

Dear Friends,

Our trip to Jordan, Israel and Palestine was wonderful and sacred. While many of us prepared for the trip through sharing in “One God- Three Faiths” study groups and by extensive reading and discussion, I do not think any of us were prepared for the stark beauty of the desert and the wilderness, or the profound spiritual experience of walking in the places where Jesus and his disciples walked. Being “in the land” allowed the stories of the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New, to take on new meaning. Our experiences allowed us to begin to know the land, the people, and the religions that have shaped our lives and the lives of many others.

We began our journey in Jordan, staying in the capital of Amman. Amman is a vibrant city with over two dozen construction cranes at work, a sign of economic vitality attributed to the nation’s peaceful relationship with Israel. We traveled to Petra, ancient home of the Nabataeans whose ability to create civilization out of rose rock canyons is amazing. This part of the experience enabled us to visualize the Israelites trek from Egypt toward the Promised Land, a daunting journey.

We then crossed the Jordan River and spent a night in Jericho, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities on earth, and visited Qumran, site of the Dead Sea scrolls discovery. Our next stop was the Sea of Galilee where we spent three nights in a Catholic hostel on the Mount of the Beatitudes, overlooking the Sea. That was my favorite location. We explored Galilee, including Capernaum and Nazareth. One highlight was an almost two hour visit with Archbishop Elias Chacour at his home church and school in Ibillin. Chacour, a Palestinian Melkite Christian and author of the book Blood Brothers, is a leader seeking peace in that troubled land.

Then we traveled to Jerusalem, with stops in Caesarea Maritima, on the Mediterranean, and Bethlehem. Our hotel in Jerusalem was in the West Bank, near the Damascus Gate, overlooking the walls of the Old City. Operated by Palestinian Christians, the hotel is truly an international pilgrimage center. Travelers from Russia, France, the Orient, and other places shared the dining room and lobby with us. Palestinians and Jews met with us on a variety of occasions, sharing their faith, their perspectives, their fears and their dreams. We visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorials, situated in the midst of a large park that includes a trail through massive stones, a living testimony to the power of stories and stones to bring forth and sustain faith, even in the midst of tragic remembrances. In addition to touring many holy and historic sites, some in our group joined an international Christian group in monitoring a military check point between the Old City and the West Bank.

Our experiences enabled us to learn much about the challenges of life in present day Israel and Palestine, yet we would be quick to say that we understand very little. Our group of twenty-four will be sharing reflections through a dairy in the newsletter, and a slide show and talk in Geneva Hall, on dates to be determined.

As we flew home from Tel Aviv, I was filled with gratitude – gratitude for the faith that makes such a journey sacred, gratitude for White Memorial and the commitment to mission trips, gratitude for the privilege of sharing the experience with Jan and others in our congregation. I realized again that faith comes from and is sustained by the eternal revelation of God, and religion is what people do with the gift of faith. Religion, no matter how nobly practiced, always corrupts faith, for religion is the response of people who seek to share their own understandings and expectations with others, and at times seek to do so by use of fear or power. As Jesus came to reveal the life of faith, so the Spirit of the living God continues to judge and enlarge our

understanding of that faith. Faith points us toward the one, true God, our creator, our redeemer and our eternal hope.

I am also grateful for all those at White Memorial who kept things moving in smooth yet faithful ways.

Yours, in faith, hope and love,

Art Ross