

Exploring the  
**The Children of Abraham**  
with Rev. Tim Ahrens



*Writings from the 2010 Sabbatical  
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# SPAIN

## **Entry #1: Beginning the journey**

From the beautiful mountains and coastline of Andalusia in southern Spain, you could never guess that I have come to the place where holy wars were waged for 781 years - from 711-1492 AD.

In 711 AD, less than 60 years after the death of Muhammad, 12,000 Moors came with their Islamic faith and their armies on ships from Morocco to Gibraltar. In seven short years these warriors, called the Al-Andalus had conquered the Iberian Peninsula - now known as Spain. So the Moors, Muslims, or Arabs (all are used) were truly the first true conquistadors in Spain.

The Muslims ruled until January 2, 1492, the year Ferdinand and Isabella finally claimed Grenada - the last stronghold. Later that year, the same King and Queen sent a man named Columbus to find riches in India. On October 12, 1492, he landed in what is now the Dominican Republic and found native Americans whom he called Indians. Columbus has a rather mixed history both here and in our homeland. I digress.

Throughout the 781 year rule of the Muslim Moors, Christians remained the dominant faith by number. As they waged war and reclaimed one city after another, the reconquistadors would take a city and turn the mosques into churches as their first acts of domination. This re-conquest moved from the north to the south from the earliest years to the last stand in Grenada.

For example, Toledo was the first great city to fall to Christians in 1086. Immediately, the city was reclaimed for Christ. In a tiny mosque at the Gate of the Sun, the conquering King had a vision. He saw that in this mosque, the Eucharist or the body of Christ along with a light had been buried in the walls 375 years before. Legend has it that he tore a hole in the wall, supposedly found the candle burning along with the Holy Eucharist, and proclaimed that Christ's light could not be extinguished. He claimed the chapel for Spain and the Catholic Church and turned the mosque into Christ the Light Church. This practice happened time and time again.

However, I have found that often the mosques had been built upon the places where churches had stood dating back to the Visigoths in the 6th Century. Churches to mosques to Churches were not the only way holy space was transformed in these holy wars. This also happened with Jews. Synagogues

were built - often in Moorish architectural styles - and then the Jews were run out of Spain (mostly between 1350 to the final expulsion in 1492) and their holy spaces became churches, too.

I offer this historical groundwork as I begin my entries to simply show that throughout this 800 year struggle between three religions to co-exist in this beautiful land, power, war, and religious fervor was at the foundation of much that happened here.

How was God known and reflected in all of this? Ah, there is the question for the ages!

To God, I shall return. I have felt Gods presence in Jewish, Islamic, and Christian places while on my pilgrimage.

## **Entry #2: The inspiration of the Dominicans**

There is an underlying sense of the unspoken here in the religious history of Spain. In my quest, I have tried to discover where God is in all of this.

I have found God in many places in this story. While history is written by the powerful with the pens, it is the little people who often make the greatest difference - at least in the eyes of God. Spain has its kings and queens. It has its conquerors and its warriors. It also has its saints and seers.

St. Dominic is one such saint. St. Dominic was born in the tiny town of Calerguea, in the north of Spain in 1170. He was one of three sons - all saints and beloved ones in the eyes of the Catholic church. St. Dominic sought the truth of the gospel. He formed an order - known to this day - as the Order of Preachers. His first true followers were nuns in southern France. In Columbus, Ohio, we are blessed by the strong and spiritual presence of Dominicans.

Dominican friars guide the religious life of St. Patricks church. We have a blessed community of faith in the parish of St. Dominics Church in the near east side. But, the greatest influence in my life, and the life of our city comes from the Dominican Sisters for Peace. Their Mother House is adjacent to the campus of Dominican University - where their gifts and graces for teaching and preaching are shared with a growing community of young men and women.

In addition, the Spirituality Network of Central Ohio was founded by Dominican Sisters and has blessed First Congregational Church by being with us for the past ten years in what was once our Pretiola Shop.

The Spirituality Network offers programs for prayer and spirituality throughout

Central Ohio. Their successful and growing program called WellSprings trains spiritual directors who care for the hearts and souls of all men and women who come to them. Check them out!

You may need a spiritual director. I have been blessed by a spiritual director for the past 28 years of my life. Through these years, Roman Catholic sisters have guided my spirit and life of prayer. For the last 19 years my Spiritual Director has been a Dominican sister. God is blessing me all the time through Dominican spirituality!

Today, I write to you from the home in which St. Dominic was born. I have just come from the exact place where he was born. It is now a Well Spring of Living Water under the church of St. Dominic. I wonder where the name WellSpring comes from sisters?

I find the friars and the cloistered nuns of this blessed place to reflect the absolute best qualities of Christian faith. They draw upon the spirituality of their founder to shine Christ's light to others. This is a holy place. I feel it in the footsteps and the liturgy. I feel it in the unconditional welcome I have received as a Protestant pastor, whose Spanish is poor or worse.

Nevertheless, I am received as a brother in Christ and welcomed to the liturgy as the friars and nuns worship each day.

This convent opened in 1266. For 775 years there were only women religious in this town. They were served by a chaplain for the sharing of the Eucharist. But, their presence of love and delight was one that overcame the horrors and the hatred of religious wars begin waged all around them.

All the Dominican professors from across Spain were here when we arrived. They have gone now. But, their laughter, love, and light was shining to me and my family.

I am in a very holy place. God is here. The love of Christ is here. The Holy Spirit permeates the spirit of this place.

In the coming days, I will share about Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross. I encountered the living presence of the Holy Spirit in the places were they served Christ, too.

I shall also share stories of synagogue and mosque - both reflecting stories of the love of God!

**Entry #3: Sr. Narcissia and Padre Jesus**

Faith in Jesus Christ is very personal. Each faithful follower of Christ brings his or her rich faith to life through the actions of local settings of their faith community.

The reality of this truth came to light for me at the Convent of Santa Domingo, in Calerugea (Burgos) Spain. This Covenant has been in operation for 740 years - since 1270 AD.

I met two people - a nun and a friar - who were shining lights of Christ in the local setting of the convent and monastery. Sr. Narcissia and Padre Jesus were clear reflections of God's love and light to me and my family.

Sr. Narcissia is a young Dominican nun from Ecuador. At just a little over 4 feet tall, Sister Narcissia's smile, grace, and kindness breathe truth from her entire being. She does everything from cooking, cleaning, running the Convent gift shop, to welcoming guests. But her strength is found in her knees and her heart of love for Christ. As she kneels in prayer, I see God's beam of pure joy and light shining through her.

Padre Jesus is also a lover of Christ. His name says it all - "Father Jesus." He is in his early 80's. He speaks at least five languages. His eyes say it all, too. When he smiles, you see God's love and grace alive in him. He gave my family a tour of the Dominican Convent. As he guided us through the 740 year old convent, sharing the stories of St. Dominic's family and the stories of nuns and priests and their faithfulness through the ages, he came alive with their stories of faith - and his.

The day we left Calerugea, Padre Jesus lifted my family in prayer during the convent's morning prayer time. There was Sr. Narcissia on her knees in prayer. Later, she was on her feet, hugging us and wishing us well as we headed on our way.

I pray that I would live my faith like these humble servants of Christ. Their passion for Christ is an inspiration to me. I wonder, who inspires you? May God bless you on your journey of faith.

#### **Entry #4: "The Grumpy Padre"**

In the previous entry, I spoke about Padre Jesus and Sr. Narcissia, whom I consider to be vessels of God's true light. While most of our encounters with nuns, sisters, and padres were incredibly beautiful, there was one friar whom my children fondly named, "Padre Grumpy."

Let me tell you about the Grumpy Padre.

He was in charge of hospitality and food preparation. He was very matter-of-

fact and never offered directions or helpful tips to us. He assumed we knew the rules. Not so. They were not written anywhere and unfortunately, we did not intuit them.

We arrived late on day #1. That was our first "mistake." We intended to arrive for dinner, but dinner in Spain is at 2:00pm - not 5:30pm (that's siesta timeoops!). As we arrived late, the first man we met was "The Grumpy Padre." We had reservations but he told us the place was full. Never smiling, never offering any help with bags or directions, he simply glared at us on day #1.

On Day #2, we set to the task of softening our "Grumpy" new friend. We brought gifts - fresh white plums from Southern Spain. Others showered us with thanks and delighted in the succulent taste. He was silent.

On Day #3, I was walking the hallways alone and came upon "Padre Grumpy." I said, "Ho la," and he was non-responsive. Since he spoke no English and I had few words of Spanish, he took my arm and signaled for me to follow. Down into the lower levels of the convent we walked. I thought he warming-up to me and taking me to one of St. Dominic's shrines buried deep in the home of the saint. We took a left turn and stepped into the dining room. He walked up to two tables and pointed. He was offering me a choice of one or the other for our upcoming meals. I made my choice. He turned and walked away leaving me there to figure my way back out.

Later that evening, we asked for napkins because we didn't know we were supposed to save them after each meal. He was not happy. He reluctantly went to get us some more. When my wife noticed the nuns at the next table were smiling at us, she looked over and said, "He's mad at us." They smiled knowingly and said, "Yes, he was mad at us when we did the same thing." They then told us the "Napkin protocol."

On our last day, I sat next to the "Grumpy Padre" during morning prayers. When it came time to pass the peace, I embraced him. He offered me two fingers. I embraced them as well.

Let me be clear about something. My new colleague in faith was never mean or unkind. He was not rude or hurtful. I have seen that in Christians. I know what that looks like. He was just "grumpy." All of us have "Grumpy Padres" in our lives. Actually, some of my other grumpy friends have become great teachers in my life. Let's learn some of their rules for living. Then, let's pass them the peace of God's love. As for me, I can't wait to return to the Convent of Santa Domingo. I can't wait to "pass the peace" again - fingertip to fingertip.

### **Entry #5: "To Dream the Impossible Dream?"**

I have been in the Land of Don Quixote! The Man of La Mancha is alive and

well in the hearts and minds of Spanish lore. But, the windmills of Cervantes' dreamer and mythic lover have been replaced by larger, more effective, more efficient ones.

While Gulf Coast residents and workers are fighting for their lives, their livelihoods, and all the creation in the coastal region in the continuing disaster created by BP Oil (and our over-dependence on gas/oil), my family witnessed what a nation looks like when it lives with a truly different approach to energy use. We continued our personal boycott of BP Gas throughout our 2,500 mile journey through Spain, but we also were blown away by Spain's intelligent and clear use of oil and creative use of wind, solar power and water conversation. They don't "dream the impossible dream" of care for creation, they live it!

In a mountainous country, large windmill farms are everywhere - transforming the natural resource of wind into consumable energy. Solar farms can also be found throughout the country. Acres of solar panels cover the sun-filled landscape. In Madrid and Barcelona, a subway strike paralyzed the metro-areas because millions of people depend on public transportation to get to and from work and to shop. Plus, a high speed rail system has trains that cross the country between the largest cities traveling up to 250 miles an hour. In small towns and cities you see people walking everywhere.

But, this approach also breaks down to the personal and local levels. All the cathedrals have energy efficient bulbs in their ancient lights. They have little to no air-conditioning. Homes do not have air-conditioning. People open their windows and use ceiling fans. All homes with land have fruit trees and gardens. Green grass yards requiring lots of water and fertilizer are rare. Solar panels are seen on the roofs of many homes. Hotels and monasteries have lights in hallways that are motion activated. The lights and A/C in hotel rooms are keycard activated. When you leave your room all electricity goes off. Many flush toilets have two mechanisms for flushing - one large and the other small.

We Americans use six times more energy than Spaniards.

You may ask what this reflection has to do with a blog on Faith. Everything! God has given us the care of creation. What we do with the Creation God has given us really matters. It is NOT an Impossible Dream to care for the earth. But, we need to focus on wind and solar and stop drilling the ocean floors to make the dream come true.

### **Entry #6: Worship and prayer**

I have worshiped in Roman Catholic cathedrals, convents, monasteries, and in Vesper Services chanted in Latin throughout Spain.

A few reflections. There are things that I like.

I like the order of the Mass. The Mass is the Mass. Like your Visa Credit Card, it is good everywhere in the world. There is something comforting (even to a Protestant pastor) with the consistent ritual of the Mass. Even with a language gap between Spanish and English, I know when the Lord's Prayer is coming, when the Apostle's Creed is to be said, how to respond to the readings of the day, and how to respond when the priest speaks the words of the Eucharist. I can see why my sisters and brothers who are Catholic find comfort in the ritual and constancy of the Mass across the globe. In the convents and monasteries, I like how all the men and women religious have parts in the services. They shared in the readings, the singing and the celebration of the Eucharist (male priests only on this one). I also like the music - although I have experienced far too little music so far.

I don't like the separation of the religious leaders from the people. In the cathedrals, I was turned off when the clergy did not pass the peace of Christ with the people in the pews. In fact, they didn't touch them in anyway during or after the Mass. They entered and existed off "Stage Left." They seemed untouchable and unreachable. However, I didn't feel this in the village churches or in the convent and monasteries. By the way, I have seen this across religions. This is not just a "Catholic" thing. At any point, religious leaders and their people can become separated from one another in unhealthy ways.

I have spent a lot of time on my knees in prayer. But, I feel like some of the greatest joy I felt was having our meal prayers shared in Spanish and English. For several meals with the Dominican sisters, we each shared our sung prayers (some from my family's experience at home and camp - "Johnny Appleseed" has made it to Northern Spain). One of our prayers sung to "Rock Around the Clock" raised some smiling eyebrows. But, once the words were explained in Spanish, they approved the translation.

There is something Universal in the language of prayer - across all faith expressions in our own traditions as well as across all religion experience.

Prayer is that which ties us to God. It also ties us to one another.

How do you experience and share your life of prayer?

Find the best in the expressions of faith that others share. You will be enriched by them.

### **Entry #7: The Religious Experience of the World Cup!**

I have a confession to make. I love soccer!

As a former player, coach and current "Soccer Dad" I am hooked on soccer. Throughout our time in Spain, the World Cup 2010 from South Africa dominated the airwaves of TV and radio.

We wept when the USA was swept out of the competition by Ghana in the round of 16. And we cheered with Spain's faithful in bars, convents, monasteries and hotel rooms in large cities and small towns as "Espana!" marched through the tournament.

In seven matches, they scored only eight goals while holding their opponents to two. All but one game was settled by one goal. In other words, all their games were tight! Nevertheless, with the WHOLE WORLD Watching, Spain beat the Netherlands to become true World Champions late Sunday! It took 116 minutes to break through the Holland defense. But, Spain won!

Why do I call this a "religious experience?"

First, soccer captures the hearts and minds of everyone. Everyone is touched by this game in some way. Everyone from nuns, monks, and folks on the street during our 3 weeks in Spain was conscious of their little team's run at the world of football! In the end, even our non-football friends in Spain were caught up in the experience! It was incredibly exciting.

Second, like faith, it is an experience which doesn't take timeouts or days off. Soccer is a game which you can't stop watching. There are no breaks as the clock keeps moving. Unlike American Football, the players are moving 90 minutes - plus extra time! They have no timeouts, no huddles, no water breaks. It is a truly "Moving" experience.

Finally, it is a game everyone and anyone can play. Like faith itself, soccer is open to all. It is the great equalizer of sports. Anyone can play. On any given day, any team can win or lose. It is difficult to dominate over another.

If you and I could open our hearts and minds to God the way the whole world opens itself to soccer, we might be able to see peace come to the world at last. Via Espana! And. Go God! :)

Now, back to "religious experience" as I more commonly reflect....then off to another soccer game!

### **Entry #8: The Art of Pedro the Wicked vs. the Moors of the Alhambra**

I closed entry #1 with the important question: "How was God known and reflected in all that I saw in Spain?"

As I begin to close my reflections on Spain, I return to God and God's children, the Children of Abraham, through the ages.

I saw God reflected in the Art of Spain. I also saw the soullessness of art which reflected nothing of the spirit of God.

Spain's cathedrals and castles are beautiful. In the walls, pillars, ceilings, and floors, you see the carved and crafted work of artistic geniuses. Much of this beauty comes from the Moors or Muslims who invaded Spain in 711 AD and held the country until 1492 AD (see entry #1). They were incredible craftsmen and artists. They carved and painted designs that blow your mind.

In Mosques and Synagogues designed and built by the Moors, you feel the presence of a God for whom no graven images may be created. In the swirling designs, in the Arabic words, in the colors, in the natural tones of earth and sky, you feel the power and presence of God. Because there is a belief that images of God may not be recreated by the hand of humans, how does it "Feel" to sense the presence of God? It is a feeling of awe, power, presence, design of purpose in nature that communicates in these buildings.

In Granada's Alhambra and Cordoba's Original Mosque, you really feel this power and presence of God. From small prayer rooms to the wide open spaces for public prayer, every inch is created with God in mind. Every niche, every carving, every pillar, every ceiling and floor has the touch of beauty.

When the Christians reconquered Spain, they added great art hanging everywhere in tapestries and paintings. They also added statutes and tombs of saints, kings, and conquerors which stand as testaments of faith and power. I found too many of these additions glorifying humans and not God. I had trouble with conquistadors and Inquisitors carved into cathedrals. It was wrong.

There is a difference how art communicates the presence of God or the power of humans. I felt this difference most clearly in the palace of King Pedro in Seville. Pedro was either known as "Pedro the Great" or "Pedro the Wicked." It depends on which side of his wrath or love you ended. He lifted and he struck down others with great regularity. He employed the Moorish Artists to design and create his palace. Instead of the images of creation and the power of God in the designs, the grandeur and beauty were designed to lift Pedro. His coat of arms, his flags, his military accomplishments replace what would have been glory

given to God in art. And it feels different as a result. It feels soulless! It feels cold and self-serving.

God is made known in the art of Spain. You can feel God's powerful presence or human power and soullessness. Beauty is in the eye and the heart of the beholder.

How do you see and feel God reflected in the art around you?

### **Entry #9: Cordoba: Where Three Faiths Once Met (Part I)**

I went to Cordoba to see for myself the Mosque now Cathedral in the heart of the Old City. In Cordoba, the flourishing of Islam and a culture of openness, tolerance, and a spirit of working across three faiths happened under the rule of Abd Al-Rahman I.

How Al-Rahman I reached the point of openness and acceptance is an interesting story in itself

Briefly, he fled from the royal palace in Damascus after his family was slaughtered by political rivals in 750 AD. He hid in Morocco for 6 years building a power base and a following there. As heir to a title of "Caliph" or ruler of Islam, he sailed north and claimed Moorish Spain as his own. He confirmed his power by decapitating his enemies and sending their salted heads to the rival caliph in Baghdad.

In Cordoba he established his kingdom. He purchased the land from Christians where the church had stood and began to build a beautiful mosque in 786 AD. In Cordoba, Al-Rahman I and several rulers who followed, established the city as a center of philosophy, mathematics, science, commerce. For example, "Algebra" was established in Cordoba. With 400,000 citizens at its peak, Cordoba was the third largest city in Europe - larger than Paris. It became a city known for its tolerance and acceptance of Christians, Jews, and, of course, Muslims. The progressive leaders were, in many ways, renegades from the dominant Islamic culture of the times.

Al-Rahman I also created a split in Islam much like the split we experience between Protestants and Catholics in Christianity. From the beginning, when

they built the mosque, facing Mecca as if it were Damascus - from which they had been driven. This was unheard of in this time. Al-Rahman did this to remind all his people of home and the persecution he and others had faced there and the dream of one day returning home to Syria.

The Christians, under "Saint" King Ferdinand III took the city back from the Muslims after a five year siege in 1236. His first act on day one was to "bless" the mosque with a service of worship and reclaim the space for Jesus Christ - doing it in the name of Mary. To this day, the church is a Marion Christian church - the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary. Ferdinand then drove out the Jews and Muslims to make a point.

In 1523 - almost 300 years later - a Cathedral was constructed right in the middle of the former Mosque. Although it is beautiful, it doesn't work architecturally or spiritually. When King Charles V saw the finished cathedral - one he had mandated to be built - he declared that it had ruined the perfection of the mosque which preceded it. At least, he saw the errors of his ways!

More on this as I continue in Part II.

### **Entry #10: Cordoba: Where Three Faiths Once Met (Part II)**

I find the small number of Muslims in Spain to be strange.

Moreover, I find the almost complete absence of Jews in Spain to be haunting. There are only a handful of active synagogues in the entire nation. Jews are not to be found. When the Christians drove them out of Cordoba and other cities, for some strange reason, they kept the name "Jewish Quarter" on the area. There are no Jews here. It feels oppressive. For example, Maimonides and his family escaped death here (after he had been briefly a part of the enlightened ones). Yet, they have a statute to him (as well as one to a Muslim enlightened one who was also driven out).

While I discovered a brief period of welcome for the Jews in Segovia under another King Ferdinand, I was blown away by the absence of Sephardic Judaism in a country which claims to have had Jews here dating back hundreds of years before the birth of Christ.

History of the silent ones needs to be written because the only ones writing this history here for the past 600+ years have been Christians. I find they don't tell

the penitential truth about themselves in this mix.

In 1992, King Juan Carlos had a ceremony apologizing to the Jews on the 500th Anniversary of the pogroms and Inquisition. It was nice gesture, although long overdue.

As we move into the second decade of the 21st Century, I pray that the three religions will discover one another to be a gift from God as they did 1200 years ago in Cordoba. We are all good for one another. Certainly, wars, terror and destruction and hate in any or all of our names will never please God or resolve the historical madness within each of our traditions.

### **Entry #11: Is this a Miracle or a Badly Told story to drive out the Jews?**

We visited the old synagogue in the Jewish Quarter of Segovia. Originally built around 1336, it was only a synagogue until the year 1415. It is now the Church of Corpus Christi and also serves as the home to a Franciscan order of cloistered nuns. Although the main gallery had been heavily restored after a fire in 1899, the building's origins were still evident in the mudejar-inflected arches.

By the entrance is a huge painting at least 30 x 10 feet in size depicting the "miracle" that led to its transformation from a Jewish synagogue to a Catholic church.

When my wife asked about the painting the guide became extremely animated as she told her version of what happened. Apparently, in the year 1415, the "rabbi" did not believe that the "host" or "the body of Christ" was holy and sacred. To prove his point, he brought all the male Jews together and boiled the host in a large pot in the center of the synagogue. The host rose from the pot. A great earthquake hit and shook the synagogue. A mighty wind blew through the sanctuary. This "miracle" marked the beginning of the end for the Jews. They left the synagogue in the year 1419 and it became the Church of the Corpus Christi - "the Body of Christ."

This story seemed strange from a number of angles. I went online to see what I could find out about this event. I found a variety of stories about the "Miracle of the Corpus Christi."

Another version sets a context for the story. Following the Christian Council of Lateran in 1215, edicts released at that time set in motion a whole movement to stop the Jews from "desecrating the Host." Across Europe from 1215 throughout the Inquisition, reports of Jews desecrating the host caused persecution of the Jews. There was a report of a desecration in Segovia in

1415, said to have been brought about by an earthquake which resulted in the confiscation of the synagogue, the execution of leading Jews, and still the occasion of the great local feast of Corpus Christ.

A report written by Robin Cembalest tells the story this way: In the 1990's, a guide hired by the Spanish tourist office took me to the last standing synagogue in the Spanish city of Segovia. The guide said, in a painting depicting the miracle that led to its transformation from a Jewish site of worship into a Catholic one. This happened in 1410, when, according to the story, a priest asked a Jewish doctor for a loan. In exchange the Jew demanded a consecrated host, which he tossed into a cauldron to boil. But the Blessed Sacrament rose in the air and flew to a nearby church. The painting, which was clearly made hundreds of years later, shows bearded men running away from the synagogue. "It's only a legend," the guide said. "But it's pretty." It was later that I learned Segovia's court doctor, Mer Alguades, had been killed for desecrating the host. That was the role of Jews in Spanish art in a nutshell, it seemed: their own creations desecrated, destroyed, or lost, their image tied to sacrilege and evil.

In Spain there has been too little room or incentive for Jews and Muslims to tell their story in the national narratives. This is beginning to change. It is now time to look deeper. Some scholars are beginning to do that.

Jews and Muslims have had a lively and important place in the story of Spain. In the arts, commerce, scholarship and philosophy Jews and Muslims have left a huge and significant impact on Spain.

What happened in Segovia in 1415 was not a miracle in my mind. It was a story, like other stories of prejudice against the Jews, which led to a great tragedy. Within the next 80 years, the Jews were completely driven from Spain or killed on Spanish soil.

No, God's true miracles happen when God's children acknowledge and celebrate the beauty, importance and value of the other children of Abraham in the religious life and culture of any given nation. These miracles too seldom occur. But, if we dig through history we will find them!

The lessons we can learn from Spain teach us how this has been beautifully celebrated and horribly desecrated. From these lessons, I pray that we find a way to treasure the gifts of God from all God's children in our monotheistic faith traditions. Only then will we come to know the true blessings of God's love and grace.

## **Entry #12: Are you a Tourist or a Pilgrim?**

I never knew there were different entrance fees for "tourists" vs. "pilgrims." I discovered this in Burgos. The entrance fee for tourists in the Cathedral is 5 Euros. If you are a pilgrim it costs only 2.5 Euros. It is clearly cheaper to be a pilgrim than a tourist in Burgos! Or is it?

I smiled and told the woman at the ticket booth that I was a pastor traveling with my family. We were definitely pilgrims on this journey. She glared at me and asked, "Do you have a certified Pilgrim Card?" "No," I answered. She said, "Then you are not really a pilgrim." I was about to give a theological reflection on the spiritual nature of pilgrimage as a Christian and a seeker after truth in this world, but my wife stopped me. She saw that my windpipes were warming up to respond. She said, "just pay the tourist rate." So I dug in my pocket and produced \$25 Euros - twice as much to see a church than the going rate for pilgrims. By the way, the people behind me had a card and they didn't look any more like pilgrims than I did

This encounter has me thinking about the question - "Are you a tourist or a pilgrim?" When I lead worship each Sunday, what would happen if I asked, at the time of the offering, if people were tourists or pilgrims? If people were only there to tour the church, shop around, use an hour of their week for resting in our sanctuary, we could "charge them" twice the "price of admission." If however, they could prove they were pilgrims, they could receive a discount. In this scheme, true seekers of the presence of the living God, would only pay half the fee for worship.

Ironically, I have found it the opposite in my 25 years of pastoral leadership. I have found true pilgrims invest 2-10 times more in the life of the church than the tourists who come to participate as if worship were a spectator sport.

A tourist gawks, takes pictures, asks few questions, moves past the glory and splendor, and often misses the presence of God. A tourist is a traveler in search of the next site.

A pilgrim seeks God, discovers wonder, prays constantly and kneels before God with questions and inquiries. A pilgrim is a traveler in God's immense Universe - one who is in search of the real presence of God.

Are you a tourist or a pilgrim? In God's universe, you don't need a card, just a curious and seeking heart.

# ISRAEL

## **Entry #1: Tisha B'av in Jerusalem**

My journey has brought me to Jerusalem.

July 20 was Tisha B'Av, or the Ninth of Av. It is an annual fast day in Judaism named for the ninth day (Tisha) of the month of Av in the Hebrew calendar. The 25-hour fast commemorates the destruction of both the First and Second Temple in Jerusalem which occurred 656 years apart - but on the same Hebrew calendar date.

Many call Tisha B'Av the "saddest day in Jewish history."

I felt that sadness yesterday at the Chamber of the Holocaust Museum. The Chamber of the Holocaust is, perhaps, the first Holocaust Memorial established in Israel in 1949. The happiest moment of the day came with the news that the Schottenstein family has graciously purchased a building adjacent to the Museum as dormitory space for those who come to pray and learn. What a blessing!

The Chamber represents more than 5,000 communities destroyed in the Holocaust and the six million Jews who died at the hands of the Nazis during WWII. The Chamber is simple and clear. It was established next to King David's tomb on the Mount Zion by the first Israeli survivors of the Holocaust.

As I was tearfully visiting the horrific displays in the Chamber, above me a minion of Orthodox men was mournfully singing and praying in the synagogue. I entered, at their invitation, to listen and pray. I heard the terribly sad and tragic accounting of those mutilated and murdered during the destructions of the two temples. It was more than burning buildings. These destructions were pointed at wiping out the Jews - in 586 BCE and again in 70 AD. Coupled with the experience of the Holocaust in the Museum below, I was overcome by tears. This day was truly one of sadness.

At the Western Wall, over one thousand people gathered for prayer and supplication. Men and women were in mourning - that was clear. They demonstrated that by doing what Jews do when in the Shiva period immediately following the death of a close relative. They were sitting on low stools, refraining from work, and not greeting others. Again, I prayed. Again, I was overcome by the experience.

Later, I attempted to enter the Temple Mount at the appointed time of 1:30pm.

What I experienced at the gate to the Mount was also sad - but now it was sadness mixed with anger, fear, and intense struggle. Religious Jews were trying to gain entry into the Temple Mount to pray in the place controlled by Muslims. There was a nonviolent stand-off between the police and the men - the press was there. Eventually, we pilgrims and tourists were allowed up to the Temple Mount - but not allowed into the Dome of the Rock - where it believed Abraham took Isaac for sacrifice, Jesus turned the tables over in the Temple and Mohammed ascended to heaven.

While I found most of the Muslims present on the Temple Mount to be friendly and hospitable, being kept out of their mosque and the Dome of the Rock felt like one more sadness.

It is truly a sad day in Jerusalem.

Please pray with me for the reign of God's peace in this land.

## **Entry #2: The City of David**

In 1004 B.C. King David and his army of Israelite soldiers drove the Jebusites from Jerusalem. On a hill below what is now "the Old City," King David established "The City of David."

3,000 years later archeologists are discovering large houses, a royal treasury, and water channels under this ancient city whose roots go back at least 5,000 years.

I made my way to the ancient city ruins where I reencountered lively, joyful, faithful and celebrative young Jewish men, women, and children. I have never heard so much singing and seen such delight from anyone (let alone teens!) in an archeological dig site! It was great.

Down into the ruins we ventured. The spirit of the group was soaring as we listened to history and looked at stones built in this place thousands of years ago. When we reached the Hezekiah Tunnel, we waded into flowing water at least two feet deep and walked for a mile through this 2500 year old man-made tunnel which created springs to bring water to Jerusalem. In complete darkness we walked through tunnels which were narrow and less than 5' in places.

I was near the end of the tour group with six young Orthodox men. In the deep darkness of the tunnel with only small flashlights guiding us, we went on in the darkness for at least 1 mile. The six began to sing. With the walls as a

perfect acoustic gift to their voices, Yechiel Smilow, Yaakov Stern, Eli Morgenstern, and Avi Kahn of the Yeshiva Gedolah of Passaic, NJ and Dani Oscherantz of Rabbi Fishman's Yeshiva and Ari Kohn of Telshe Yeshiva of Cleveland, Ohio blended their voices in praise to God in deep darkness below the City of David. The Hebrew transliteration is, "Shifchi KaMayim Leebaich Nocach Pnei Hashem" which translates, "Pour out like water your heart to the Lord" It was calming in the darkness. But, even more, I felt like I was listening to the voices of angels below this ancient city of God.

Tonight, I hear the echoes of Hebrew in the air. God is being glorified and there is peace tonight. Thank you and God bless you - Yechiel, Yaakov, Eli, Avi, Ari and Dani for setting the tone for this beautiful Shabbat in the Holy City of God.

### **Entry #3: Never again**

"Where books are burned, people are also destined to be burned." - Heinrich Heine, 1821

"The Jews must be removed from our midst" - Adolph Hitler, August, 1920

Hitler started by burning books. He ended by burning Jews.

In between his beginning and end a world war created by his madness and insane rise to power cost the lives of over 20,000,000 global citizens between 1933-1945.

The Holocaust brought the murder of 6,000,000 Jews.

To enter the Holocaust Memorial named "Yad Vashem" is to enter into the eternal madness and sadness of the annihilation of the Jews in Europe and North Africa. Between 1938-1945, two of every three Jews were killed in Europe and North Africa. It is so horrific it is nearly impossible to feel or comprehend such evil.

One of the fascinating truths I discovered in the six hours my wife, daughter and I spent at Yad Vashem was this: Whenever the Jews and resistance movements were able to fight back, the Nazis were stunned and sometimes completely stopped their mass murdering in that location. In two concentration camps, inmate riots caused the shutting down of the camps - one having murdered 500,000 and the other having wiped out 800,000 Jews. In Auschwitz- Birkenau, the largest and deadliest of the camps where 2.5 million men, women and children were murdered and 500,000 died of starvation and sickness, on October 7, 1944, the Jewish Sonderkommandos, overpowered the Nazi SS guards and blew up Crematorium IV, using

explosives smuggled in from a weapons factory by female inmates. Crematorium IV was never used again.

Along with the hopeful stories of the "Righteous Ones" - Gentiles who hid and saved Jews (like Oskar Schindler of Steven Spielberg's "Schindler's List") there were other signs of resistance and hope.

Mostly, Yad Vashem is a haunting remembrance of the "Chosen People of God" stricken from the face of the earth by evil.

Chiseled in the wall outside Yad Vashem in both Hebrew and English are these words from the prophet Joel. "Hear this, O elders, give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your ancestors? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation" (Joel 1:2-3).

It's our duty to tell our children and they their children of what happened in the generation of my parents. They have told me. We must carry the message forward. Never Again!

Whenever we see genocide and "ethnic cleansing" and the wholesale, targeted destruction of people, races, tribes, religions, and nations, we must fight to end the killing. We cannot be silent. We must remember.

#### **Entry #4: Question - "Who is My Neighbor?" Answer - "Sarah Snyder"**

Worship last Friday night at Kol Haneshamah Congregation was glorious and engaging in every imaginable way!

Kol Haneshamah is a Progressive Jewish synagogue in Jerusalem's German Colony southwest of the Old City. Rabbi Levi Weirman-Kelman leads the Kol Haneshamah Congregation. He is centered in his warmth and leads with grace and ease. As an aside, he is dressed in a Star Trek Uniform on the synagogue website! Too funny! Obviously this is a man who is comfortable in his own skin!

Over 300 people attended this service which was sung entirely in Hebrew. The rabbi led this entire magnificent sung worship. There was no cantor. Because of the English transliteration, I was able to follow along and sing about 85% of the service. At times we broke into four-part harmony. Several times we sang rounds during worship. This worship experience was one of the highlights of my life of faith! It was amazing!

Just as amazing at the worship was an experience I had minutes before worship started.

I am a great believer in greeting your neighbor in worship. So, as we were beginning the service, I extended my hand to the young woman sitting beside me and I said, "Shabbat Shalom." She answered, "Shabbat Shalom" with a lovely smile.

I asked if she spoke English. "Yes," she answered. "Are you American?" I continued. "Yes," she smiled. "What state are you from?" I asked. "Ohio," she answered. "Really, we are Ohioans, too!" "Where in Ohio?" I asked. "Columbus," she said. "We are too" I quickly responded. "Where in Columbus do you live?" She answered, "Worthington." "No way! We live in Worthington, too!" "Where in Worthington do you live?"

Her next answer was great. She lived less than a mile from our home in Worthington! She is about to graduate from The Ohio State University. Sarah had gone to the same elementary school, middle school and high school as my sons and daughter. At 22 years old, she and my children had the same teachers in school and we knew many of the same people.

Her name is Sarah Snyder. Sarah is studying at Hebrew University this summer. Sarah and I sat next to each other at Shabbat services half-a-world away from each of our homes - which are located less than a mile apart. We are neighbors. But, it took us all these years and all these miles to find one another in a Jewish synagogue.

I don't believe in coincidences. I refer to moments like this as a "God Incident." Now I am sure Sarah and I will meet again in Columbus, Ohio.

"Who is my neighbor?" the scriptures ask. On Friday night in a synagogue in Jerusalem, this Christian pastor had the answer! "Sarah Snyder is my neighbor."

### **Entry #5: My Green Bible**

While writing in the dark of our Jerusalem patio late Friday night, I almost lost the Minor Prophets and the Book of Revelation.

It happened like this.

Earlier in the evening, we had hand-washed our clothes and hung them out to dry. All the water dripping down had soaked the stone patio outside our apartment. There was a small pool of rinse water on the ground.

Later, I went out to write in the dark on the little table in the small patio. With only my Green Bible in hand and the light of the computer screen to guide me

on this Shabbat evening, I composed my journal and blog. I was reading the Bible when suddenly it slipped and fell to the watery surface below my feet. My beloved Green Bible was soaked in the laundered water!

Just a word on the Green Bible. It is biodegradable and printed on recycled paper.

Now water-soaked, the Minor prophets were breaking down before my eyes. Ezekiel and the Minor prophets - Joel, Micah, Obadiah, Jonah, Daniel, Hosea, Amos, Nahum, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zephaniah and Zechariah were super-saturated scripture writers. By the opening words of the New Testament, the Bible was dry. However, the Book of Revelation and the index were also effected.

With my wife's help, I was able to place paper towels between each page of the affected sections of my Green Bible. This morning I removed all the paper towels. The pages have a distinctive paper towel pattern in places, but the Word of God is dry and all is well once again.

If you know the Green Bible, it is a wonderful version of the Bible in which all the texts of God's creation are in green (similar to the old "Red Letter" editions with Jesus' words). I love this Bible. It is loaded with stories, articles, and practical ways to care for the earth. It reminds me on a daily basis of my need to be "Green" and a disciple of God's plan for the earth's care. I don't know what I would do without my Green Bible.

More important, I cannot imagine my life without the Minor Prophets of Hebrew Scripture. They inspire me every day while I am here in Jerusalem to remember God's call to peace and living fully in God's word.

### **Entry #6: Sunday Worship at St. Andrew's Church of Scotland**

Sunday morning worship at St. Andrew's Church of Scotland was as different from Friday night Shabbat Services at Congregation Kol Haneshamah. Frankly, the services were as different as night and day.

Friday's service was musical, Spirit-led, joyful, and packed (read [Entry #4](#) for more details).

Sunday's worship had simple organ music coupled with a slow, quiet, methodical delivery of God's Word in reading and preaching. The prayers were thoughtful, well-related to the scriptures of the day, and very personal. The congregation for worship was from six nations and yet numbered only 50 - their largest congregation all summer. Although the service was not very exciting, it was heartfelt and meaningful.

These services were vastly different. Nevertheless, I felt moved by both communities and their witnesses of faith.

The Jewish community was progressive, welcoming, and joyful.

The Christian community was caring, compassionate and centered in Christ's love and quiet joy. As we left St. Andrew's the pastor and student intern greeted all the worshippers and welcomed us to coffee hour. We were able to purchase gifts from the St. Andrew's gift shop which sells the work of Palestinian Christians.

Each Holy Day, when we enter to worship God in our churches, synagogues or mosques, we have stepped into our own cathedrals, our holy temples, or our great mosques. Wherever in the world they are, whether they are in cities, towns or the country, each of our houses of worship are the places where we glorify God and God is pleased by our amazing love.

We have a saying chiseled above the entrance to First Congregational Church in Columbus - "Enter to Worship, Depart to Serve." May you do so this weekend and be blessed in praising God.

### **Entry #7: The Ancient Galilee Boat and Jerome Hall**

Jerome Hall is an Archeologist and a professor at the University of San Diego. I never knew of him until we met today.

He was drawing very small sections of the Ancient Galilee Boat in the Yigal Alon Center at Kibbutz Ginosar on the Sea of Galilee. We started talking and I discovered one of the treasures of the Galilee - an archeologist with a deep and abiding passion for this 2,000+ year old boat.

Go to [www.Jesusboat.com](http://www.Jesusboat.com) or email - [betalon@netvision.net.il](mailto:betalon@netvision.net.il) for more details on the boat.

Just a little background.

In 1986, two brothers from Kibbutz Ginosar discovered an iron nail sticking out of the mud during a severe drought on the Sea of Galilee. From the nail, they dug down and discovered an ancient fishing boat. In 11 days, they extracted this 2000 year old boat - now preserved to 26.9 feet long, 7.5 feet wide and 3.9 ft. high. The story of saving this boat is amazing in itself.

Since 1996, Jerome has been mapping the construction of the boat - which

includes at least 12 different wood types. Whenever he is able, Jerome comes to the seaside monument to study this amazing boat - which dates back to Jesus' time or earlier.

Through the years as he quietly chronicles his discoveries, Jerome has heard many people speak as though they are experts on this boat. Some say it was Peter's boat. Others say, Jesus sailed in this boat. Others say it sank with Jesus on board. Apparently, we walked across the water in this person's story.

Jerome said, "We really don't know much at all about this boat or it's builder. I have learned to listen to the boat, not the people."

Over the years, listening to all these people talk as experts about something they know so little about has led Jerome Hall to live by the words penned by Robert Frost (a paraphrase from Jerome):

"We dance round in a ring and suppose,  
But truth sits in the middle and knows."

Too many of us on too many days of our lives dance around a ring and suppose. We make things up when we don't understand the truth. We would all do well to sit down, reread, breathe in and contemplate the deep truth of Robert Frost's poetic verse.

Let's apply Frost to our passions and daily life's work. Truth will delight in our determination to get it right.

### **Entry #8: Making Money off the Baptism of Jesus is Wrong!**

I believe Jesus and John the Baptist would be appalled by the Baptismal Rip-off now known as Yardenit. I certainly was appalled.

I was here nine years ago with pilgrims from Columbus. At the time, we walked into the Jordan River and simply and beautifully renewed our baptismal vows with the sprinkling of Jordan River water. It was a very powerful renewal of our Christian faith. That same day, Pentecostal Christians were fully immersed in the frigid February waters practicing full immersion baptism. Needless to say, they were screaming - mostly with joy - as they rose from the water.

Nine years later, this site has turned into a rip-off. Everyone must buy or rent a baptismal robe and then pay for lockers to change. To rent a robe costs \$10. To buy one costs \$35. In addition, all the gift shop items cost upwards of 200% more than vendors in other locations. They were taking advantage of people who came here in faith to experience their sacramental faith in the

waters of the Jordan River. Walking through the store and witnessing the rip-off robes and the costly baptismal gizmos made me want to turn over all the tables - like Jesus in the Temple. If I had done that it would have been more Biblical than what I was experiencing.

To top it off, almost all Biblical theologians agree that Jesus was not baptized by John in this location. He would have been baptized at the southern end of the Jordan River near the Dead Sea and the Judean desert. That is where John the Baptist was leading his movement. Unfortunately, when we tried to visit the real location two days ago only to discover it has been closed off as a military zone.

At my point of greatest exasperation, my wife suggested we go to a quiet place along the Jordan River and do our baptismal blessings. Half a mile north of this rip-off zone we found a quiet river bank 100 yards from the mouth of the Jordan where it receives its water from the Sea of Galilee. It was peaceful there. There was a gentle breeze blowing off the lake. Children were swimming nearby. Fish surrounded us in the shallow water and a date palm dropped its fruit by the water's edge. We eased into the water and washed ourselves in Christ's name in this holy stream of God's living water.

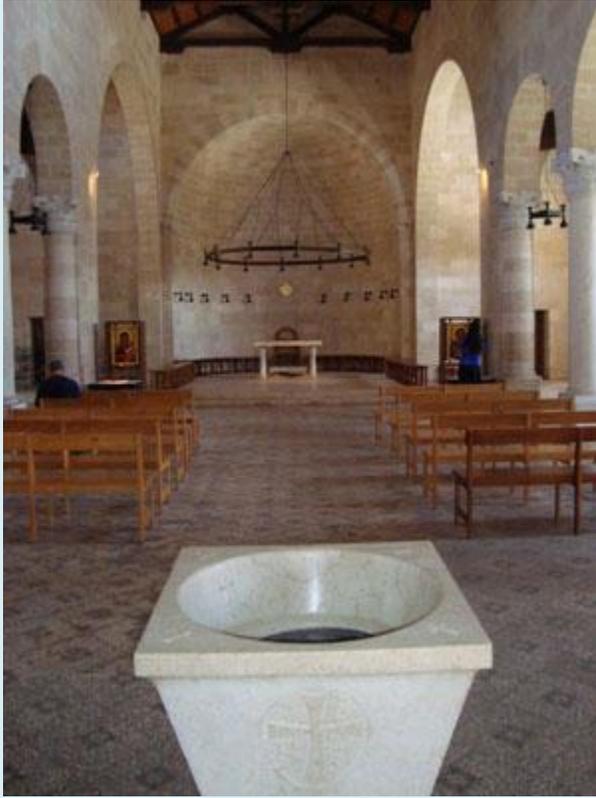
This peaceful and meaningful experience cost nothing. I believe John and Jesus would have been pleased. I trust that God was pleased, too.

### **Entry #9: The Wiesbaden Voices of Angels Multiply God's Blessing**

The Church of the Multiplication was built by German Benedictines in 1936 and sits on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The sight has long been associated with the place where Jesus miraculously multiplied two fish and five loaves of bread to feed a crowd of 5,000 people who had come to be healed by his hands, his heart, and his words.

Many people will say that the miracle was this: People, touched by Jesus, and seeing the needs of others, opened their hearts and shared food they had brought with them to the hillside. It is true. People will do amazing things when their hearts and minds have been touched by God!

The Church of the Multiplication is one of my favorite places in Israel. It is simply and beautifully built of stone in a place where a Byzantine church (4th Century AD) had stood previously. The mosaics of loaves, fishes, flora and birds are simple, ancient and stunning.



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The Church sits among a cluster of serene holy places connected to Jesus' ministry on the Sea of Galilee. The area is known as "Tabgha" - a word that is an Arabic corruption of the Greek Heptagon (seven springs).

As I walked into the outer entrance of the church, I heard perfect four-part harmonious singing. It sounded like the voices of angels. Coming in and sitting among the plane wooden chairs, I found 50+ German teenage Christians from Wiesbaden offering their voices to the glory of God. I was moved to tears while listening to these beautiful voices.

When they had finished, we spoke with one another. I asked the meaning of their song. My rough translation is this:

*Thank you Lord for your Word and your Light  
that change this world to reflect your Love.  
Lord, give us silence to hear your Word.  
Give us courage to live your Word.  
Give us strength to act upon your Word.*

My lineage is German and Swiss. Having spent a day at Yad Vashem (read [Entry #3](#)), and witnessing the horrors afflicted by Nazi Germans on the Jews, I felt ashamed by familial lineage to Germans - even though we were long gone

from Germany when Hitler reigned. But, today, I felt that God had multiplied yet another miracle and I felt healing in this place.

There is hope for the world as these young German Christians - two generations removed from the sins of their fathers inflicted in the Holocaust - now seek to live the true way of Jesus, which is the way of life, light and love.

### **Entry #10: The Inn of the Good Samaritan**

As I write the 24th entry in my blog, I am doing something unusual. I dedicate this blog to Marty Worth, my colleague and friend at The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio. Marty runs our Good Samaritan Program which cares for the poor who come to our church doors from the streets of Columbus. Marty is the heart and soul of "Good Sam." Thank you Marty!

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan in which a man is beaten and robbed by thieves and left for dead. In the parable, religious leaders and "Holy Men" pass by the man on the road as he lies dying. Each have excuses for doing this! But, a Samaritan - who is reviled and despised by these same religious folks - stops and cares. The Samaritan takes him to an Inn where he pays the Innkeeper to care for the man until he is healthy enough to travel again. Jesus asks his listeners which one of these men in the story is a good neighbor? The answer is obviously, "the Samaritan." Jesus tells the others to be the same good neighbor for those they meet.

The Inn of the Good Samaritan sits in the barren Judean Desert at the half way point between Jerusalem and Jericho - they are 22 miles apart. This was the only road between the two cities 2,000 years ago. For years, the Inn has been an oasis for travelers in the desert. Just recently, the "Inn" has become a national archeological site. There are ruins of a Byzantine church on this site. But, it now has archeological religious pieces from across the region. It will become an important stop for generations to come.



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The day we were there, the temperature in the sun was 105 degrees F. There were no trees, no place to hide, no springs of water, nothing to serve as respite from the desert heat.

Without an Inn here, even a healthy traveler would die. Thanks be to God that the place exists! But, God bless the Innkeepers and the Samaritans through the generations who care for the desert sojourners here and everywhere!

My questions are simple:

How am I a "Good Samaritan" to people I meet on my life's journey?

How are you a "Good Samaritan" in your life?

Be a good neighbor whether on barren desert highways or in Columbus, Ohio.

### **Entry #11: Longing for God's Word and Praying for Columbus on Sunday, August 1**

Dear God,

I pray to you from the shores of your Mediterranean Sea in your land of Israel.

It is now Sunday morning in Tel Aviv. As a Christian it is my Shabbat, my Sabbath day. I sit in my room and pray.

I pray through the texts of the 10th Sunday after Pentecost. They are Psalm 138, Colossians 2:6-19 and Luke 11:1-13. Your Word speaks to me. Each passage calls to me about how to live this day, in this time, in a land far from my home.

I can hear David singing from the hills of Jerusalem. I can hear Paul preaching and writing from across the water of the Mediterranean Sea upon which my eyes are focused. I can hear Jesus teaching his disciples the "Lord's Prayer" from the hillside on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Kidron Valley. Moreover, I can hear your voice in these words of Holiness.

But, in the midst of all this, my heart is in Columbus.

I long for home. I long for my family.

I long for the comfort of worship in First Congregational Church downtown Columbus. I long to hear the organs of First Church. I long to hear the voices of choir and congregation lifting songs of praise to you. I long for the voices of English speaking sisters and brothers saying in one accord the words of the Lord's Prayer. I even long to hear the sirens of EMS vehicles headed to Grant Hospital around the corner. And I pray for those who are being transported for emergency medical care. just as I would if I were home.

Watch over my home, O God, as Columbus and all my beloved ones sleep tonight.

Guide their rising on this Sabbath Day. Guide their steps to church and synagogue and mosque. Guide their way in worship and in rest for this day. Be graceful and kind to my city this night, O Lord. Watch over the poorest of the poor sleeping on her city streets. Watch over her newborn babies and first time parents. Watch over those who bring their fears and pain into this night. For all who are newly arrived in our city, help them find a place to lay their heads and sleep tonight.

And I pray that as Columbus wakes this Sunday, August 1st, all of your children may reflect your life, light, and love from dawn's early light through the setting of the first August sun.

My love and prayers are all homeward bound as my city sleeps.

Your son and faithful servant....

### **Entry #12: Oskar Schindler's Grave**

On Mount Zion, just outside the Old City Walls in Jerusalem, is a modest Christian Cemetery. In the archway of the Gate to this old cemetery is a sign that reads in English "To Oskar Schindler's Grave."

As you make your way through the gate and down the hill to the grave of

Oskar Schindler, something is very different about this grave and all the others. Schindler's grave is piled with stones. There are virtually no stones on other graves.

So why all the stones on Schindler's grave?

I have read many writings on the stones placed on graves. Rabbi Shraga Simmons writes this:

*We are taught that it is an act of ultimate kindness and respect to bury someone and place a marker at the site. After a person is buried, of course, we can no longer participate in burying them. However, even if a tombstone has been erected, we can participate in the mitzvah of making a marker at a grave, by adding to the stone. Therefore, customarily, we place stones on top of a gravestone whenever we visit to indicate our participation in the mitzvah of erecting a tombstone, even if only in a more symbolic way.*



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Wikipedia begins its entry on Schindler with this:

*Oskar Schindler (28 April 1908 9 October 1974) was an ethnic German industrialist born in Moravia. He is credited with saving almost 1,200 Jews during the Holocaust by employing them in his enamelware and ammunitions factories, which were located in what is now Poland and the Czech Republic*

*respectively. He is the subject of the novel Schindler's Ark, and the film based on it, Schindler's List.*

Oskar Schindler died penniless at the age of 66. He asked to be buried in Jerusalem. Here he lies.

*Wikipedia continues: On his grave, the Hebrew inscription reads: "Righteous among the Nations", an honorific used by the State of Israel to describe non-Jews who risked their lives during the Holocaust to save Jews from extermination by the Nazis. The German inscription reads: "The Unforgettable Lifesaver of 1200 Persecuted Jews". No one knows what Schindler's motives were. However, he was quoted as saying "I knew the people who worked for me... When you know people, you have to behave towards them like human beings."*

Today, there is a new stone on Oskar Schindler's grave. I placed that stone there. Thanks be to God for Oskar Schindler and all the righteous among the nations.

### **Entry #13: Abraham and Zodiac Signs**

The story goes that on December 30, 1928, a member of Kibbutz Beit Alfa discovered a mosaic floor in the fields of the neighboring Kibbutz Hephzibah (southwest of the Sea of Galilee). Excavations soon revealed a highly decorated and incredibly well-preserved mosaic featuring a zodiac and many human figures. The find astonished the Jewish world, demonstrating for the first time the use of human images in ancient Jewish art.

Twenty synagogues have been excavated in Israel to date. The oldest synagogue dates back to the 1st Century CE while others are as modern as the 6th-7th Century CE. Many of these synagogues have zodiac signs. While some of the zodiac signs are primitive, others are quite elaborate. Zodiac signs are not the only graphic artwork in the synagogue mosaics. We know during the Byzantine period the Jews were persecuted by the church as well as the authorities. Their mosaic art emphasizes redemption and Godly intervention: like Abraham and the Binding of Isaac; Daniel in the Lion's Den and King David.

I visited the ancient ruins Sepphoris (or Zippori). In the synagogue at Sepphoris, the mosaics include rare scenes essential to Jewish life. While much has been difficult to save, it is clear that the angels visit to Sarah, the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham's servants on the journey to Mt. Moriah, two menorahs, shofars, other symbols of Jewish religious life, two lions surrounded by a wreath standing with their paws on the head of an ox, in addition to Helios (the Sun God) riding on a chariot at the center of an

elaborate Zodiac sign with twelve sections.

Interestingly, Abraham, Sarah and Isaac's mosaics surround the Zodiac with Helios in the center. Is there a connection between the Children of Abraham through the signs of the zodiac?

I asked some rabbis about these zodiac signs. Words like "survival" and "assimilation" came up in the conversation. They didn't get it either.

Perhaps Dan Brown will write his next "historical fiction" about the zodiac signs in Jewish synagogues in Israel and all truth about these signs will be revealed by Brown's wild and wonderful imagination (and impeccable research techniques). Until then, I will wonder what was in the stars that caused Jews to place these elaborate zodiac signs right in the center of their synagogues for centuries and centuries.

I can make fantastic judgments about the zodiac signs OR I can go read what is in the stars for me and other Aquarians this week. Perhaps it will say, "You will stumble on the truth of a previously unrevealed "mystery" about an unsolved riddle of life." Who knows?

#### **Entry #14: Yehuda Solov**

I met an amazing man in Israel. His name is Yehuda Solov. He is the Executive Director of The Interfaith Encounter Association. Most important, he is a man of peace.

Nine years ago, during the heart of the Second Intifada (the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which lasted five years and cost at least 5,500 lives of Palestinians, over 1,000 Israeli, and 64 foreign lives), Yehuda started building "sustainable relationships" between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. While others were hiding, fighting, making war and spreading hatred, Yehuda was building community one relationship at a time.

As I sat across the table and talked with this man of peace today, I became aware of what one of God's true peacemakers really looks like. His eyes are compassionate and kind. His voice is soft and still. His presence is gentle and purposeful. When he speaks of other people it is always with great respect and incredible dignity. His dream is God's dream as expressed in the Gospel of John when Jesus speaks, "that all may be one as I and God are one."

Yehuda speaks of relationships as "the Road." "In a civil society, people learn to share the road. They seek never to divide the road. If someone wants to move over into your lane on the road, you can block his path. But, 99% of the time, if he makes eye contact and signals you that he has a need to come over,

you will let him in." It's true!

Yehuda continues, "We build community by building relationships. We effectively build relationships by connecting people at their most intimate concern and passion - which is faith in God. It is their religion. Once people begin to talk about their differences, they are strengthened by them - not threatened by them. I have seen faith become a transformative power in people's lives. I have seen people change."

There are now 35 Interfaith Encounter Association Groups. Some groups have specific focuses - like Student groups, school groups (first graders are in the IEA!), Women's groups, health care professionals, and prayer-centered groups. They meet regularly and have some incredible stories of overcoming differences. They are faith-based and not built for political gain. As Yehuda says, "It takes time to bring peace this way. It may take fifteen years or more to change lives through relationship building. But, what we gain will never be lost."

Check out the this group. I will share more about Yehuda and the Interfaith Encounter Association in the coming weeks. Their address is: I.E.A., P.O. Box 3814, Jerusalem 91037, Israel, The website is: [www.interfaith-encounter.org](http://www.interfaith-encounter.org)  
Email: [yehuda@interfaith-encounter.org](mailto:yehuda@interfaith-encounter.org).

### **Entry #15: The Baha'I Gardens and Shrine**

The Children of Abraham are not the only ones who call this land Holy. Located on the slopes of Mt. Carmel in the heart of Haifa is the Shrine and Gardens of Baha'I 'I founder, "the Bab."

The gardens are beautifully kept and manicured beyond belief. Currently, the shrine is undergoing renovations for the next three years.

The Baha'I faith, founded in Iran in the 1860's, holds as its central tenant the unity of humankind. Religious truth for Baha'is is not doctrinaire. It consists of progressive revelations of universal faith. While the Bab was the first to reveal this truth, it was Mirza Husayn Ali, who was the Revelation of God of whom the Bab spoke. He is known as Baha'u'llah, "The Glory of God." His shrine is in Akko where he lived as a prisoner for 25 years before his death. It was Baha'u'llah who declared that a shrine should be built here on Mt. Carmel when he came to pay homage to the Bab's final resting place.

Today, the Baha'I have about 6 million followers worldwide. However, because of the political laws against evangelizing in Israel, there are actually no Baha'I in the country who have come to the faith as Israelis. They have to leave their homeland to become Baha'I.

There is a gentleness and kindness among the Baha'I I met here. Their desire for world peace and the unity of all God's children, make the Baha'I blessed peacemakers in the world which too often calls forth chaos and hatred from religious followers.

In Haifa, the Baha'I have spent over 250 million dollars to make Mt. Carmel beautiful - all of this since 2003. I celebrate this tiny faithful religion which calls forth the best from the human spirit and all people of faith everywhere.

### **Entry #16: Group "Nein" at Kibbutz Hannaton**

The 121st Psalm begins, "I look to the hills from where my help comes"

From the hills of Kibbutz Hannaton, I look over the valley facing Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus. We are here in the Galilee Valley region of Israel. It is a beautiful view. Before me are places familiar to those who know their Bible. Nazareth, Cana, Mt. Carmel, and on and on In the daytime, a gentle breeze breaks through the heat of summer haze. In the evening, the lights of towns and villages are sprinkled throughout the valley looking east.

But, Biblical history does not make this place Holy to me. Rather, encounters with other people of faith light my path on this journey of faith. One such group I met here at Hannaton. I was blessed to meet Group Nine of the United Synagogue Youth (UYS). Their end of trip t-shirts will announce them as Group "Nein," symbolizing most things they heard "NO" about on this trip.

This group is very special to me because Adam Berman is a staff member. From Bexley and a member of Tifereth Israel, Adam is the youngest son of my friends Beth and Rabbi Harold Berman. This fall Adam will be a sophomore at Yale University.

USY is United Synagogue Youth, the youth movement of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. USY has about 10,000 members in the United States and Canada, and sends several hundred high school students to Israel each and every summer. Group "Nein" is the USY Eastern Europe/Israel Pilgrimage Group. This group has 44 "USYers" and 6 staff members, 4 American and 2 Israeli. Aaron Sherman is their leader from Santa Rosa, California. The USYers come from all over the USA and one from Canada.

Their trip is six weeks long. Meeting in Newark, NJ, they flew to Berlin, Germany. They spent two weeks in Berlin, Prague and Poland. They visited historic Jewish sites, Holocaust memorials and concentration camps, as well as general tourist sites. Then they came to Israel. Here they have completed three of four weeks touring the country. They have been to the northern and

southern tips, in all bodies of water bordering the country, and have visited countless sites of political, religious, and historical significance. They are headed to Masada this week and soon they sadly leave one another for home.

They travel in a very Jewish way. They pray multiple times a day, observe the Sabbath and dietary laws, and do text studies. This was most impressive. In the two days we were together, this amazing group was in the synagogue at 7:00 am and 6:45 am respectively. Also impressive: they are young people, led by young people.

They shine God's love and light. I am sure they will grow into wonderful and faithful Jewish women and men. For a brief time at Hannaton, it was an honor and a joy to worship, pray, and break bread with Group "Nein.

### **Entry #17: Muad Oudeh and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Kababir**

I will write several pieces on a movement within Islam called the Ahmadis.

Overlooking the Mediterranean Sea south of Haifa in a small community called Kababir Village, I met Muad Oudeh of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. Muad is 37 years old and currently serves the post of Secretary General for his mosque. In the four hours we spent together, I found him to be a compelling witness for the Ahmadiyyat Muslims.

Muad is a man of peace.

Muad comes from a movement within Islam that is only 121 years old. It was founded in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (from Qadian, Punjab in NW India). The Ahmadiyyah movement already has 200 million followers scattered over five continents. While there are 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide, the growth of this movement is incredibly monumental. I am not sure any religious movement in history has grown this fast in this short a time frame.

The Ahmadiyyat Muslims differ from other Muslims in several ways - most notably to those outside of Islam - they believe that "Jihad" does not mean only "holy war" but to make a great effort to teach, repair, and educate people for love, humanity, and universal peace, harmony and reconciliation.

There are many other beliefs and I urge you to go to [www.alislam.org](http://www.alislam.org) or [www.islamahmadiyya.net](http://www.islamahmadiyya.net) to read more.

Muad is a person who works for reconciliation and peace in all aspects of his life. He emphasized that we are called as people of faith to "Know" God - not just to "Know about" God. It is not what we believe, but how we act that

matters. If we "know God," then we interact with God and people in a special way.

"God treats those who know him in a special way," Muad told me. He continued, "We need to rebuild our relationship with God. If our relationship with God is right, then our problems are fixed. Our enemies become our friends. We face evil with good and we find that the wounds of relationships with others and with society are healed."

After talking for quite a while, Muad took me to his house. We ate one of the best meals I have ever tasted. It was Arabic food prepared and cooked by his mother! She hand ground the beans for the soup. She handmade the bread and the chicken was exquisite!

If converts are made through food well cooked and served, Muad's mother must have brought thousands of followers to this path at her dinner table!

I will write more soon on this movement and the struggles they face as peacemakers in this world.

### **Entry #18 - The Conservative Jews of Kibbutz Hannaton**

I have come to Kibbutz Hannaton in the Galilee Valley to experience life on religious kibbutz. Hannaton is a part of the Masorti or Conservative Judaism. I came wondering how it works. What are its people like? How do people worship, pray, and live together in community? What does it mean to honor and celebrate God's presence in a small community?

I have discovered an amazing amalgamation of people, experiences, and spiritual relationship with God. I have discovered people from a range of religious traditions and no religious background at all coming together to glorify God in their daily walk and work. I have found great people here.

They are proud of their Masorti roots and their connection to this kibbutz. Most are young. Many are young parents who are trying to balance family life as build a future for their children in this "gateway to the Galilee." They have dreams and visions of what this kibbutz should be and can become. I see people who are seeking to grow in relationship with God and with one another through fellowship, worship, and friendship.

Many of them have come to Kibbutz Hannaton with a dream of a richer, more inclusive, more pluralistic society and faith. It is hard work to move this place forward - from previous indebtedness to a future with programs, buildings, more people and unfolding promise. But, they are committed and driven to make it come to pass. Each person I have met has impressed me

tremendously.

Rabbi Yoav Ende directs the Educational and Spiritual Center and works to keep the community growing and strong. Yaniv Gilsman has been my host and directs the operations. He brings great spirit and personal commitment to the work here. Viki Langbeheim is doing wonderful work developing programs for Bat/Bar Mitzvahs. Rabbi Dr. Haviva Ner-David is the first Orthodox woman to be Ordained a Rabbi and has written two books on the subject. Shira Taylor Gura continues to develop resources to keep the kibbutz strong and growing. Stephen is a jack of all trades. Karen runs the office. The list goes on and on. And each have family who also fill out this dynamic community of faith.

I encourage everyone who reads this to check out their website: [www.echannaton.org](http://www.echannaton.org). Better yet, come to Israel to the Galilee Valley and experience Kibbutz Hannaton yourself!

### **Entry #19 - It's Complicated**

I have waited three weeks to write this piece because "it's complicated."

Israel is a complicated country with complicated politics, cultures, religions and people. It is special land with a very unique global, regional and local history.

As an outsider listening in, I have learned that is even more complicated than I ever imagined.

How so? I offer three layers but there are many more

First, everyone living in Israel lays some sort of claim upon this land and its significance to them. This land has had known and named human communities for more than 7,000 years. That makes over 2,555,000 days of stored memory and written texts concerning this land. But, what matters to one group is completely irrelevant to another. For example, as I sit on the hillside overlooking Zippori, the hometown of Mary, the Mother of Jesus which itself overlooks Jesus' hometown of Nazareth, the stones have 2,000+ years of stories to tell me. But, when I mention the religious and spiritual meeting of these places in my life to people here, they don't get it. They have special places and claims that wouldn't matter to me either.

Second, overlay the religious political, and cultural history of the region with the daily challenges of getting water, food, work, a home, and an education for your children and it multiplies the complexity by ten fold!

Third, mixed into every situation in this land is a history of on-going violent

encounters: border wars, constant rumors of war, two Intifadas, periodic localized violent confrontations and episodic missile launches (there was this week from the Egyptian Sinai Desert that struck Jordan - aimed at Israel). So even in relatively peaceful times there are on-going conflicts around the edges of the country and in the Gaza and West Bank.

Rabbi Yoav Ende said today, "I am always concerned about the issues on the borders, but I even more deeply concerned about what happens with the heart of Israel."

Last night I was speaking with Carmit Barnea, a young Israeli woman who has dedicated her life to working with children and adults with Cerebral Palsy. Her grandparents escaped Nazi Germany just as Hitler was starting to mass murder the Jews. They were among the only survivors from their respective families. We spoke of the "complicated" nature of Israel. She said with a smile, "Israel is complicated. But, life is complicated." She is right and knows all too well.

### **Entry #20 - "Shabbat Shalom"**

It is late-Friday afternoon in Israel. As the sun moves to the western horizon and evening approaches, Israel turns to Shabbat or "Sabbath rest." The greetings change from "Shalom" to "Shabbat Shalom." People scurry about getting last minute shopping, cleaning, cooking, and preparation completed for the 25 hour day ahead.

Now the sun has set. Now it is Shabbat.

Shabbat is like nothing I have witnessed in my life before. As a child, Sundays came close. But, even they were not the same. We would go to church, worship and return home. Stores were closed. No work for parents. No sports for the kids. No school or social events. Nothing of the regular work week seemed to invade Sundays. The TV was off until the Ed Sullivan Show. All this changed with the "Blue Laws" in America which allowed shopping, commerce, sports, community calendars and even school events to be held. There is no real Sabbath (no Shabbat) in America today. Religious Jews try hard to hold to it. But, it is a challenge.

"Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it Holy," proclaims the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8-11.

Shabbat in Israel feels like a holy day. It is a quiet time. It is time when life slows to a near stop. People worship God. People walk to synagogues. People spend time visiting with each other. Shops are closed. Work stops. Israel Airlines does not fly and many other planes stay grounded. Religious Jews

don't drive. Secular Jews and others are mindful of driving less or not at all. The pace is slow. There is rest. There is stillness. There is Shabbat.

On Saturday Evening the Sun will set again. Shabbat will end. Sunday brings a new work week to Israel, which is problematic for Christians who wish to "Hallow" their Sabbath day. But that is not today's problem. For today, I will savor Shabbat. I have only two more Shabbats in Israel. I will savor each as well.

In Columbus, you have seven hours until Shabbat arrives. "Shabbat Shalom."

### **Entry #21 - "Capernaum: A Holy Place on the Sea of Galilee"**

Coming out the Judean desert and forty days of fasting, Jesus of Nazareth came to the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee around 29 AD. Walking the length of Palestine's largest fresh water lake, he came to Capernaum. Here he found Peter, Andrew, James and John. Here he started his ministry with a handful of fishermen. He pitched his tent with these strong men who fed their families by catching fish.

That was 2000 years ago.

If you close your eyes and listen, you can hear the Master speaking in the wind over the sea. You can hear his kind voice calling still. "Come follow me," he says, and one by one, people of faith cross the threshold to the excavations of this ancient fishing village.

The "White Synagogue," was built in the 4th Century over top of the synagogue of Jesus' time. So named because of its white pillars, you sit in the place where Jesus worshiped, taught, and moved the hearts and minds of people for at least 2 years and you can feel him there.

In Capernaum, you feel the power and presence of God. Capernaum is a very holy place. Only one church has been built over ruins of Capernaum - directly over Peter's home. It is all glass and feels light as opposed to so many large and "heavy" shrines throughout the Middle East. The Mount of Transfiguration looms above the sea to the west. There Jesus turned into pure light before the eyes of his disciples. He clearly told them not to build any shrines there. Others would have been wise to heed his words down through the ages.

By the seaside I see a Franciscan friar from China. He glows with the love of Christ. Peacefully he soaks in the view. Together we sit in silence and listen.

If you go nowhere else in Israel, come to Capernaum. Here you will feel the power of God's Holy Spirit in the wind and the water. Here you will feel God's

peace in the synagogue where Jesus honed his teaching and healing gifts as a young rabbi.

### **Entry #22 - "Rabbi Haviva Ner-David"**

Rabbi Dr. Haviva Ner-David is a special woman. She was ordained by Rabbi Aryeh Strikovsky (an Orthodox Jerusalem rabbi). She was the first woman ordained in Orthodox Judaism. She lives with Jacob and her six children at Kibbutz Hannaton.

Besides this great distinction in ordination, Haviva has a PhD in Philosophy of Halakhah from Bar Ilan University. Plus, she is a spiritual director, teacher, regular columnist for the Jerusalem Post, Zeek and Forward's Sisterhood blog, author of two books *Life on the Fringes* and *Giving Chanah Voice*, Rabbi Ner-David.

I read Rabbi Ner-David's first book while at the Kibbutz. *Life on the Fringes* is an important book. It is a feminist perspective on the elements of Jewish life including: Covenant, Commandments, Law, Torah, Marriage and God. In the book Haviva blends her personal story with her deep call to move beyond the boundaries of Orthodoxy while being faithful to God and community.

Haviva is a powerful woman ordained by God for her ministry of justice, equality and righteousness. As I stood beside her in worship today, I was reminded of God's amazing touch in our lives. In each generation, God calls special people, like Haviva Ner-David, to step up and ask the difficult questions whose answers bring about transformation in the community. Today, I was humbled to stand beside one such woman. I was blessed by her presence in worship and in this world.

I encourage you to check out Rabbi Dr. Haviva Ner-David on-line!

### **Entry #23 - A Step Forward - "Tsad Kadima"**

For one week at Kibbutz Hannaton, I was blessed to share the dormitory and cafeteria with 32 young adults with Cerebral Palsy. In addition, over 25 adult staff and volunteers, plus their children, completed this glorious array of "The Children of Abraham." They are Christians, Muslims and a beautiful array of Jews. Most of all, they love one another.

Their days were filled with laughter, hugs, singing, high ropes, social activities and moving. They were always on the move! They call themselves "Tsad Kadima" (A Step Forward).

To me, they are my newest friends in Israel. They welcomed me as family to

every activity and meal. I have rarely been so warmly welcomed by complete strangers. Meir, Michal, and Yair took me in. Michal is a lovely young woman who loves everyone. She is amazingly engaging. She would make a great actress. Meir is an athlete and loves conversation and interaction. He is also very funny! I met Yair singing Hip-Hop one night. Moreover, he writes and performs Hip-Hop. He has five of his own Hip-Hop songs on [www.MySpace.com](http://www.MySpace.com). You can find them if you go to MySpace and then cpmc1.

I have wonderful memories of our time together. But, my favorite memory of the group was watching those in wheelchairs and walkers get on to their feet and walk great distances throughout the day. Their training department leader, Yuval Tsur said it best, They Step Forward with love." I would add, love plus patience, perseverance and presence.

### **Entry #24 - Worship in Jerusalem**

Jesus said, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them." In Christianity, a "minyan" can be two in worship. At 7:00am on Tuesday morning, Canon Robert Edmunds and I gathered to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. In the chapel of St. George's Cathedral, this Holy Eucharist was a special blessing as I reunited with a former seminary colleague.

In the last three days, I have worshipped six times with Christians. Three services within the Anglican communion at St. George's have blessed my soul. With Russian Orthodox sisters at the Convent Church of St. Mary Magdalene on the Mt. of Olives, I celebrated the Feast Day of the Gethsemane "Hodigitria" Icon- the Blessed Virgin Mary and Child. At the Tomb of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, I celebrated Mass with Vietnamese Catholics from Saigon. Their voices filled this stone chamber with harmonic resurrection joy. Their kindness and grace to me as an American was very touching.

Yesterday, high upon the Mt. of Olives, I was warmly invited by Portuguese pilgrims to join in their Mass at Dominus Flevit Church. In these gardens on this mountain, Jesus wept for Jerusalem who "kills her prophets and persecutes those who love her." This tear-drop shaped church reflects the pain of our Lord. Dominus Flevit looks down into the Temple Mount. Facing the Communion Table, the people of God see the huge Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque directly behind the celebrant. Below us, across the Kidron Valley, Muslims were preparing for Ramadan.

As I felt the connection of faith and the depth of love among my fellow Christian pilgrims, I began to weep for Jerusalem. The age old tears of my Lord, dropped upon my heart. As I felt the kindred spirit of Christians in worship, I wandered why we still find ways to separate ourselves in the Christian Communion. And

why do we, as the Children of Abraham, still persecute and kill those who prophesy deliverance?

My heart was breaking as the priest broke the Eucharistic host. Tears flowed as the communion wine was poured out. In the end, as we embraced one another with the peace of Christ, sang the Sanctus, and received the blessing of bread and wine, my heart changed from sadness to joy.

This week, it has been a blessing to worship in different tongues but also in the unity and power of the Holy Spirit. As I head into Jerusalem today, I know two or three will gather once again in Christ's. I will join them.

### **Entry #25 - The Joyful Melkite Greek Catholic Archbishop**

The first time I saw Archbishop Joseph-Jules Zerey, Greek Melkite Catholic Patriarchal Vicar of the Holy Lands, he was bent down in prayer in the back pew of the cathedral.

Twenty-five minutes before the Byzantine service on Saturday night, I stepped into the sanctuary with two of my Jewish friends to show them one of the most beautiful churches in the Holy Lands. I was explaining the stories of Jesus surrounding us in the glorious art and icons. Shortly, we were joined by a man in black. He greeted us humbly, "I am Joseph." He smiled at me and acknowledged I was doing a good job on the story. He asked with excellent English, "May I help?" I returned, "Of course. I am sure you know much more than I." He answered, "Well, I have spent some time here."

Joseph shared the story of Jesus Christ with my friends while apologizing for the sins Christians had committed against Jews. He said, "this is my faith. I don't expect that it would be yours." He spoke of Christ as the sacrificial lamb of God, given for the life of the world. He took us back into the Holy of Holies. He prepared communion as we watched, explaining the meaning of the Bread, the Wine and the numerous Icons. Finally, I asked of his role in the church (he had not yet revealed to us who he was). He smiled and said, "I am the Archbishop."

During the service, Joseph spoke directly to me in English a few times. Not knowing I could receive the Eucharist in this Catholic Church, Joseph apologized to me for the "fanatics" in the church who keep Christians separated. He said, "In faith, you are welcome to our table!" He then shared unconsecrated bread left from the service. Joseph invited me back for the Feast of the Assumption of Mary the following morning. He patted me on the shoulder and said, "Timothy, one day Christ will bring all of us together. No more divisions." I would return for worship on Sunday.

## **Entry #26 - The Feast of the Assumption of Mary**

*"A comprehended god is no god" - St. John Chrysostom*

Sunday, August 15, was the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. I returned to worship with the joyful Archbishop Joseph-Jules Zerey, Greek Melkite Catholic Patriarchal Vicar of the Holy Lands. Joined by two lay leaders singing in three-part harmony, the Archbishop presented fifteen minutes of Arabic music before the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom started.

At 9:00am the entire sanctuary was filled with incense as we began the service. With 20 folks visiting from France, Archbishop Joseph-Jules Zerey sang, preached and led the liturgy in Arabic and French. With a Lebanese mother, a Greek father, and his country of origin Egypt, I can only imagine how many languages he speaks! He glowed through the entire service with the love of Christ.

All our senses were engaged in worship - sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. Everyone present, from the youngest child to oldest adult was engaged in worship. The children were robed, carrying crosses and candles, bearing the word of God and actively involved in Children's time.

As I approached the communion table, Archbishop Zerey remembered me. He dipped the bread in the cup, smiled and said in English, "Timothy, this is the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ." Christ's true presence was there in all the elements of worship. It started with the Joseph and shined everywhere.

Worship didn't end with the benediction. Instead we left the sanctuary and walked out into the streets with Icons of the Blessed Virgin Mary. All traffic stopped as we moved in the daily thoroughfare to engage the world with "the Mother of God." Mary must have been smiling, too.

## **Entry #27 - Mary Matters**

Between Spain and Israel, I have visited well over fifty churches this summer. I have seen 33 churches here in Israel. Between both countries, I have worshipped 26 times - and I am far from finished! I have worshipped with over 1,000 Christians in Russian, Greek, Arabic, French, Polish, Vietnamese, German, Amharic (Ethiopian), Spanish, Portuguese, Latin, Scottish Highlander English, and even American English. The churches have been Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Evangelical Protestant, Melkite (Greek Catholic), Russian, Greek, and Ethiopian Orthodox and Roman Catholic. I have loved all the places and people with whom I have worshipped for a variety of reasons.

But, as a Protestant all my life, I have been most taken by the presence and spirit of one who has been largely absent in my life of faith. That person and

presence is Mary, the Mother of Jesus. In the art, the Icons, the spirituality and the liturgy of the Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic communions, Mary matters!



In Luke 1:45, we read, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord!" At 14 years old, Mary becomes pregnant with Jesus. Yet, she is has an Abrahamic soul! She follows God and accepts God's blessing and God's will for her life. She lives into the hope that which Jesus will become and she waits with anticipation for the coming of her son, my Savior, into the world.

Mary raises, loves, teaches, protects, nurtures, and finally lets go of her son, even as he dies before her eyes on the cross. She beautifully and perfectly says "yes" to God throughout her life. She does this all in love, faith, and humility. She follows Jesus' teachings and lives into his vision for the coming of the Kingdom of God! But, the attribute which any person of any faith can celebrate and embrace is Mary's openness to God's word alive in her life!

Mary matters.

I see this in the art of the church. I have seen her alive in the faith life of Christians across the globe! For those who for too long have ignored the gifts Mary brings to Christian faith, I invite you to see behold her eyes in the

hundreds of paintings I have seen. Behold the icons which bring her faith and face to life. You will see, Mary REALLY Matters.

### **Entry #28 - Sergeant Benjamin C. Edinger**

The Holy Land is filled with stories of beloved ones who are no longer with us. They loved God, loved country, and have gone on to eternal life. Their stories and memories are cherished here. Across the Middle East there are tombs, shrines, markers, plaques and art work dedicated to Biblical and national heroes who fought and died on holy ground. Some tombs and shrines are thousands of years old. Some are more recent.

I met one of these beloved ones just last week. He is a man who lived, loved and served his country in the Holy Land, more specifically in Iraq - which is less than 500 miles away. I met him through the memorable stories, smiles, laughter and tears of his mother and step-father, Rose and Randy.

His name is Benjamin Edinger. Ben was known to many as Sgt. Benjamin C. Edinger, United States Marine Corp. He was on his second tour of Iraq, assigned to 2nd Force Reconnaissance Company, II Marine Expeditionary Force, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He died Nov. 23, 2004 at the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, Md., of injuries sustained Nov. 14 from enemy action in Babil Province, Iraq. Randy and Rose had come from Green Bay, Wisconsin to be by his side. Randy was holding his hand when he passed from this life. Ben was 24 at the time of death.

As Randy and Rose told me of Ben's life and death, I felt as though I knew him. I was inspired by Ben's amazing courage and quite strength. As I read comments on the Fallen Heroes Memorial website and one friend after another spoke of their love and admiration for Ben, my feelings were confirmed.

The Force Recon Association writes on its website:

*On November, 14, during a mission to extract from an Observation Post (OP), Sergeant Edinger's team was again engaged by an IED ambush. Although mortally wounded, Sergeant Edinger continued to man his gun, fighting for air, until he was relieved of it in order to receive medical attention. Sergeant Edinger was an inspiration to those around him with his physical courage, buoyant fighting spirit, and "never quit" attitude. He will be sorely missed by his platoon, and the Reconnaissance Brotherhood. [www.forcerecon.com/Sgt-Benjamin-C-Edinger.htm](http://www.forcerecon.com/Sgt-Benjamin-C-Edinger.htm).*

Bahgdad is about as far from Jerusalem as Columbus is from New York City. While conflict is always simmering here, a war has been going on there for close to eight years. Also part of the Holy Land, Iraq has plenty of heroes for us to remember, too. Ben Edinger is one of those heroes. Written on the wall

above Ben's bed, to which he never returned the night of November 14, was one question: "What's your level of commitment?"

### **Entry #30 - A Land of Contrasts**

I walk in the shadows of Israel and Palestine. This is not merely a mystical reflection. I walk in the shadows to survive the light. Walking in the shadows has given me perspective on surviving and thriving in this region.

One woman said to me as we were walking yesterday, "I walk in the shade and try always to go downhill." Uphill is common here. Uphill is often quite steep. But, to always walk downhill? How could that be done? This woman said, "I take the bus uphill and walk back down." This is a very creative survival technique.

You need survival techniques in this land - a land of great contrasts. In the land itself, you find, mountainous deserts and salt flats; the Dead Sea, at 410 feet below Sea Level the lowest place on earth and the Mediterranean Sea Coast a vibrant waterway to the world. You find fertile valleys and tree-covered mountains. There are prospering cities and cities trapped by poverty and conflict.

There are two dominant peoples - Arabs and Jews - living in the same place. They have different faiths (Arabs are 94% Muslim and 6% Christian). They have different cultures. They have different perspectives. From what I have seen, they mostly have different socio-economic realities. In each case, they are people who come from across the Middle East and the world.

One person said it well when speaking of the conflicts and violence that are a constant undercurrent. He said, "we are two people, not one people. We have to find a way for one neighbor to live with the other. This can never be a nation or a neighborhood for only one person."

I walk in the shadows. But, when the seasons change, I will be walking in the light again.

### **Entry #31 - "God Is Still Speaking"**

In my final worship service at the Greek Catholic Cathedral, Archbishop Joseph-Jules Zerey, Melkite Catholic Patriarchal Vicar of the Holy Land said, "Too often as Christians we are not listening to the voice of the Holy One. We are not listening, but nevertheless, God is Still Speaking!" While I am sure that

imams and rabbis might echo this sentiment, I was hearing a leader of Christianity speak this truth. He continued, "we need to open to eyes to see God. We need to open our hearts to receive God. We need to open our ears to hear our 'Still Speaking God!'" I heard God speaking in the voice of his servant Joseph-Jules Zerey.

As the sun was setting over Jerusalem, I sat by the Western Wall and prayed. Having heard the Archbishop, I realized God had revealed to me His "Still Speaking" presence in Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

I heard God's voice and saw God's presence at by the Sea of Galilee as Christ whispered from the Capernaum Synagogue, "Everything will be all right." I heard God in the voices of Yaniv and Marcie's triplets as they laughed and ran together through the streets of Kibbutz Hannaton. I saw God's passionate eyes for justice and heard his clear voice in Ben Ross as we walked and talked on Jerusalem's streets. I heard God speak in Maud Oudeh's convictions for peace as the Ahmadiyyat Muslims seek to overcome violence in the face of hatred and prejudice from their fellow Brothers in Islam. In the voice of Assaf, I heard God guiding a young visionary working for non-violent approach on the pathway to peace between Arabs and Jews. I heard God's call for peace in the soft voice of Yehuda Stolov and the people of the Interfaith Encounter Association. I heard God's still speaking voice in the preaching of Canon Bob Edmunds and the embodied love of Deborah Edmunds who shine God's light with clarity concerning the need for freedom in the hearts and minds of Palestinian Christians. I saw God's passion for beauty expressed in the quilts of Rahel as she weaves a new understanding of color and design in this often dark and contrasting place.

God is "Still Speaking" in Israel and Palestine. I pray that the Children of Abraham will listen to our Still Speaking God. As I leave this beautiful and beloved land, I pray that a tipping point of God's Holy and Beloved Ones will hear the voice of God crying for peace, reconciliation, forgiveness and love.

# PALESTINE

## **Entry #1 - "The Church of the Crucified Christ"**

Surprisingly, few people know there are Christians among the Arab population in Israel and Palestine. At the time of Israel's establishment in 1948, 20% or 350,000 Arabs were Christians. Today, it is estimated Christians make up less than 2% or 175,000 of the population. Christians continue to emigrate from the Holy Land and no new Christians are moving into this region.

I was told the other day that Christians in Israel and the Palestinian territory feel like "the church of the crucified." They feel caught in the middle as Christians in the struggle between Israel and Palestine - a struggle which often is expressed as one between Jews and Muslims. Christians I have spoken with often feel the despair of the cross, but that is not all they feel.

On Easter 2010, all the Christian leaders in the Holy Land sent a letter to Christians throughout the world. The Patriarchs, Archbishops, and Bishops wrote:

*We know the power of despair. We know the power of evil. We know the power of the "principalities and powers" of this world which promote agendas of division and oppression to bring harm to God's people throughout God's creation. We, with you, know the power of sin and death.*

*We also know the power of the Resurrection. We know the power of God to bring hope out of despair. We know the power of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, to use forgiveness and love to conquer evil. We know the power of God in Christ to confront those same "principalities and powers" to promote faith, mutual respect, compassion and courage to speak the truth to benefit all of God's people. We know the power of the forgiveness of sins to redeem relationships in families and among the family of nations. We know the power of the gift of eternal life for all who believe.*

*Alleluia! Christ is Risen. He is Risen Indeed. Alleluia!*

As I worship among indigenous Christians, it is clear they are a Resurrection People! Their worship, their churches, their spirit speaks of faith, hope, and love.

## **Entry #2 - What I Saw on the West Bank**

Yesterday, I traveled to Hebron and Bethlehem. Both cities are in the Palestinian Territory. Each city has been in battleground of the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Before I went there, I had begun to see the trauma of this struggle from the Israeli perspective. Now I see it from the Palestinian perspective.

Throughout the day, I heard many things from our guide, from refugees, from Palestinians in each city. But, I will tell you what I saw with my own eyes.

I saw intense poverty. I saw beggars in the market who were missing limbs. I saw homes with no running water. I saw trash everywhere by the sides of the road and in the streets. I saw fields with wilting crops and scant irrigation. I saw graffiti on many walls with messages in English and Arabic. "To Exist is to Resist" was painted on one wall.

I saw homes occupied by Israeli soldiers only to learn their former occupants had simply been moved out and sent to "the New City" in Hebron. I saw Israeli military throughout the city of Hebron. They were in fortifications on top of houses perched over the marketplace and the neighborhood. I saw large military vehicles rolling through the streets of Hebron as if in wartime. I saw military camps high on hills throughout the territory.

I saw children peddling armbands of the green, black and red Palestinian flag. When I said, "No thank you," they often asked "Why do you not help us?" One young man said, "You love Israelis and hate us."

I saw Refugee Camps in Bethlehem that had permanent buildings. These "camps" have been there for over 50 years. There was art work on walls portraying their struggle.

Worst of all, I saw an Israeli settler dump a wash bucket filled with dirty water on the heads of two Palestinian children walking by. Soaking wet, the young children kept their eyes focused forward and they kept walking.

In eight hours on the West Bank, I saw despair. I saw poverty. I saw man's inhumanity to man.

### **Entry #3 - Part I: Abraham's Tomb in Hebron**

Genesis 23:19 and 25:9:

*"Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave on the plot of land at Machpelah to the east of Mamre, which is Hebron, in Canaan.... [Abraham's] sons, Isaac and Ishmael, buried him in the cave at Machpelah... with his wife Sarah."*

Abraham died and was buried in Hebron. Buried beside Abraham is his wife Sarah, their son Isaac, his wife Rebecca, their son Jacob and his wife Leah. The site is called the Tombs of the Patriarchs.

Since I started walking in the footsteps of Abraham, I have felt my journey would bring me to the Caves of Machpelah, the burial site for Abraham. I felt I needed to come and pay homage the Father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Abraham was the first monotheist. He believed in One God. When God called him to follow God to a foreign land, he rose and went. He did not question God. He trusted God completely. He is an inspiration to everyone follows after his way. After Abraham, even the way we speak of God changes. God is called, "The God of Abraham."

In Columbus, one of two 1575 Brussels tapestries hanging in the sanctuary of First Congregational Church portrays the transactional moment in which Abraham purchases the tomb for Sarah. In the end, the Tomb in Hebron is the only land Abraham ever "owned" this holy land promised to him by God.



Sadly, today this parcel of land has been a battleground between Jews and Muslims for thousands of years. Now the conflict is most poignantly between Israelis and Palestinians.

Since 48 Muslims were killed and 200 injured in 1994 by an American-born Jewish extremist with a submachine gun, Jews have not been allowed in the Haram al-Ibrahimi (Mosque of Abraham). Muslims are not welcomed in the synagogue either. Christians can enter either at certain hours of the day.

Abraham's Tomb sits in the middle between Mosque and Synagogue. I will say more in my next blog.

## **Entry #4 - Part II: Abraham's Tomb in Hebron**

When I first spoke of traveling to Israel and Palestine, one friend said, "Don't go to Hebron. It is not safe." Another said, "if you go, take an armed guard." Perhaps they were all right. My Fodor's 2010 Israel Tour guide doesn't even mention Hebron as if it disappeared from the Holy Lands. I found a company named Olive Tree Tours going to Hebron. With 15 people, I took off for the West Bank. There is safety in numbers. The intention of this "Alternative Tour" was to give us a Palestinians perspective on the conflict here. That was achieved.

The distance from Jerusalem to Hebron isn't great. But, the trip is sobering. You travel past the West Bank Wall, through checkpoints, past barbed-wire towers and machine-gun nests, through territory which is clearly occupied by great numbers of Israeli military. Finally, we arrived in Hebron. Through heavy security, we made our way into the mosque. By a large green steel door, our tour guide stopped to say, "This door leads to the underground tombs. It is nearly impossible to gain entrance into the caves of Machpelah." Through a hole in the floor of the mosque, we were able to look down into the cave.



The Mosque is really old and very simple. The huge oak lectern, where imams deliver the Friday sermons is 800 years old and carved out of one single piece of wood. Amazing. And yet, the synagogue is even older. Truly fascinating! The walls were built by King Herod - 2,000 years ago and are believed to be the longest single cut stone ever discovered to form walls.

What I find most interesting is that Isaac, carrier of Abraham's line in Judaism is buried in the Mosque. Ishmael, carrier of Abraham's line in Islam is buried in the Synagogue. Each day, as faithful followers of Abraham go to pray in Mosque and Synagogue, they encounter "the tomb of the other son."

I am sure volumes have been written about this. For me, I see it as sign from God to work out the differences. Embrace the "other son of Abraham." Perhaps then and only then, will peace come to the whole family of faith.

### **Entry #5 - A Moment of Truth**

On December 15, 2009, thirteen Christian Patriarchs and Heads of Churches endorsed a document entitled "Kairos Palestine, 2009." It is subtitled, "A moment of truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering." In "Kairos" Christian leaders lay out their case for justice and peace in the holy lands based on "Faith, Hope, and Love" (I Corinthians 13). After much prayer, reflection, and exchange of opinions over many months, this document speaks to cries of the Christian Palestinians living under what they see as occupational forces from Israel.

The authors ask, "Why this, why now?" They feel they have reached a dead-end on the pathway to peace. They see no choice but to cry out to Christians across the globe, whom they need to stand up and speak out. While they express their helplessness in this "kairos" moment, this is not a hopeless document. In fact, I find Christian Palestinians to be people of tremendous hope. I see them as a peaceful presence in the cauldron of conflict.

I have met two men of 13 who signed this document. They are pastors of their flocks. They are genuine people of faith. They speak from their heart and from their experiences of faith. They speak from this moment in time = this "Kairos" moment.

I find "Kairos Palestine 2009" to be a powerful and clear testimony from a wide range of Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Christian Palestinians. I read "Kairos" with the eyes of a Christian pastor. As I listen to my brothers and sisters in Christ here in Israel/Palestine speak about their daily conditions, I understand this document. I encourage you to read "Kairos Palestine 2009." Argue with it. Respond to it. As you do, remember genuine hands and hearts of faith have given themselves to it. Here is the link.

<http://www.kairospalestine.ps>.

### **Entry #6 - Is it Apartheid?**

Apartheid is a word created in South Africa in the 1930's to describe the racial, economic, social and political separation between Black and Whites. It is a French and Dutch word combined which literally means "Apart Hood," as opposed to "Neighbor hood." Over the years in power, the White South African apartheid regime became more and more brutal and separatist. Eventually, through pressure caused by an international movement of divestments in South Africa, the internal deterioration of the untenable White Power structure and the rise of a powerful Black movement led by Nelson Mandela and many

others in the ANC, apartheid was ended in the 1990's.

"Apartheid" has become a word used more and more in recent times to describe the separation between Jews and Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. In 2006, President Jimmy Carter's book , *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* created much debate and conflict here and around the world.

Throughout my travels, I have asked Palestinians and Israelis if they feel the word "Apartheid" was a fair or appropriate way to describe their current situation. The answers have mostly been passionate and direct. Some Palestinian Christians and Arabs believe, without a doubt, that the Israeli Government is an apartheid regime. Several Israelis laughed at the question. Others called it a terrible lie and an anti-Israeli, and in some cases, an anti-Semitic attack.

One Israeli told me of a tour he had guided to the West Bank and Gaza . It was a sizeable delegation of current Black political leaders from South Africa. He reported that these men and women, all of whom lived and battled through apartheid, spoke to what they saw in the West Bank and Gaza.

They didn't know if they would call it apartheid. But, the violations of people's lives were much worse than they had experienced in South Africa at the height of Apartheid. They said, the depth of penetration into people's homes, into their movement from place to place and on all fronts was worse than they had ever known in South Africa. They pointed out that policies here are explicit, exploitative, and designed to keep people apart.

Father Michael Pryor, S.J., who has written extensively on the situation, was in a forum with a rabbi in Jerusalem not long ago. Father Pryor was challenged by the rabbi on his beliefs. He responded, "If there were people hurting people in my name, I would be angry about that. I would do everything in my power to stop that hurting."

Is it apartheid? Perhaps the word is problematic. Perhaps using the word takes the focus away from dealing with needed just reforms. I do know that the places where people are hurting people systemically and intentionally must end. Apart-hood is never a good replacement for neighbor-hood.

### **Entry #7 - "God Is Still Speaking"**

In my final worship service at the Greek Catholic Cathedral, Archbishop Joseph-Jules Zerey, Melkite Catholic Patriarchal Vicar of the Holy Land said, "Too often as Christians we are not listening to the voice of the Holy One. We are not listening, but nevertheless, God is Still Speaking!" While I am sure that imams and rabbis might echo this sentiment, I was hearing a leader of Christianity speak this truth. He continued, "we need to open to eyes to see

God. We need to open our hearts to receive God. We need to open our ears to hear our 'Still Speaking God!' I heard God speaking in the voice of his servant Joseph-Jules Zerey.

As the sun was setting over Jerusalem, I sat by the Western Wall and prayed. Having heard the Archbishop, I realized God had revealed to me His "Still Speaking" presence in Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

I heard God's voice and saw God's presence at by the Sea of Galilee as Christ whispered from the Capernaum Synagogue, "Everything will be all right." I heard God in the voices of Yaniv and Marcie's triplets as they laughed and ran together through the streets of Kibbutz Hannaton. I saw God's passionate eyes for justice and heard his clear voice in Ben Ross as we walked and talked on Jerusalem's streets. I heard God speak in Maud Oudeh's convictions for peace as the Ahmadiyyat Muslims seek to overcome violence in the face of hatred and prejudice from their fellow Brothers in Islam. In the voice of Assaf, I heard God guiding a young visionary working for non-violent approach on the pathway to peace between Arabs and Jews. I heard God's call for peace in the soft voice of Yehuda Stolov and the people of the Interfaith Encounter Association. I heard God's still speaking voice in the preaching of Canon Bob Edmunds and the embodied love of Deborah Edmunds who shine God's light with clarity concerning the need for freedom in the hearts and minds of Palestinian Christians. I saw God's passion for beauty expressed in the quilts of Rahel as she weaves a new understanding of color and design in this often dark and contrasting place.

God is "Still Speaking" in Israel and Palestine. I pray that the Children of Abraham will listen to our Still Speaking God. As I leave this beautiful and beloved land, I pray that a tipping point of God's Holy and Beloved Ones will hear the voice of God crying for peace, reconciliation, forgiveness and love.

## **EGYPT**

### **Entry #1: Welcome to Cairo**

It is 2:45 a.m. in Cairo. I exit to the plane into the heat and humidity. Welcome to Egypt.

Coming through Customs is simple. It is actually a pleasant experience for the first time on my journey. My hired taxi driver is waiting as I exit the airport. "REV TIM AHRENS," his sign reads. He is the only man holding a sign at 3 a.m. He smiles and says "welcome to Cairo." I start chattering. It is clear that

"welcome to Cairo" are three of 100 words he can use in English. That makes 100 more words than I possess in Arabic. So, only the sounds of the city fill the car as we head into Cairo with windows rolled down.

Off we go onto the highways of Cairo at about 90 mph. Maybe it's good we are not talking so he can concentrate on the roadways. There is little traffic at 3 a.m. -- just a few thousand cars.

Cairo is huge. It is one of the most densely populated capital cities in the world. With approximately 17 million people, Cairo is the most populous metropolitan area in Africa and ranks 16th amongst the most populous metropolitan areas in the world.

We "fly" by many sites: \* past one of the largest mosques in the world, lit-up and active for the night \* past a mother, father and baby on a motor scooter -- no helmets \* past cars without their headlights on \* past a wagon going the opposite direction on the highway pulled by two donkeys \* past at least 100 cars pulled over on the July 26th Street bridge overlooking the Nile River with people eating and having fellowship together.

During the month of Ramadan, I discover later, people stop eating and drinking (remember, no alcohol for Muslims) around 3:30 a.m. So, the people on the bridge are having their last supper together before heading out to work or home to sleep.

We pull up to the Anglican Diocesan Guesthouse. This will be my home in Cairo. It is 3:45 a.m. The glow of the sun is coming closer to the desert beyond the Nile. Sunrise and the 13th day of Ramadan is less than 2 hours away. Welcome to Cairo.

## **Entry #2: Michael Jackson and the Pyramids of Giza**

With my new friends, Jonathan and Kelsey, I headed to Giza and the Great Pyramid of Egypt. Getting into the place seemed too complicated probably because our taxi driver dropped us on a side street in front of a homemade looking sign that said "Welcome Information." We were surrounded by camels, horses and donkeys and their owners and handlers. We couldn't see the Pyramids from here.

After haggling our price for camels from \$105 to less than \$16, we mounted our camels and headed through the side streets to the "Tourist Police" station. After being asked three times if I had a bomb in my backpack and explaining I did not, we gained entrance to the site containing one of the great wonders of the world.

Our next two hours aboard the camel were exciting -- at moments, too exciting.

My camel was named "Michael Jackson." Camels are huge beasts. When they talk they sound like Chewbacca from *Star Wars*. At one point, Michael Jackson had an itch on his neck. So, he dropped and rolled with me aboard. The effect was to toss me off his back. With me deposited in the sand, he reached his itch. Then did a Chewbacca cry and burped at me while I stood up. As I stood and wiped myself off, I was feeling more like Indiana Jones than Han Solo.

I turned my attention back to the pyramids...

Dating back almost 5,000 years, the Great Pyramids consist of the Great Pyramid of Giza (known as the Great Pyramid and the Pyramid of Cheops or Khufu), the somewhat smaller Pyramid of Khafre (or Chephren) a few hundred yards to the southwest, and the relatively modest-sized Pyramid of Menkaure (or the Mykarenos) a few hundred yards further south-west. On the east side of the Giza Necropolis lies The Great Sphinx, facing east. Current consensus among Egyptologists is that the head of the Great Sphinx is that of Khafre. Along with these major monuments are a number of smaller satellite edifices, known as "queens" pyramids, causeways and valley pyramids. Also associated with these royal monuments are what appear to be the tombs of high officials and much later burials and monuments.

The pyramids are magnificent and the Sphinx is the largest and oldest known monumental sculpture in the world. To be in the presence of these eight pyramids and the Great Sphinx is inspiring. It is also amazing that Cairo stops a few hundred yards from the Pyramids of Giza. It is hard to imagine New York City ending at a desert and welcoming the graveyard of 5,000-year-old civilization.

As we exited the Pyramid Complex, Michael Jackson was able to contain himself long enough to allow for journey's end. Then, with a scratch on his neck, I told him to "beat it." He smiled and burped.

### **Entry #3: "Break Fast" with Hassan and family**

After dismounting from Michael Jackson, Kelsey, Jonathan and I continued our great adventure by the Great Pyramids with a shopping trip into the streets of Giza. We discovered that the 24-year-old owner of the camels and 14 horses had a cousin with a wonderful shop. His name was Hassan.

The family welcomed us into their shop. They gave us lemonade and Coca-Cola (even as they were able to drink nothing at all). As the day was winding down and the sun was setting, Hassan insisted that Kelsey, Jonathan and I join

them for "Break fast." On this 13th night of Ramadan, Hassan couldn't have been kinder and more hospitable. His family was the same. From youngest to oldest, they were kind and welcoming. They spoke of their Islamic faith, the hundreds of years their family had lived by the Pyramids and the practice of Ramadan. They acknowledged that not all Muslims practice the discipline of Ramadan. They were honest and sincere in their conversation and their dealings with us.

The sun was setting over the Pyramids as Hassan took us to his rooftop. He began to smoke and acknowledged that he had not had one since before sunrise. There we saw two goats being saved for the feast at the end of Ramadan.

From his rooftop, we had a perfect view of the sun setting between the pyramids.

As we left, we met Shop owner. His name is Abraham -- the third Abraham I have met on this journey -- a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim bearing Father Abraham's name. This Abraham spoke of faith, family, life and love.

As we departed, I wondered why we make it so hard so many times to be at peace with one another. We had experienced the beautiful, hospitable nature of the Egyptian people in this one family. We were feeling blessed.

#### **Entry #4: "Prisoners for Christ in Egypt"**

"I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus, for the sake of you Gentiles, for surely you have already heard of of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you..." -- **Ephesians 3:1-2**

Yesterday I went to prison.

I went with sisters and brothers in Christ who minister among prisoners here in Egypt. I went hoping to encourage them, to lift their spirit, to strengthen them for the long sentences they are facing. None of that happened. I was encouraged. My spirit was lifted. I was strengthened by the men who shared their witness and faith in Christ Jesus, as prisoners in this land.

I went to give something to my brothers in Christ. I gave nothing. I received everything. I spent a day in prison here in Egypt and I was transformed by the eyes of compassion, the hearts of love, the genuine stories I heard.

I have never felt so moved by so many in such a short time. Prisoners from many nations here on charges of drug running, theft, and other crimes told me the stories of their coming to Christ for help, sustenance and faith. One man after another told me, even though he had lost everything in his life, it was

God's will that he should be imprisoned. Each man spoke of his weakness, his sin, his crime, his transgression with clarity and honesty. Each man spoke of the light of God which had come into his heart and changed him forever with equal conviction. In a predominantly Muslim country and culture, it is a daily challenge to live fully into your Christian faith. However, this Church Behind Bars is growing in its witness and vitality.

I would love to share the prisoners' names with you. But, I wish to protect them from any undue harm or further persecution. They face both daily. And yet, they face their daily trials with joy and laughter. One prisoner cleans the toilets. He says, "I love cleaning the toilets for Christ! It is the job that I do to glorify him. Our toilets are the cleanest in any prison in Egypt!" He laughed as he gently touched my shoulder.

The church's lead pastor recently spent one month in solitary confinement. For 30 days, he had no light in his cell -- 23 hours each day. From 3 to 4 p.m. each day, light came through a tiny crack in his wall. It was enough light to read his Bible. Each day, he waited with joy for the hour he had to read scripture. He said, "God was so good to me in solitary confinement."

I hope to return to prison. What an honor to receive the Light of God through his sons behind bars.

#### **Entry #5: Breaking Fast at the Al-Hussein Mosque**

The Al-Hussein Mosque is one of the holiest sites in Cairo. Built in 1154 to honor the grandson of Muhammad, Hussein ibn Ali, the Mosque houses some very sacred items like the oldest believed complete manuscript of the Quran. It opens to a large city square and is adjacent to the Khan El-Khalili bazaar, one of the busiest markets in the city.



Breaking the fast in the market outside Al-Hussein Mosque

Last night I broke the fast of Ramadan with Moamen and Ahmed outside Al-Hussein Mosque. It was quite an experience.

In the Mosque, hundreds of men gathered on the first floor with women and children on the second floor. They were seated together on carpets receiving food and water.

In the restaurants and open marketplace, everyone was eating for free. Tables were set up in the streets filled with dates, water, rice and meat. In the narrow cobblestone streets of Khan El-Khalili, long tables were set-up on cardboard and wicker baskets as people gather by the thousands to break the fast.

The fast ended at 6:25 p.m. The atmosphere was electric. The sense of fellowship, anticipation and tired joy made the moment feel like 11:59 p.m. on New Year's Eve. The difference was this happens every evening for 30 nights!

When the moment came, people laughed and smiled, consumed their dates and water. They started to slowly gain back energy from a day in which the heat index topped 105 degrees Fahrenheit and they had consumed absolutely nothing. It was a beautiful sight. Even though many did not know each other, they had shared this day in common. Fighting fatigue, sleepiness, hunger, anger, and the temptations to eat and drink, Islamic men and women looked at each other knowingly.

Eleven hours later it all began again.

### **Entry #6 - Breaking fast**

Friday night I met Mohamed for the first time. We met as "Friends of Friends." After eight hours together we separated as brothers.

Mohamed is the brother-in-law of a friend of one the members of my church, First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus. Out of the blue, someone calls you up, brings you to his home, welcomes you at his table, offers you a fantastic meal, entrusts you in his circle of relatives and friends, takes you to pray in his mosque and embraces you totally in his Islamic culture - and you just met.

Friday night was rich in laughter, culture, food, faith, and friendship. In the hour leading up to "Iftar" or "Break Fast," was painful to share. As we all waited for the appointed moment when the fast ended (announced on TV from Mecca!), we looked wasted. No food or water in 105degree heat will definitely do that to any person. When the moment arrived, we shared a rich drink of milk and dates. I never knew dates could be so crunchy!

Dinner was amazing! Egyptian food cooked by a great Egyptian cook and

received on an empty stomach is in describable and completely filling! After "Break Fast" supper Mohamed and his four friends prayed the evening prayer of gratitude for the meal. We went from there to the Mosque where they prayed with hundreds of men - repeating the prayer three more times. While children ran around playing at the back of the mosque, the men were led by a magnificent Imam chanting the verses of the Quran and leading them in prayer. We ended up at a late night performance of poetry, song and verses of the Quran led by children of all ages. With a front row seat in an audience of 800 people, I was honored by the hospitality and welcome.

Throughout the evening, Belal shared with me his love of Islam. He said his faith was everything to him. It was rising and setting sun. It was breath and life and all creation. He could not imagine life without Islam. "Islam is my heart and soul," said Belal. The words of the Quran are as dear to me as life itself. I told him, I feel the same way about the Bible. I feel a passion for faith in Jesus as deeply and dearly as he feels about faith in Allah. He nodded and reached out his hands to me, acknowledging my love for God. On this night, under a full moon in the desert of Egypt, I felt at one with my brothers in the faith of Abraham.

### **Entry #7 -- Two Men and Five Wives**

As I mentioned in Entry #6, this past Friday evening I broke fast with Mohamed and his three friends. Mohamed is an entrepreneur with his own computer equipment company. His business is growing in Cairo. His best friend from childhood is Belal. Belal is studying to become an Imam and already has a vast knowledge of the Quran and Islam. He runs a school for 300 young children and teens. It is a growing program in the Nassir City section of Cairo.

Mohamed has three wives. Belal has two wives. Both men are committed fathers and husbands.

Perhaps I have lived a sheltered life, but I have never met a man with multiple wives. In one night, I met two with five wives total.

I had lots of questions - not the least of which was - how does this work? Belal loves having two wives. He shared that he felt it brought him closer to his faith and deepened his understanding of women. Beyond that, we didn't explore all the details about how this works. He did offer his assistance to me should I seek a second wife. He had "tips" to share on how it could go well. I respectfully declined sharing my happiness in my 25 year marriage to Susan.

Mohamed and I talked quite a bit about his three wives and four children. Since there are more women than men in Egypt, he feels strongly that having multiple wives helps women. He also feels like he is more sensitive to women

because he has three wives and not one.

Mohamed maintains three households in two buildings. Wife #1 and #2 live in one building (one floor apart). Wife #1 has three children - ages 7, 5, 3 (two daughters and one son). Wife #2 has one son - age 3. Wife #3 lives across the street and does not have any children yet. His office is in the same building as his third wife's apartment. He spends two nights each week in each household with the seventh night shifting every three weeks between the apartments. He intentionally sees his children at those times. But, since he lives so close, they are around each other a lot more than that. The children play together and the wives get along as friends.

The wives talk with one another. They work out some together as households. Each wife has different gifts and abilities. He spoke to me of each woman and her special abilities. I listened a lot to Mohamed and Belal. I have much more to learn about their lives with five wives.

Belal said, "I think this is very hard for you to understand this because of your Western values and mind-set. If you were from here, it would make sense to you."

Perhaps.

St. Francis of Assisi once wrote that it is more blessed to "understand than to be understood." I am working on understanding having multiple wives. I have much to learn from listening to my new friends. We will talk more in the coming days.

### **Entry #8 - The Zabaleen of Garbage City and their Cave Churches**

Thirteen million tons of garbage are created everyday in Cairo. Most of that garbage ends up in the Garbage City of Mokattam. There you find over 100,000 people living in the filth and garbage. They are called the Zabaleen - which literally means "Garbage Collectors" in Arabic.

The streets of Garbage City are narrow because Garbage is piled everywhere. Contained in bags that stand eight feet high and six feet across, these heavy-duty garbage bags hold everything from food waste to plastics, to paper. The bags are dumped and cleared out in alley ways and homes. One house I looked into had three children sitting in what looked like a living room, sorting through garbage at their feet. The stench was overwhelming.

When the bags are cleared, plastic, metal and paper are recycled while food waste is hauled away and buried. I saw children walking and wading through waste and recyclables. The lack of sanitation is frightening. Imagine living in a dumpster and raising a family there for three or four generations. Multiply that by 75,000 families doing the same thing all around you. This is what it looks like to be the Zabaleen of Garbage City.

In the midst of Garbage, there is hope.

There is APE! A.P.E. is the Association for the Protection of the Environment. It is an NGO (Non-Government Organization) seeking to change the environment of Garbage City for the better. They have established schools and children protection programs, women's collectives, health care services, gardens and programs for the community. Along APE, church groups are the building blocks of hope growing out of this dump east of The Citadel and the Islamic Center of the City.

The witness of Christians is amazing. More than 60,000 of the Zabaleen are Christians (Christians only make up 15% of Egypt's total population). The Christians are Coptic, Catholic and Evangelical. Mother Teresa's Sisters of Charity have a ministry here. Christians have opened Good Shepherd Hospital to care for the children and adults with diseases growing out of this environment.

In addition, the Coptic Christians and others have carved the Cave Churches out of the cliffs of Mokattam. There are five churches carved out of stone. The largest church is an amphitheater carved from the mountain which seats over 5,000 people. It is packed every Thursday night for weekly worship.

Truly the Cave Churches are a resurrection story from the garbage of Cairo and a true witness to the faith and perseverance of the Zabaleen. I remind the reader that our Christian Savior, Jesus Christ, was crucified on garbage dump on a hill outside the walls of Jerusalem. A Church which witnesses to Christ out of the garbage in these times is truly a church of resurrection faith.

### **Entry #9 - The Beloved Community: All Saints' Cathedral**

Many Christians worship on Friday morning in Egypt. While Muslim brothers and sisters head to mosques for the noontime Friday prayers, Christians are praying, too. It makes sense to worship when the majority of religious people are worshipping. With Muslims outnumbering Christians 68 million to 12 million, why not take time for prayer at the same time?

All Saint's Cathedral has eight worship services each weekend. Beginning with the English speaking service on Friday at 10:00am (plus another in English Sunday morning), there are services in six different contexts and languages:

Sudanese Dinka, Habesha (Ethiopians and Eritreans), Swedish, Sudanese Arabic, Bari Sudanese, and Egyptian Arabic. Many Christians in All Saints' are refugees of war and violence. They have found a home at All Saints.

I worshiped with the Friday English speaking congregation and Sunday with Bari Sudanese Christians. The English-speaking service was led by American, Scottish, British, Swedish and Australian Christians. We had a great variety of voices within our one language! The spirit in the congregation was glorious. The singing was spirit filled. The preaching on the prophet Jeremiah was excellent. The welcome for all was beautiful and extravagant.

Sunday's worship was translated for me from the Bari dialect. Everyone helped me find my way through hymns, scripture readings, and even the sermon. We sang everything with drums beating behind our voices. It was a magnificent celebration of Christ alive among us. At the end of worship, I was invited to bring a word of greeting from my congregation to theirs. They took my arms and escorted me to the front of the sanctuary with drums, dancing and singing "alleluias." I have never felt so welcomed to worship anywhere with such fanfare and joy!

All Saints' Cathedral is a beloved Community of Jesus Christ. I wonder how many of our churches with refugees right outside our doors would be strengthened and enriched if we opened our doors all weekend long and welcomed every tongue, nation, and people inside to worship Jesus Christ in Spirit and in Truth! I know my congregation would be a better place if we were enriched by the joy which I experienced in the beloved community of All Saints' Cathedral, Cairo. I trust your church would be more of a beloved community as well!

### **Entry #10 - Helbees Zaher: The Heart of the Guesthouse**

At dinner Sunday night, I was surrounded by ten people from four continents, seven nations, and a wide range of Christian traditions. Our conversation literally covered the globe. At the head of the table was Helbees Zaher, the Manager of the All Saints' Cathedral Guesthouse. Helbees was quietly enjoying the fast paced and delightful conversation. She listens well.

During my ten days at the Guesthouse, I have been impressed by multiple ministries and motivations of so many young Christians. The average age of men and women staying here and caring for others is early 30's. Doctors, nurses, teachers, pastors, seminarians, engineers, statisticians, writers, and NGO (Non - Government Organization) specialists all find their way to the

Guesthouse. Each person is exceptionally gifted. Each brings a heart for Jesus Christ.

At the center of this hurricane of helpers is Helbees. She is the heart and soul of the Guesthouse. She is a Coptic Christian from Upper Egypt (which is south of Cairo). At 24 years old, she shows incredible poise, kindness and patience with everyone who passes through the Guesthouse doors. She welcomes everyone with the same joy with which we welcomed the last guest. In the eyes of Helbees everyone is equal and everyone is loved by God.



We are taught in Christian faith to practice hospitality. We are taught to welcome the sojourner. Some of us embody this spirit of welcome better than others. Helbees is a shining light of God's love and welcome.

Here at the Guesthouse, I am proud to be share this space for a little while with men and women of Christian faith who show love and compassion to others. Whether caring for refugees through REFUGE EGYPT, practicing their faith through prison ministries or building hospitals for the poor, God is alive in this place. Jesus is pleased with his brothers and sisters serving in his name.

I have often called the Holy Spirit the Mortar in the Brick. The Holy Spirit holds this world together. Similarly, Helbees is a gift to the guesthouse. She holds us all together.

### **Entry #11 - Imam Balel Telep**

He memorized the entire Qu ran as a young boy. Trained as an Islamic scholar, worthy of teaching posts in the University, he has dedicated his life to teaching

the Qu ran to children and adults. In one school, he has 300 students who are learning Islamic culture, law, and faith. In the classrooms above his mosque, more than 400 children are memorizing the entire Qu ran.

His name is Belal Telep. He Imam of Bani Hashim Mosque. He is a brilliant, passionate, and caring man who lives, breathes and speaks of "Allah" knowing that his very existence depends of Allah. Of Belal, one of his friends, known to him since childhood, said, "He was always the best student when we were children. He could have simply been a great professor of Islamic Studies. Instead, he has chosen to be with people - to pray, teach and care for others. He is an inspiration to me."

The other night I spent five hours with Imam Belal. I was told recently by a American Christian professor of Islam that there are Liberal, Conservative, and Radical Muslims. He said, "In the US we really only see Liberal Muslims (or at least that is how they present themselves to us). They show us their faith to Christians and others in ways we can tolerate. But, Conservative Muslims will try to convince you and convert you. They present a clear picture of Islam with no apologies whatsoever."

We ate together and spoke with one another. As the men of the mosque bowed low in prayer, I was praying as I pray, too. Throughout the evening with Imam Belal, our interpreter and four other men, it was clear to me I was in the presence of a gifted and holy "Conservative" Muslim. He was genuinely concerned that I come to know and believe the truth of Islam. He was concerned for my soul and my eternal salvation if I did not see the truth of Allah's revelation of the Qu ran to the Prophet Mohammed.

Through the night we had a lively and honest discussion of our two faiths. Face-to-face, heart-to-heart in Bani Hashim Mosque we listened and talked. He said, "Our faith is not inherited. In Islam you have a choice. You have to make up your own mind. But, if you pray and read and learn the Qu ran, you will come to the point where you have no hesitations." While I heard him, I had many hesitations and many questions about what I saw and experienced.

He asked at one point why I did not believe in Mohammad and the Qu ran. Rather than simply negate his faith, I answered that I believed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and God's revelation of eternal life through him. He listened but he did not fully understand, just as I had listened and could not fully understand.

The night we met was the 21st night of Ramadan. It is called Laylat al-Qadr or "the night of decree or measures." Laylat al-Qadr is considered the most holy night of the year. Muslims believe that Laylat al-Qadr is the night in which the Qu ran was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. It is believed to have occurred on an odd-numbered night during the last 10 days of Ramadan,

either the night of the 21st, 23rd, 25th, 27th or 29th. As you pray on this night, it is believed that God will grant your prayers.

I prayed for peace between and within the three faiths of the children of Abraham. Allah, Yahweh, Almighty God - please, answer this prayer.

### **Entry#12 - Mt. Sinai: Sunrise on Jabal Musa**

A knock on my door awakens me at 1:35am. It is time to climb Mt. Sinai. I dress and 10 minutes later meet my guide for the morning - Hafel. He is a 13-year-old Bedouin. He begins into a trotting pace as we leave the gates of St. Catherine's Monastery and head for the pathway to the peak of Jabal Musa. It is clear Hafel wants to be the first to the top. With a 39 year difference in age and the inherent differences between a Sinai Bedouin and a Central Ohio Buckeye, we will have to negotiate this upward journey into thin air.

I have been told the ascent is steep, covering close to 1000 meters to the 2285 meter summit. I have been told to expect 2 - 3 hours for the climb. No one mentioned the 60+ camels, the absolute darkness (except a moon), the rocky path, the wind, the coldest air I have encountered in the Middle East and climb trajectory going from steep to steeper to steepest. The fast young Bedouin and the slow middle-aged Buckeye move past plenty of pilgrims and arrive in 2 hours. I am winded. My mantra is "Moses was 80 years old when he came for the commandments of God. You can do this."

Hafel and I are among the first to the summit. We will wait 1 hour for the sun to rise through the mountain peaks near the Gulf of Aqaba. It is cold and a chilling wind. I begin to feel the effects of hypothermia. For a price, I get a blanket from another Bedouin. It cuts the cold wind, but my hands go numb from the fingers to the wrists. I will regain feeling when I reach the high valley below.

Hundreds of Pilgrims arrive for the next 90 minutes. These are the Children of Abraham and Moses. Jews, Christians and Muslims gather on this high and holy mountain singing and praying in Hebrew, Arabic, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, German, English and Russian. Sometimes joining with other faiths, tongues, and nations, the joy amidst the chill of the mountaintop is palpable and brings a spiritual warmth at dawn. "Alleluia! Allah! Shema Israel!" are words coupled with hands raised and clasped in joy, songs lifted high to praise God as the sun rises. It is 5:24am. From a sliver to a burst, the sun reminds us all of the power of God, Allah, Yahweh to create each new day.

Moses must be smiling along with the sun on this day which the Lord has made. He had grazed his flocks on these mountains as a young herdsman. Close to here he had seen the burning bush and heard God's voice proclaim, "I AM WHO I AM." From this mountain he was sent to free his people from slavery

in Pharaoh's Egypt. To this mountaintop he returned and received from God ten new laws for the Chosen People wandering this Sinai Desert.

Today I feel connected to Moses. Here he must have felt God's peace as he escaped the struggles of his wandering people camped in the desert below. The wind, the sun rising, the very rocks below my feet this morning all touched the strong deliverer, the Prince of Egypt, even as they touched me.

I believe "Mountaintop experiences" can happen on the plains of Ohio as well as on Sinai peaks. I encourage you to seek God's peace - in the sunrise, in the wind across the prairie, in the stillness of your day. You will receive God's peace if you ask for such a blessing from God.

### **Entry #13 - Ramadan - Day 23 of 30**

I have spent 15 days of Ramadan in Egypt. In a nation whose 88% majority is Muslim, Egypt is a fascinating place to spend the most challenging month in the Islamic calendar. The Qur'an gives very clear instructions about how to fast during Ramadan. The fasting begins with the first shimmer of morning light, not with sunrise. Around 3:30am, people have their last solid meal and fluid intake until the call for prayer sounds at sunset - around 6:30pm. Besides no food, there can be no smoking, drinking, or sex during these hours.

With 65 million other people called "believers" there is a constant self-monitoring and social monitoring of how people are doing. For example, I was riding at the back of an East Delta bus from Cairo to St. Katherine's when the man in front of me began to smoke. Like everyone I smelled it before I saw the man smoking. Everyone turned and glared at me - thinking I was the culprit. Since I don't smoke, it took awhile for me to realize the glares were directed toward me. The bus driver pulled the bus off the road, went back and confronted the man who argued about stopping (I guess you can smoke the other 11 months on public buses). In the midst of their argument, I heard the bus driver say "Ramadan" at least three times.

The same bus driver and about 10 men on the bus stopped, got off and prayed with the noontime and 2:00pm call to prayer was issued. On our long bus ride, another man quietly prayed from his seat, going through the positions of prayer as we moved through the day. In shops, stores, at guard posts in museums, in the metro stations and on the streets men will stop and pray to Allah at the prescribed hours.

Also, during Ramadan everything shuts down around 3:00pm. Whether Pyramids, Museums or shops, the schedule of the nation shifts to relate to Ramadan. People need to get home for prayer in the Mosques and breaking fast with family and friends. In one of the largest cities in the world, everything readjusts to meet the requirements of Ramadan.

Everywhere I go, everyone who speaks English wants to tell me about Ramadan. They share the rules and regulations. I find that most people I have met in Egypt work hard to uphold the rituals and rules of Ramadan.

As we get closer to the end of Ramadan, many men have told me they feel stronger each day and feel clearer and closer to God the longer this goes on. One said that the two times a Muslim feels the deepest joy of Allah is when he breaks the final fast of Ramadan and when he enters into heaven. In Christianity we say such a moment is the "foretaste of heaven divine." Experiencing Ramadan in Egypt, I can see why they feel this closeness and connection with Allah.

### **Entry #14 - The Nile is the Key of Life**

In Age of the Pharaohs, the Key of Life was a symbol that communicated the totality of life. Shaped like a cross with a circle on top, the Key of Life showed the connection between heaven and earth and all their gods held together in the circle of life. The Key of Life is carved everywhere in temples and tombs.

Egypt's true Key of Life is the Nile River.

The Nile shapes the regional descriptions. The Nile travels south to north - from "Upper Egypt" to "Lower Egypt." She carves her watery way through a barren desert land. In the north, the vast Nile Delta produces 90% of the food for the nation and then feeds parts of North Africa, too.

ALL LIFE in Egypt exists because of the Nile River. Without it, nothing would survive. This is hard to fathom. Buckeyes are blessed with many fresh water sources. The rain from heaven, Lake Erie, Rivers, streams, and natural wells grant us an abundance of water. We need to thank God each day for the multiple sources of water with which we are blessed.

Here, ONLY the Nile River gives life as it flows through nine African countries to the Mediterranean Sea. In many places along the river, the desert comes is within a quarter mile of the river. A sliver of green separates barren from bountiful. On Nile's bank water buffalo, camels, birds, donkeys, and horses graze. Women wash clothes, men fish and children swim with delight.

The Nile has the power to take away life as well. Because she serves so many purposes, the Nile is constantly threatened in her ability to counter diseases and parasites. People die young with a life expectancy at least 10-15 years less than ours. They suffer from parasites that attack the liver and cancers caused by toxins in the water. If the Nile's water is not purified, it becomes the worst enemy of the nation and its people.

One source feeds. One source threatens.

Egyptians talk a lot about their country's vulnerability. Their greatest strength and great weakness is the High Dam of Aswan. Built in the 1950's the dam controls the flow of water for the last 600 miles to the sea. The water levels cannot go over 111 meters or the Nile floods. It cannot dip below 106 meters, or the Dam turbines won't function. In addition, everyone here fears missile strikes - mostly from Israel. Such a missile strike would blow up the dam and create flooding throughout Egypt which would destroy life as they know it. Cairo, with 25% of the countries population would drown. It would be a 100 times worse than New Orleans after Katerina.

Consider the keys to your life. Is there one Key of Life which can give life or take it away, sustain or destroy, give health and well-being or illness and death? In Egypt the ancients knew the answer. The Nile is the Key of Life.

### **Entry #15 - Horses tied to the front door**

Last night I saw a horse tied to his owner's front door. It was a strange scene. Beside him was a pile of dirt, no water, nothing to eat. His rib cage was showing. He looked tired and hungry with no place to rest and nothing to eat.

I have seen the rib cages of more horses, mules, and camels than I ever imagined possible. The animals reflect the poverty suffered by people here. We too often see the animals suffering before we see their owners' starvation.

Statistics are not well kept, but an Egyptian social worker told me that unemployment was close to 40% in Cairo. Maybe, maybe not. What is clear is that people and all creation struggle and suffer here. It is hard to imagine unless you walk these streets at all hours of the day and night. Sometimes the starving horse tied to the front door gets your attention of the greater suffering.

How do people and their creatures survive?

I believe faith in God sustains so many of the poor people of Egypt. I see the faith of 12 million Coptic Christians as meaningful and true. With a tattoo of the Coptic Cross on the hands or wrists of Copts as babies, they carry this witness to faith as a constant in an often hostile religious environment.

Similarly, I see the faith of 68 million Muslims as one which creates self-discipline and gives meaning to daily survival. In prayer to Allah, every believer puts his or her face to the ground. Every believer must surrender everything to Allah.

One person riding with me along the Nile said that she hates seeing the animal cruelty. She comes from a small farm community in Wales. It pains her to see

the animals here suffer. When I pointed out that people with starving animals are also starving, she said, "that pains me even more." The pain of poverty should inspire each one of us to take action to end it.

I pray this day that God will give you faith to overcome your pain and suffering and strength to help you work to end the same for your brother and sister in need.

### **Entry #16 - Burning the Qur'an**

I have been following the story of Rev. Terry Jones and the 50 members of the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida burning the Qur'ans on 9/11. This is absolutely insane!

Yesterday, General David Petraeus, Commander of the American Fighting Forces in Afghanistan declared this action "could endanger troops and it could endanger the overall effort." General Petraeus is absolutely correct. For any Christian to burn Islam's holiest book is like throwing an incendiary device on relationships between Muslims and Christians worldwide. This will be particularly true for American Christians outside of our borders.

This action will not only endanger our troops, it will endanger the fragile relationships between Muslims and American missionaries, Peace Corp Workers, Medical workers, diplomats, teachers, students, tourists and Holy Land pilgrims.

I shared this evolving story with one Coptic Christian friend here in Egypt. He was horrified when I described the unfolding event. He said, "if radical Muslims cannot respond against Americans, they may turn on local Christians in whatever country they are in. Here, that means me and my family. This is a very dangerous idea."

Anglicans, Copts, Evangelical Christians and so many others all say the same thing. They KNOW the radical elements of Islam will respond to this action. The reaction will be swift, violent and I believe will bring harm to innocent men, women, and children. One Dutch Christian said, "When our papers had a caricature of Mohammed, the reaction was violent. To burn the Qur'an will bring a much greater reaction against Americans, especially Christians."

### **Entry #17 - More on Burning the Qur'an**

Last night I spoke by phone with my Muslim friend Mohammed. In the background I could hear the prayers of Isha closing out the 28th Day of Ramadan. We spoke about a number of things - our families, Imam Balel, my friends at Bani Hashim Mosque.

I asked Mohammed if he had heard about the pastor in America who was planning to burn the Qur'ans on Saturday, Sep. 11. He told me he had heard this. He then offered this, "Rev. Tim, Imam Balel and all of us know there are hateful people who call themselves Christians. We also know many good people who are Christian." Then he asked me how I was doing. I indicated that I was upset about how this would be received in the Islamic World and what reaction would come in the aftermath. He responded, "I am concerned about how this hurts your heart. I am worried about you and the good people you come from. We are all concerned about you."

Through our language differences, through our faith differences, Mohammed and I were unified by the heart of God. We were united by the goodness of God and hope of God's love. I told him many millions of Christians and American leaders were trying to convince the Florida pastor that no good would come from this hateful act - including me. I told him I had had written the pastor to appeal to his better nature. I was not hopeful. Mohammed ended, "You tried to stop him? You and your friends are trying to stop this act? I am so proud of you. I will tell Imam Belal that so many of you are working to end this." His joy was complete. The prayers could still be heard behind Mohammed as we hung up. "Allah is great. Allah is merciful."

### **Entry #18 - Bibliotheca Alexandrina: "The Truth Shall Set You Free"**

The ruins of the ancient library of Alexandria are buried underwater. Fear not, there are no waterlogged books or scrolls. They were all destroyed long ago. Only one survived.

Opened in 329 B.C. E. by Demetrius of Phalerum, counselor to Ptolemy I, the Library of Alexandria stood in the heart of this Mediterranean Port dedicated to the "writings of all nations." Believed to be among the first and greatest libraries in the world, this library welcomed scholars and philosophers. International research and debate were expected in the halls of this library. By law, all ships docking in Alexandria were required to allow all scrolls on board to be copied in they were of interest. By the mid-first Century B.C., the library held 532,800 manuscripts, all catalogued by the Head Librarian, Callimachus. The library spawned a "branch library" at the Temple of Serapis. Together these "mother" and "daughter" libraries housed over 700,000 scrolls, the equivalent of 125,000 printed books today.

In 48 B.C.E. the "book burning" began.

Julius Caesar's army destroyed over 40,000 (and as many as 400,000) scrolls. As compensation for this destruction, Mark Anthony gave his beloved Cleopatra 200,000 scrolls from the Pergamum library in Greece. But, the destruction wasn't over. Christian mobs destroyed this vast storehouse of "pagan" knowledge, torching the Mother Library in 293 and the Daughter

Library in 391, though medieval Europe later mythologized the destruction as proof of Arab barbarism. Other attacks on the libraries continued through the ages.

In the end, only one book was saved. It was the Index of all the other volumes. We know what items were lost. But, what knowledge and truth was destroyed will never be known.

Opened in 2002, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina is a lighthouse of truth and understanding in the port of Alexandria. Built within a mile of the submerged remains of the old library, Bibliotheca Alexandrina is a living testimony to a glorious past. Designed by Norwegian-Austrian architects, built by Egyptian, Italian and British contractors and funded mostly by Egyptian, Iraqi, Saudi Arabian, and the Emirates financing, this \$335 million dollar complex is a pearl of knowledge and truth.

In these times when some fearful and ignorant people continue to burn books and destroy the truth and wisdom of the ages, people in search of truth and understanding write books and build relationships and libraries to treasure "the writings of all nations."

Will we people who are liberated by truth and understanding or will we held captive to fear and ignorance? For truth and understanding, check out: [www.bibalex.org](http://www.bibalex.org)

### **Entry #19 - An Uneasy Peace as Ramadan Ends**

The call to the final noontime prayer of Ramadan has sounded on the streets of Alexandria. As I walk through the streets, the spirit of the people is turning from fasting to feasting. All around I find women and children shopping to prepare for the celebration which begins late tonight. I find men reading their Qur'ans in front of shops and stores. Aloud they read the words given to the prophet 1400 years ago.

There is an uneasy peace today on the streets of Alexandria.

Everyone is acutely aware that 50 so-called Christians in America will burn copies of the Qur'an this Saturday. Muslims are anxious. Christians are anxious, too.

One Syrian Catholic Christian asked me why President Obama and Christian leaders won't stop this from happening on American soil. I explain our Constitution and the freedom of expression. He listens attentively and responds, "Many people around the world will be hurt by this freedom of expression. You have no idea." I ask if he fears for his family in Egypt and Syria. He answers, "Yes, of course I am afraid of the reaction." He has faced

difficult days before. He will face them again.

While Muslims may not like the idea of a Mosque being stopped from construction in New York City, they all understand what it is like to have a government or powers that be intervene in such cases. They do not understand the lack of action around the Qur'an burning threat.

The Qur'an is read daily, prayed through, sung aloud, memorized and treated with absolute devotion and reverence in Islam. Believed to be the divine revelation of Allah to humanity given through the Prophet Mohammed, the Qur'an is the primary source of all life and faith in Islam. The thought of any one destroying one Qur'an is beyond imagination.

### **Entry #20 - Sunrise on Eid ul-Fitr**

The sun rose on a new month this morning. Eid ul-Fitr arrived and Ramadan departed until next July. The call to prayer was blasted through the streets of Alexandria beginning at 5:00am. No one could sleep through this call.

By 6:30 a.m. the streets were filled with well over 100,000 people heading to the harbor and the Qaed Ibrahim Mosque. The streets were packed with people. In colorful new clothes, men, women, and children gathered for prayer - women and girls in one area, men and boys in another. At 7 a.m., the final call to prayer instantly riveted everyone into their prayer position. For this prayer, everyone is on the streets rather than in the mosques. Mohammed believed that on this day, prayer should be outside the mosques as a public witness of the celebration and adulation felt by everyone.

The holiday of Eid ul-Fitr marks the end of the fasting period of Ramadan and the first day of the following month, after another new moon has been sighted. The Eid fell after 30 days of fasting based on the lunar sighting.

The Eid ul-Fitr literally means "The Festival of Breaking the Fast." Following the early morning prayer, the rest of the day will be filled with food, family, and fun. People will share gifts with the children, put on their best outfits, and donate food to the poor (Zakat al-fitr). Although the feast lasts three days, everyone agrees that Day #1 is the most special.

What I witnessed this morning was peaceful, beautiful and communal. It was a glorious new beginning and a joyful celebration.

I spoke with two old men on the steps of Qaed Ibrahim Mosque. They were very aware of the late breaking news from America that the Qur'ans will not be burned in Florida. One man said, "If the Qur'ans had burned, the world would have caught fire." The other man smiled at his old friend and said, "Nothing happened. Allah is the greatest. Allah is merciful. That is our prayer. That is

our faith." They thanked me for coming to prayer. We all embraced in the early morning light and there on the steps of Qaed Ibrahim Mosque I felt the love of God.

I know the Feasting will be extra sweet today.

### **Entry #21 - "Each Child of Abraham Needs to do Major Soul Searching"**

Since arriving in Egypt, I have written nothing on my encounter with Jews, the third member of the family in "the Children of Abraham." I have met no Jews in Egypt. I have visited four synagogues - two in Cairo and two in Alexandria. All four have been heavily guarded by Egyptian police. I was allowed to take no photos at three. I gained admission to one which is an historic shrine in Old Cairo. Only two have worshipping communities - but these communities are very tiny.

Sunset September 8th marked the beginning of Rosh Hashanah. Now is a time when Jews focus on their relationship with God and creation. In these "Days of Awe," Jews mark the 10 day period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement is with soul-searching. Jews traditionally ask themselves how they have lived in the year gone by and how they might do better in the one to come.

With Eid al-Fitr (the three days of Feasting) having started late last night for Muslims, and with the events which are transpiring in the world community today, now would be a perfect time for Christians to join their Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters to reflect deeply on our relationships with God, creation, one another and all God's children.

We all need to do major soul searching.

There's always those familiar sins of pride, anger, greed, insufficient compassion to recall. But perhaps we could all join together in examining our sin of incivility, our tendencies toward mean-spiritedness, our growing inability to speak with one another in constructive and healing ways and our continued and growing global distain for the care of all of God's creation.

Abraham must be weeping this morning. He, among all men, turned his entire life and being over to the care of God. He trusted God and set out on a venture of faith in one God that changed the course of human history and humanity's relationship with God.

What major soul searching are you doing today?

### **Entry #22 - One Journey Ends while another begins**

Early Monday morning, I leave Egypt. I travel back through Israel and return home to Columbus. While my journey seems to be coming to end, in reality it is beginning all over again closer to home.

This journey in the "Footsteps of Abraham" has not been a straight path. It has taken me across oceans, rivers, deserts, mountains and barren land. It taken me down alleys and on to back streets where, in some cases, no one ever remembers seeing a Christian before. The streets I have walked are thousands of years old. Some of these crooked paths were walked by Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Joseph and Mary, Peter, the disciples and Mohammed. Conquerors and peasants has crossed these paths. Wars have been waged and blood has run through these streets. If only the stones could talk, the stories would expand exponentially.

This journey has covered thousands of miles. Only English and a few words in Arabic, Hebrew and Spanish have accompanied me. I have believed in the power of God and goodness of humanity to guide my feet. I have trusted God to deliver me from any harm. I have trusted the goodness of people, their hospitality, kindness and generous spirits.

My journey has been with common people of faith - Muslims, Jews and Christians from across the globe. I have visited 24 mosques, 24 synagogues and more than 60 churches from every imaginable part of the Christian communion. I have prayed on sidewalks, in mosques, synagogues, and churches with all the children of Abraham. I have been present in prayer with Muslims 14 times. I worshipped with Jews 15 times and Christians more than 30 times. In Arabic, Hebrew, and 12 other languages, I have heard the name of God praised and exalted.

There have been a few constants on this journey - my baseball hat and daily prayer, for beginners!

First, my Columbus Clippers hat has covered my head everywhere through three months. With no rain in three months, my Clippers hat has protected my head. The poor hat looks like it has been through several seasons of AAA Baseball! It has been my constant friend on the journey.

Second, I have started each day with the prayer of peace from St. Francis of Assisi. I pray that God would make me an instrument of peace and help me to understand more than to be understood.

Third, I also pray each day that Jesus would open my eyes and my heart to listen, learn, and feel the pain and joy of God's people everywhere. I have witnessed and heard some amazing things because God has answered this prayer many times each day.

Finally, I pray that Father Abraham will accompany me as an Angel of Mercy, Love, and Faith.

While my hat protected my head from overexposure, God protected my entire being in every other way.

I have been blessed beyond belief.

### **Entry #23 - Father Abraham and the Way Forward**

Abraham is ever present in the Land of the Holy One.

He can be found in the prayers, purpose and paintings of all his children. For Jews, he is named in the lineage and litany of daily prayers. For Muslims, he is named five times a day as they kneel and bow their heads to the earth in prayer. For Christians, I see him in paintings, icons, and sculptures in sanctuaries across the Middle East.

Abraham is an ever-present figure of faith.

God called Abram to go with Sarai from his country and kindred in Genesis 12 to a new land. There was no turning back. He was blessed to be a blessing. He was sent with no instructions. No map. Nothing except faith. As he rose and traveled into unknown territory, Abram did this trusting God to deliver him. This set Abram apart from every other man before him. He was the first monotheist! He was the first to surrender to God.

No matter where I have gone, Jews, Christians, and Muslims ALL know and revere the story of Father Abraham. In each faith tradition, Abraham is the "Father of Faith." It is in the next generation that the children separate - around Sarah and Isaac and Hagar and Ishmael. But, with Abraham, there are no questions of lineage and hope.

I believe it isn't "knowing" the story of Abraham that ultimately matters. What matters is living the story.

How are we faithful to God? How do we follow God, trusting in God to deliver us from sin and conflict; from agony and distress? How do we follow God when God calls us to follow? How do we come together as children of Abraham to walk a holy, peaceful and acceptable path of in the eyes of Yahweh, Almighty God, and Allah?

The truth is there are saints and sinners in every faith tradition. On any given day, any one of us could be either a saint or sinner. There are people I have met who make me ashamed to be Christian. If I were a Jew or Muslim, there are people I have met who would me feel the same way.

Mostly, I have encountered good people. I have met faithful men, women, and children seeking to glorify God and worship God in the ways they feel most called to worship and pray.

I have been inspired by young children and old men touching their heads to the earth in humble adoration and praise of Allah. I have been inspired by Jews witnessing to their faith at sunrise on the Western Wall and Shabbat services in synagogues great and small. I have been touched by indigenous Palestinian Christians, Coptic and Evangelical Christians, and pilgrims from around the world kneeling before the cross of Jesus Christ as witnesses of faith in Him.

I have wept for Jerusalem at the Western Wall, put my face to the earth in the mosque by Abraham's tomb, knelt with Vietnamese Christians in the Tomb of Mary and spent many days and nights in prayer wondering how we as Abraham's Children can get out of the messes we have created in God's name.

Violence and hatred will not deliver us from evil. God's love, grace, forgiveness and mercy are our only hope for deliverance from evil.

Not one of our faith traditions can do this alone. We must all see that we are an interconnected web of faith and consciousness. We must all see that we need each other as believers to sort out the political and religious divisions which we have created in our times.

There can be no other way.

One day in the Galilee Valley I was asked quite directly, "WHO ARE YOU?" and "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?" I answered, "I am Timothy, son of Abraham. I am here seeking peace for my family." My inquisition answered, "I am Caleb, also a son of Abraham. I too seek peace for my family."

Perhaps, the entire journey comes down to this - one child of Abraham meeting another child of Abraham and walking forward in peace.

And so the journey begins. Will you walk with me?