is the only part of the original temple that Jews have access to today. Hannah took the opportunity to point out various things about the people who were there, including why many of them were bowing as they prayed. (This tradition started long ago and was originally a way to acknowledge each time God's name was said.) She also pointed out that many of the men were wearing prayer shawls (taken from a commandment in the Old Testament) and yarmulkes (a symbol of humility before God). Each of us then wrote a prayer on a small piece of paper and stuck it in the wall. Hannah says that these remain in the wall until they fall out, and even then they are put in a special place, never to be thrown away.

For lunch, we returned to one of the summits overlooking the city. This lunch was very special because it was made by the wife of Ishmael, our bus driver. The dish, Maklubah (upside down),

was made in a large pot with rice, vegetables, and chicken. Much like a layer cake, it had to be dumped upside down out of a very large pot. The meal was very delicious and everyone enjoyed the opportunity to relax in the shade.

After lunch, we entered the city's market place through Herod's gate and prepared to walk the same road that Jesus walked to the cross. Following the Catholic tradition, we started at Pilot's judgment hall and made our way down the Via Delarosa (Way of Suffering), observing each of the Stations of the Cross along the way. There is a Christian church built at each station along the route. And of those, we had the chance to enter the Church of Condemnation, as well as the Church of Flagellation. All of the churches along the route are modern churches (built within the last 500 years), which are operated by the Franciscans.

Along the way, we entered the Convent of the Sisters of Zion, which is known for its work with disabled children. In the basement of the convent, we were able to stand on the floor of the Antonia Fortress of biblical times. (This is most likely where Jesus would have been held as he awaited his sentence.) In the floor, there are games carved into the stone. These very well could be the games that the Roman soldiers played as they mocked Jesus. It was here that we read Matthew 27:11-31 and sang "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord."

Finally, we came to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built on top of the hill of Calvary and the resurrection tomb. The first church on this site was built by Constantine's mother. After its destruction, the Crusaders built the current church in 1149. The church is presently shared by Catholics, Greeks, and Armenians. Because of that, you can notice many styles of decor throughout the building. Even though this is a Christian church, Hannah pointed out that a Muslim family still controls its keys.

We made our way into the church from the roof level, and passed through two Ethiopian chapels. Once inside the church, we had to climb a large flight of steps in order to reach the altar area. This is because the church was actually built on the incline of the hill of Calvary in an effort to preserve it. Underneath the altar table, you can kneel down and touch the rock on which they believe the cross once stood. We also had a chance to see the Rock of Anointing, where it is believed that the women anointed Jesus's body for burial after the crucifixion.

Underneath the dome of the church is a large monument built over the site of Jesus' burial cave. Since it was covered, Hannah led us into an adjacent tomb that was like the one in which Jesus would have been buried. It was here that we sang a verse of "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today." As we made our way outside, Hannah pointed out that because of its age, the church is in a constant state of renovation.

After our visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Hannah gave us some free time to shop in the market. She advised us to bargain with the vendors, and to not use our credit cards in certain shops! As the bells began to toll, and the calls for prayer echoed over the city, we exited ancient Jerusalem by way of the Jaffa gate, and then boarded our bus to return to the hotel.



## Day 7

Today began with a reading from Psalm 127, which speaks of the heritage of sons and the reward of children. After pulling away from the hotel, we traveled east through the Judean Desert towards the Dead Sea.

Along the way, Hannah pointed out primitive shepherd communities, which are still inhabited today. She went on to explain that the shepherds are extremely hospitable, offering bitter coffee to guests as a sign of welcome. (The bitter coffee is a symbol of the guest's long and hard journey. If you are offered a second cup you are welcome to stay the night. If not, you must move on.)

As we continued our ride on the Jericho-Jerusalem Road, Hannah reminded us that this was the road on which the Good Samaritan traveled in Jesus' parable. We also passed a live camel on the side of the road, which Hannah says is there at all times to mark the actual point of sea level.

In the desert, we noticed groves of Date Palm Trees everywhere. When asked how this was possible, Hannah informed us that the Israeli government has been very creative in recent years with their irrigation methods. She said that many Jews believe that this phenomenon is a realization of the prophecy from Isaiah which states, "The desert shall blossom like a rose."

When we approached the Dead Sea, we were forced to take a detour because of a sinkhole in the road. This detour took us past En Getti, which is the place where David met with King Saul. On the hillside there, we noticed a small herd of deer-like animals. Hannah says these were Ibex, and that are known for their ability to blend in with the rocky mountain scenery.

Our first destination for the day was Masada. This mountaintop settlement on the edge of the Dead Sea was originally built by King Herod as refuge from his enemies. (We don't know that he actually ever stayed there.) It was recently added to the World Heritage list of historic places, and Hannah says it is the second most visited site in all of Israel. Today, it is a popular location for military ceremonies.

The story of Masada comes to us from the writings of Josephus Flavius, who was the commander of Galilee during Judea's great revolt against the Romans. In 73 B.C.E., the Romans, led by Flavius Silva, laid siege to the mountain. The army, consisting of 8000 troops, built eight camps around the base, a siege wall, and a ramp made of earth and wooden supports. When the hope of the rebels on the mountain dwindled, their leader convinced the 960 member community that it would be better to take their own lives than to live in shame and humiliation as Roman slaves. The fall of Masada was the final act in the Roman conquest of Judea.

After a short visit to the guest center, we took a cable car 450 meters to the top of the mountain plateau. When we entered through the Eastern Gate, we were able to see evidence of the site's

excavation and restoration, which began in 1963. We were also able to see the Mountains of Moab on the other side of the Dead Sea, where many believe Sodom and Gomorrah were located.

As we toured the mountain site (which was in the full sun with no shade!!), Hannah pointed out the remains of various parts of Herod's original palace. These included the food warehouse, the royal chambers, terraces, and the bathhouse. She also showed us how many of the walls in the palace were made of stone, but used a faux plaster technique in order to make them look like real marble. (Herod wanted the very best, but there was no way he could get fine materials through the desert and to the top of the summit.)

The second half of our tour focused on the various aspects of the site which were related to the later Jewish revolt against the Romans. This included a detailed explanation of their water system, a tour and explanation of their synagogue (in which were found remnants of a scroll containing Ezekiel's account of the Valley of the Dry Bones), and artifacts (lots) connected to the Jewish rebel's tragic end. Lastly, we saw the ruins of a Byzantine monastery, which occupied the site for a short period of time in the fifth century.

Following our tour, we made our way back down the mountain. Most of us took the cable car, however, a few brave souls (Trey and Megan) decided to do the 45 minute walk from the top to the bottom. Once back on the bus, we made our way to Qumran. This site is significant because it was where the Dead Sea Scrolls were located. After lunch in the cafeteria, we enjoyed a short video about the history of the site.

At Qumran, there are remains of a settlement built in the eighth century B.C.E. Occupying the settlement was a small group of celibate Jews called Essenes. They were at Qumran for two centuries, living very holy lives in order to prepare for the great revolt against the Romans. On the site, we saw evidence of their dining hall and their ritual baths. We also saw the host and crew of the popular PBS TV show, "Reading Rainbow." They were in the country filming for an online interactive series on Israel.

After our tour, we boarded the bus and made our way towards a beach on the Dead Sea. Along the way, Hannah pointed out various unique factors about the sea's history and ecology. Cleopatra, for instance, believed that the mud of the Dead Sea made her beautiful. (It is rumored that the sea was even given to her as a gift by Julius Caesar.) The reason that the body of water is called the Dead Sea is twofold. First, the water has so much salt in it that it cannot sustain life. Secondly, the salt content makes objects float on the water, making them appear dead. It is also important to note that the Dead Sea is the lowest point on earth.

Hannah then gave us time to actually swim in the Dead Sea. Many of us even brought towels and swimsuits for the occasion. (I must admit that this was probably the most fun that we had together.) Before getting into the water, Hannah told us to make sure to rub the famous mud on our bodies. However, some in our group misunderstood and the lifeguard on the beach had to

tell them that they were actually rubbing sand on their bodies instead of mud. Once in the water, we all enjoyed the unique experience of "floating."

After taking showers, changing clothes, and having some ice cream, we boarded our bus and returned to the hotel. After some time to rest, and a wonderful dinner, we boarded the bus again and made our way to the Citadel Arena in the old city of Jerusalem. It was here that we enjoyed a wonderful sound and light show projected on the ancient ruins of the city. The show told the history of Jerusalem through picture and song. What a perfect way to end the day!

## Day 8

This morning was special because we had the opportunity to sleep late. We were not required to be on the bus until 8:30 am, and all of us really enjoyed the extra few hours of sleep! Once on the bus, Jim shared with us a devotion from Psalm 138. We then made our way to our first stop for the day, which was the Holocaust Memorial Museum.

As we traveled through a traditional Jewish neighborhood, Hannah took the opportunity to point out the differences between the various sects of Judaism. She said that the Orthodox Jews (the ones walking along with beards, black hats, and long black coats) believe that the men of the family should spend all of their time in prayer and study of the Scriptures. The others (Hasidic) believe that you can live a normal life and work to support the family. She also pointed out that certain Jews are not required to serve in the military (something that is required of all other males in the nation).

As we approached the museum, Hannah told us of how the Holocaust had affected the nation of Israel. During Hitler's reign of terror, his army executed anyone whose grandparent was Jewish. This means that the person did not necessarily have to be Jewish, but was executed because they had Judaism in the recent bloodline. She went on to say that after the war, Israel used the same method of thinking in order to become a safe place for Jews all over the world. This means that if anyone seeking residency in Israel can prove that their grandparents were Jewish, it automatically makes them an Israeli citizen. Hannah called this the Law of Return.

When we arrived at the Holocaust Museum, we could not help but be impressed by the crisp and modern architecture of the campus. Hannah told us that the entire museum was designed like a spear piercing the mountain on which it was built. This was to represent how the Holocaust had pierced the spirit of humanity. As we walked through the main courtyard, we noticed various trees planted in memory of people who were obviously not Jewish. Hannah told us that these trees were planted in memory of those non-Jews who had helped or hidden the Jews during the time of the Holocaust. The trees are Carob trees, which are said to produce a fruit on which humans can live without any other sustenance.

As we left the main courtyard, we entered a complex that was dedicated to the memory of the children lost during the Holocaust. Built by an American Jewish family in memory of their son, this beautiful memorial honored the one and a half million children lost during the Holocaust. As we entered the dark space, we could hear the names of the children being read aloud. The next room consisted of mirrors, which reflected candles throughout the space. This made it feel as if we were walking through the stars. As we left the exhibit, we walked out onto a large balcony which overlooked the city of Jerusalem. Hannah told us that this was to help visitors look toward the future as they remembered the past. Hannah then gave us an hour to make our way through the actual museum at our own pace. It was very crowded, and there was a lot of information to take in. What I saw I found to be very meaningful. However, I made sure to buy a few books in the gift shop so that I could read more about the displays at a later time.

Our final stop on the trip, was a visit to the Garden Tomb, which was discovered by General Gordon and 1894. This is the other site within the city of Jerusalem where it is believed that Jesus could have been crucified and/or buried. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which we visited earlier in the week, was built on the hill of Calvary. The Garden Tomb is located next to the hill of Golgotha (also known as the place of the skull).

Once inside the garden, Hannah turned things over to Peter, one of the garden's caretakers. He took us to a small seating area where we had the opportunity to look out over the hill of Golgotha. He pointed out the shape of a skull in the side of the mountain, and went on to tell us of how the nose had fallen off when it was struck by lightning a few years ago. He also pointed out a small house in the distance, which once belonged to Philip Bliss, the writer of the hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul." He went on to explain the various reasons as to why people feel that this was the actual site of the crucifixion. In the book of Leviticus, it says that the big sacrifice for humankind will take place on the north side of the temple. The Garden Tomb is located to the north, whereas the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is located to the west.

Peter then took a moment to point out the similarities between the sacrifice of Isaac (which we know took place on the north end of the temple mount) and the crucifixion of Jesus. Both individuals are said to have had wood placed on their backs. Peter also said, much to our disappointment, that the crucifixion did not occur on the hill itself (as the old gospel hymn says), but rather next to the highway that enters the city through the Damascus gate. (Crucifixions were meant to be a warning to all who passed by.)

Next, we made our way through the garden to the sight of the tomb. We know from the Biblical account that the tomb in which Jesus was laid was new. We also know that it was most likely owned by one of Jesus' wealthy family members. Many things about this location seem to match that account. Once there, we had a scripture reading from Matthew 28. Afterwards, each of us had an opportunity to go inside the tomb. On the door to the tomb is a plaque which states, "He is not here! He has risen!"

Finally, we were taken to a quiet spot in the garden where we observed the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Even though we had to wait for the Muslim calls to prayer to finish before we could start, I think that I speak for everyone when I say that the service was extremely meaningful. After reading the liturgy, we sang "Let Us Break Bread Together" and "In the Garden." Each of us received a small communion chalice carved out of olivewood as a memento of the occasion. Before the long walk back to the bus, Hannah gave us a moment to peruse the gift shop, with many of us buying last-minute gifts and souvenirs. The rest of the afternoon was at our leisure. Most of us went back to the hotel for lunch (a few ordered Shawarma), some took the opportunity to pack, others used the time to rest, and a small group of brave souls decided to walk the ancient wall around the city of Jerusalem!

After a farewell dinner, half of our group boarded the bus to the airport for our journey home. (The rest of our group remained for an extension to Jordan.) Before leaving, we said our goodbyes, and Jim presented our guide (Hannah) and our bus driver (Ishmael) with gifts from the group. As we rode to the airport, we enjoyed a beautiful sunset overlooking the city of Jerusalem. This trip was fantastic! Not only did we see wonderful sights, but we also made wonderful friends. When we return home, I know that we will all have a new appreciation for the things we read and study in the Bible. We will also strive to pray for peace....in Jerusalem, in our homes, in our church, in our nation, and in the world.

Soli Deo Gloria,  
Justin L. Addington  
Director of Music & Worship