



“Giving Thanks”

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19

November 22, 2009

As you probably know, 18 of us from the Westminster family have returned from our trip to the Holy Land. The full impact of our adventure will not be clear for some time because each of us continues to process the meaning of our journey. Ours was not a *tour* of Israel, but rather a pilgrimage. It was not a vacation, but a spiritual awakening.

For 16 days we took our own exodus from our routines and experienced a different daily rhythm. There was no *New York Times* on our doorstep and no *Morning Edition* as we ate breakfast. We hit the pause button on life as we normally live it and entered another world. We walked on paths that Jesus walked, reflected on the words that Jesus spoke and breathed the air that Jesus breathed in hopes of drawing closer to the One who creates, redeems and sustains us. Such a pilgrimage lends itself to retreating from the troubling events that put us on edge: violence, economic insecurity, family problems, injustice, work headaches, suffering... It was easier than usual to focus our energy on seeking a personal mountaintop experience.

Most of us yearn for a deeper, more personal experience of God. Life in 21st century North America is so secular that we must swim against the tide to carve out a spiritual existence. Much of what we encounter in our culture is profane, which prompts a disruption in our soul because God has created us with a yearning for what is sacred. Two weeks of encountering the land of the Bible provided us with an extraordinary opportunity to reintegrate our hearts, minds and souls.

Before sharing some of my impressions, I want to be clear that each person on the pilgrimage had a unique experience. Although we visited the same sites, heard the same lectures and worshiped in the same services, each of us encountered God in our own personal way because each person’s spiritual journey is unparalleled.

The story is told of a teacher who announced to his disciples that they would walk to the top of a nearby mountain that overlooked their town. The journey began smoothly, but “by midday it was apparent that the teacher had gotten them off the path. Moreover, no provision had been made for food. There was increasing anxiety and grumbling among the followers but the teacher continued marching ahead. Sometimes they tromped through underbrush and other times stepped gingerly across faces of crumbling rock. Once they finally reached the summit late in the day, they spotted other hikers already there who had strolled up a well-worn path. The disciples complained to their teacher about his circuitous route, but he replied, ‘These others

have climbed a different mountain’.”¹ And so it was for each of us on this pilgrimage. Each of us trekked a different path and climbed a different mountain.

In the months of planning leading up to this trip, I wondered how my first – and hopefully not last – venture into the Holy Land would shape my life and ministry. Over the years people have told me that their trip to the Holy Land was a spiritual highpoint that added depth to their faith and I wondered if I would be able to say the same.

I did not have an emotionally overwhelming experience, but my faith was deeply enriched and my insights are still unfolding. We visited many of the places that I’ve heard about since my childhood days of Sunday school and studied in seminary. These biblical sites possess no intrinsic supernatural powers, but they give us a point of contact with momentous events in the past whose influence continues today.

Years ago, walking through the battlefield at Gettysburg brought home to me the closeness of combat and the tragedy of this sad era in the life of our nation. I had heard these things before visiting the battlefield, but being there and seeing the hills where the cannons were positioned and walking through the field where the Union and Confederate soldiers clashed brought it home to me in a way that words and pictures never could.

Similarly, I have studied the biblical story for years, but experiencing the sites firsthand helped me gain a deeper understanding of certain events. When the gospels spoke of Jesus in the desert, I always imagined mounds of sand as in the old movie, *Lawrence of Arabia*. But the desert in Israel is not sand. It is barren rock and dirt.

When we visited the wilderness between Jerusalem and Jericho, I could see why the road that connected the two cities was notorious for muggings. There are no wide open spaces where you can get a clear view of someone approaching. It’s a vast area of large moguls with countless places to hide. It must have been a frightening experience to travel that road because every few steps held the possibility of a deadly encounter.

Seeing the route Jesus walked from the Last Supper, down through the bottom of the Kidron Valley and up onto the Mount of Olives enhanced my understanding of that fateful night. The distance Jesus walked was further than I had imagined – close to a mile. Where he prayed in Gethsemane provided him the perfect view of the Temple, his place of confrontation with the religious authorities. It’s apparent how easy it would have been to slip away over the back side of the Mount of Olives to Bethany where he could escape his persecutors. The temptation to flee that night must have been enticing.

Celtic spirituality speaks of “thin places.” These are places where the veil between the material and spiritual worlds is especially thin. A Celtic saying states that heaven and earth are separated by only three feet; however, in “thin places” the distance is even smaller. Many places in Israel are extraordinarily thin. These are sacred places where we are more aware of the Divine Presence.

It was amazing to walk on the same steps that Jesus used to enter the city of Jerusalem. It was awe-inspiring to pray at the Western Wall, the remaining part of the ancient Temple platform where Jews from around the globe come to pray. When it first came into my view after I emerged from a tunnel, I felt the hair on my arms and neck stand up. It was also very moving to stand in a cave in Bethlehem similar to the place where Jesus was born, to go out in a boat on the sea of Galilee where Jesus preached, to hike up the mountain fortress of Masada, to touch the rock of Golgotha at the traditional site of the crucifixion and to experience simultaneous and melodious worship with Coptics, Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics in the church that is on or at least very close to the spot of Christ’s resurrection.

Yet, do not think that this was an antiseptic experience cut off from the real world. Suffering often invaded our holy moments. Bedouin shepherds who live in a desolate environment that is uniformly hostile toward life, rode up on their camels and donkeys to beg us to buy their scarves and bracelets. Palestinians shared their frustration of being held up on their travel at checkpoints for hours. A very gracious Armenian priest explained that he is spit upon because he is a Christian. We saw numerous housing settlements where Palestinians have been pushed off the land their family has owned for generations.

It was tempting to avert my eyes from the current pain and problems, and to focus solely on my personal religious experience. Yet, when I sat in silence gazing at the harsh wilderness where Jesus was tempted to pursue the path of power and privilege rather than humility and compassion; and when I prayed in Gethsemane where Jesus was tempted to flee from danger, I realized that *I* was being tempted. I was being tempted to focus inward instead of outward. I was being tempted to seek a personal religious high rather than respond to human need with Christ-like mercy. I was being tempted to imagine a milquetoast Jesus rather than a courageous advocate for the poor and oppressed. I was being tempted to focus on personal serenity rather than justice for those whose lives are perpetually disrupted.

The historical sites of the Holy Land are not beckoning us to take a nostalgic trip down our individual memory lanes so that we can muster a personal emotional experience. Instead, they are opportunities to connect us with the man from Nazareth who taught that the way to love God is to love our neighbor. Imagine how different our world might be if those who sought only a personal experience of God focused on the same things Jesus set his eyes on: compassion toward others, justice for the oppressed and peace for all people.

As we approach our nation's holiday that was created for the purpose of expressing our thanks to God, I am especially grateful that Christ calls us to a faith that is lived in the real world and not an escapist spirituality. Living as we do in a tangled web of human failures, I am grateful for the path Christ strode, the pains he endured and the promise he gave us that God is with us in the sweat and toil of real living.

When the phone rings at 3:00 a.m. with devastating news, when a loving relationship disintegrates, when your job is terminated, when you fail the test, when your friend is disloyal, it helps to know that through the life of Christ, God endured the disappointment of rejection, the sting of betrayal and the suffering of mortality, yet never stopped loving us and seeking the best for us. It strengthens our resolve to keep pushing forward and holds out hope for a better day to know that God loves us and is by our side each step of the way.

Today's passage from the Gospel of Luke reminds us that it is not uncommon to forget to thank God for the blessings of life. Jesus healed ten lepers, yet nine of them developed amnesia and failed to express their gratitude for the fabulous new life he made possible. The story is intended to wake us up if we have taken the wonders of the world for granted; to shake the sleep from our eyes if we have failed to notice the marvelous gifts of God.

When we nurture an active spiritual life we develop a new orientation. We are drawn out of our relentless narcissism and become aware of the gifts of God that surround us. The countless blessings that touch our lives every moment of our existence become obvious to us and we develop a heart of gratitude for the sacred nature of life.

My hope and prayer this Thanksgiving is that the blessings of life will be transparent to you, and that your awareness will cause a profound feeling of gratitude to well up inside of you so that you cannot help but express your thanks. The man who healed the lepers, who taught us to trust God rather than Caesar, who extended forgiveness to the failures, who pulled the outcasts

near to his heart, who showed us that the best way to live is to love, who gave a special blessing to those who strive for peace, who demonstrated that even in the face of death we can cling to hope, gives us countless reasons to be grateful. In rich times, as well as times of grief, we can sing words of thanksgiving because there is healing in God's embrace and nothing – not one thing – can sever our tie with God.

NOTES

1. James P. Carse, *Breakfast at the Victory: The Mysticism of Ordinary Experience*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p.33.