

Date: May 10, 2009

Scripture: John 15:1-8

Title: “The Journey and The Journal”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Jesus is the true vine. All grow in his name.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): The gifts of Jesus Christ reach from his home land to places all around the world, including this place of Immanuel UCC in Sedalia, MO.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

People ask me if I am worn out following my trip to Israel. The answer is that I am someplace other than worn out. There is this sense of weariness coupled with restfulness and all mixed with a deep sense of excitement for the journey I just completed along with thirteen other traveling companions as we made our way through Israel visiting Holy sites, meeting with church officials, and leaders of the military and government. The totality of the experience goes beyond words I can share; but I thought it might be appropriate this morning to offer a glimpse of the journey as recorded in my journal over the ten days of the trip. I also find it timely to share about the journey on this morning when we read and hear the words of John about Jesus being the true vine. The vine of Christ truly reaches from the Holy land all around the world.

Day 1 – Tuesday April 28 – Well, I’m on my way to Israel. After leaving KCI this morning I arrived into New York City at 1:15. I now have a 10 hour 35 minute layover. That’s OK. Out of all my travels for business and pleasure that have taken me to NYC, I have never flown into JFK Airport so there will be plenty for me to

explore. Plus, I find that airports are great places to walk and I can use this time and place to walk around and build up credits in the Immanuel Fitness Challenge. Let's see how does that work? I get one point for every fifteen minutes of exercise and that includes walking. I can probably get in six to eight credits before the other folks start arriving at 5 o'clock. I might even be able to walk further than that and justify an extra piece of pizza at the pizza party. I better get started.

Day 2 – April 29 – We have left NYC on time. The plane is big and full. It will be about a ten and half hour ride to Tel – Aviv. There are several religious Jews on the plane who go to the back and pray throughout the flight. ElAl Airlines is very committed to customer service. There is plenty to eat, drink and in flight entertainment. Besides for being packed into the plane, it is a very good flight.

We have arrived into Tel – Aviv. My very first impression of Israel is that it is overcast and brown. This impression changes fast as we make our way into the airport. This is a new, slick, modern facility. Also, as we make our way from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem, there are plenty of rocks, but also a tremendous amount of green. Israel is the only country in the world committed to planting one tree for every tree cut down. This commitment shows.

Our hotel in Jerusalem is beautiful. We are in the heart of the city, very near to the residences of the prime minister and the president. Now, after getting settled in, a delicious dinner, our first gathering for prayer and reflection, I am getting ready for bed. But wait! A big surprise! While channel surfing, I have found a St. Louis Cardinals' baseball game – the Cards and the Braves. However, after being up for

thirty hours, I doubt I make it to the end of the game. Plus, I need sleep because we have busy days planned.

Day 3 – April 30 – We spent today visiting with Israeli military officials. I was particularly impressed with Colonel Ran Livnat who spoke to us as we stood on a hill right outside the southern Israeli town of Svedat and overlooking Gaza strip. This town has been one of many in the area bombed by the Islamic Fundamentalist Group in Gaza called Hamas. This is a beautiful piece of the world stained by the ravages of war. Colonel Livnat makes it clear that while Israel currently lives in a time of peace, Hamas is using the time to build up weaponry and is preparing for future attacks. The look of resignation on his face is clear as he speaks of the probability of further war with Hamas and with the strong possibility of Iran getting a nuclear weapon which means extra threat to Israel. I ask Colonel Livnat what message I can share with the congregation I serve in the states. After a long pause he shares, “Please tell them we need their support. Our lives depend on it.” The burden of this trip begins to become clear.

In the afternoon we meet with two more military officials. There are very articulate about their desire for peace, their acceptance that more attacks are inevitable, and their commitment to humanitarian considerations as they go about fighting. I am impressed with their dedication to caring for the lives of others. Still, it strikes me that they are part of a process that is ultimately about war – not about peace. It is peace, true peace that this part of the world needs.

Day 4 – May 1 – What a fascinating day. We spend the morning touring

Jerusalem with Danny Tiraso, the man responsible for planning and building the security fence between Israel and the West Bank. This man, retired from military duty, has briefed Condoleezza Rice, Hillary Clinton, President Obama, and has been part of negotiations with former President Clinton, former Israeli Prime Minister Barack, and Asser Arafat. Danny makes it clear that the fence is his assignment to complete and he does the best job he knows how as he deals with constant complaining from everyone involved about every aspect of the wall. Since the wall has been built, there has not been one suicide bomber attack. In the afternoon we visit another wall - the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall. We have to go through x-ray machines to get to the Western Wall to pray. What a disappointment.

Day 5 – May 2 – Today we meet with two leading Palestinian officials. One of the officials is a chief negotiator for the Palestinian Authority. He speaks of his belief that peace is a long way off. The second is a teacher and a Palestinian Christian. He speaks of the ongoing violence between Arab Muslims and Palestinian Christians. I am beginning to get the picture that this conflict in the middle-east is more than a conflict over land between Israelis and Palestinians. There is corruption, ego, misunderstanding, anxiety, fear, ignorance, and religion involved as well. Dr. Sabella, the Palestinian Christian teacher answers a question that I have about a message I can deliver to my congregation. He says to remind everyone that we all live in the same world. We are also reminded by a tour sponsor, Sister Ruth Lutt, that we cannot solve the issue of peace in the middle-

east, but that we can solve issues of peace in our own places in the world. That's where peace really begins.

Speaking of peace, Saturday afternoon we visit the Garden of Gethsemane and Golgotha, the places where Jesus was arrested and then later crucified. I find Gethsemane to be a place of deep beauty and peacefulness. Even amongst the hustle and bustle of the crowds, which I can find challenging, there is a lifting of burdens and an embrace in the garden. The senses come alive as we hear the word of God read by Sister Ruth, smell the scent of flowers, and see the spectacular colors in this place where our Lord and Savior accepted a burden that is far greater than any other has had to accept. I could stay in this spot all afternoon.

Day 6 – May 3 – This is a spirit filled, policy presented, information offered day. We begin by visiting the Temple Mount, site of the first and second temple and the place where Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers. Next it was off to an Armenian Catholic Church for worship. Sister Ruth had offered us five places to worship, and this was the place we had decided upon. In reality this had to be a Spirit led choice. Besides for our group of fourteen, there were four Armenians, an organist, and the priest in worship. In reality it was not an Armenian worship, but a traditional catholic mass in an Armenian Church. Regardless, the organ music, a solo by one of the nuns, and a simple yet profound sermon about Jesus Christ's presence in our lives truly feeds our spirituality.

Following the worship, the priest invited us to tour his apartment above the church. It provides a breathtaking view of Jerusalem including the market and the

avenue of crosses leading to the church of the Holy Sepulchre. This was a splendid treat and a tremendously fulfilling morning.

In the afternoon we visited the Israeli Foreign Ministry and met with the chief spokesman and the Israeli head of relations with North America. Being the behind the scenes fan that I am, I was enthralled with the accounts these men provided of negotiations through the years with various countries including the U.S. leading to the place where we are now in terms of middle-east relations. I felt close to home as one of the men spoke of President Truman and of a visit to Independence and the Truman Library.

Day 7 – May 4 – Today we made our way north, visiting an Arab school in Israel and then on to the Sea of Galilee. Today we were in a fierce wind and dust storm. Winds blowing from the Sahara Dessert bring sand and dirt all the way across Israel. It wasn't pleasant. However, the visit to Galilee is another highlight for me. We visited four sites, the Church of the Beatitudes where I read scripture, the place where Jesus served the loaves and fishes, the coast line of the Sea of Galilee, and then my favorite site, the home of Peter's mother –in- law in Capernaum. I have always felt called to this place. What an amazing site to see the remains of this home and to feel the power of Jesus healing touch. Today the Franciscans have built a glass bottom church over the site so when in the sanctuary it is possible to look down on the foundation of the home and overlook the Sea of Galilee. This was another place where I could have stayed and prayed all day.

On our way back to Jerusalem we drove along the Jordan River and the

border of Jordan to the east. To the west we saw the Judean Desert complete with tents, sand, and camels. The turn back to Jerusalem at the Dead Sea led to a rise in elevation of nearly three thousand feet in about twenty five miles. We get back to the hotel just in time for a 7:30 meeting. Can we say tired?

Days 8 and 9 – May 5 and 6 – are supposed to be slower days so we only have 4 meetings and two dinners scheduled as well as the trip in to the West Bank and Bethlehem which includes walking through the check point – a stressful situation. The highlight of these two days is the visit to the Church of the Nativity and seeing the place where our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was born; the point of origin for the true vine. Although this is the place where He is born, I will soon be returning to one place where he lives.

And so we return. We leave Tel-Aviv on time for a twelve hour flight back to New York. Just to give an idea of how long the flight is, I watched three movies, had two meals, and took a three hour nap, and still had time to kill. But before I know it I am in KC and then Sedalia. I give thanks for this incredible trek to and through the Holy Land, but I have to say, it is good to be home. Let us pray.

Lord,

We offer deep thanks for the world that you have created and the opportunities to see parts of your world, whether it be right around this place called home, or places far away that others call home. For your presence throughout the world, throughout the universe and beyond, we offer our thanks this day. And so we pray. Amen.

Offering: Let us show our thanks for God's glorious creation through our morning offering.

The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Lord, accept this offering that we make and may it be used to spread your good news throughout your world. This we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Benediction: Go forth and know that Christ is the vine and we are the branches. We bear fruit abiding in the vine. Go forth blessed by God. Amen and Amen.

Source:

Journal by Brady Abel – Trip to Israel.

