

Sermon #240
May 6, 2018
Title slide: slide 1

Journey of a Lifetime

I walked where Jesus walked. More than just site seeing, my trip to Israel in April was a spiritual journey. It followed the life of Jesus chronologically, beginning in Bethlehem at his birth place and ending in Jerusalem, his crucifixion, burial, the empty tomb, and the place of his ascension into heaven. (Slide 2) It was a ten-day tour with a group of thirty-three Christians, all from United Methodist churches in Pennsylvania, New York, Virginia Beach, and Ohio. The team was led by Pastor Sal and Nancy Buonocore, friends of ours since college and seminary.

I'm not here to simply tell you my story this morning and have you see some wonderful pictures. I want you to journey with me. So, pick up your suitcase (pick mine up) and come with me on a spiritual journey this morning. Walk with me where Jesus walked. Allow his story to come alive in you this morning and follow his way wholeheartedly. Let's start at the beginning.

I. The beginning, Jesus birth (Luke 2:8-12)

The first place on our stop is Bethlehem, Jesus' birthplace (Slide 3). Luke tells us in chapter 2 of his gospel that Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem from Nazareth to register there because Joseph belonged to David's line. There, Mary gave birth to her firstborn and placed him in a manger, more like a cave in the hillside because there was no room in the guest room.

Today, Bethlehem has the Church of the Nativity on this site that three Christian groups govern and use as a worship site (Slide 4). Those groups are the Roman Catholic, the Eastern Orthodox, and the Armenian churches. We joined a procession and went to the cave below where it is said that Jesus was born (Slide 5). Take a minute to look at the photo and realize that Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, came to earth in human form to live among us. (Slide 6) Paul says in Phil. 2 that even though Jesus was in the very nature God, he also "made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness... He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross." God's Son becoming human like us, was no minor miracle, but holds great significance for all of us. He is worthy for us to follow.

On that same night, Luke also tells us that shepherds were out in the field, watching their flocks by night (Slide 7). We now travel to the actual site where the shepherds roamed that night and the cave where they lived. They were the lowest of society and yet God in his mercy and his deep love, felt it appropriate to bring his good news to lowly shepherds of a Savior born to all the world. Take a minute to view the photo and realize that Jesus was born for all people, from the lowly to the highest.

There are many other places that now lead us away from Jesus' birth to his ministry days. We visit the ancient city Jericho (Slide 8), whose walls were torn down by God, through the obedience of Joshua and the Israelites. It's the oldest town in the world, having been formed in 8,000 BC, as well as being the lowest in elevation at 825 ft. below sea level. Then we must visit Qumran (Slide 9), where the Essene sect lived and carried out their preservation of God's Holy Word. The finding of the dead sea scrolls in 1947 was one of the greatest archeological finds of our times, giving us original manuscripts of the Bible that we never had before. As the prophet Isaiah said, God's Word never returns void. He always preserves his Word.

Before moving on to Jesus' ministry, we visit the Jordan River (Slide 10), nearly the exact spot where Jesus himself was baptized. There a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." (Slide 11) Today the Jordan River is a much narrower, dirty river, but one that affords significance for all Christians to be baptized or to remember their baptism, as we did. (Slide 12) Take a few minutes to look at the photos and remember your baptism, remember what Jesus did for you, or if you haven't been baptized then maybe it's time to consider doing so. But now we must turn to Jesus' ministry, which primarily means the area of Judea and the Sea of Galilee.

II. The ministry, the Sea of Galilee calling and ministry (Matthew 4:18-22)

Now let's travel north, (Slide 13) first through Caesarea Philippi with its huge outdoor amphitheater or pagan worship site, much of it still intact, (Slide 14) Herod's Palace right on the Mediterranean Sea, and the horse race track/Gladiator fighting ring is still very visible (Slide 15) along with a very impressive Roman Aquaduct. At this point, Jesus began a conversation with his disciples about who he was and what his ultimate outcome would be.

(Slide 16) Tel-Meggido is also on the way, an excavation site of twenty cities stacked one on top of the other. The view from this mount shows the valley of Armageddon below where it is prophesied that the last battle will take place at the end of time. The ruins of Solomon's Palace are in this place and so are his stables with 450 horses. (Slide 17) a large underground water cavern, which supplied the city's water was dug here. We went down some 110 steps and then back up another 80 or so.

(Slide 18) One of the greatest points of Jesus' ministry was all around and on the Sea of Galilee, which is 7 ½ miles long and 13 miles wide at its widest part and approximately 155 ft. deep. (Slide 19) On this beautiful Galilean Seashore, Jesus first called his disciples to ministry. He approached two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew and James and John. They were fishing and mending their nets. Jesus called to them, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of people" (Matthew 4:19). (Slide 20) And amazingly the two sets of brothers left their boats immediately to follow Jesus, leaving their profession and James and John's father in the boat by himself. This reminds us that we, too, are called to leave things behind. And we are to go not necessarily to a profession, a place, or a vocation (even though all of those have their place). No, we

are first and foremost called to follow a person – the person of Jesus Christ himself. And he will help us fish for people, that is make disciples of Jesus Christ.

(Slide 21) I had my most profound experience on the Sea of Galilee. We took a boat ride on the Sea. We relaxed in the cool breezes, took in the breath-taking scenery, listened to Christian music, both hymns and contemporary songs, and even danced to Jewish music believe it or not, learning a Jewish dance step (Slide 22). While in the boat, I met Jesus. He was just right there. He told me, “I’m still here. I’ve never left this place even though it has changed a lot.” And he encouraged me to keep doing what I’m doing and he encouraged me about our church. (Slide 23) To walk with Jesus is the greatest joy of all! Nothing else compares!

We visit other great sites in and near Judea and the Sea of Galilee including Mt. Carmel (Slide 24) where Elijah trusted God to defeat the prophets of Baal, the hill of the beatitudes where Jesus gave his sermon on the Mt. (Slide 25), the little town of Nazareth (Slide 26). Jesus’ hometown that today has nearly 170,000 inhabitants, a majority of whom are Christian coming from all types of denominations, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, Coptics, and more. (Slide 27) What an amazing irony to learn that Jesus’ hometown, where he could do few miracles in his day, is now a predominantly Christian city. (Slide 28) Praise God for his witness! In the town of Nazareth we also see ruins from the house where Mary received the message from the angel Gabriel that she would bear the Holy One, the Son of God. Below the Greek Eastern Orthodox Church of All Nations, there are stairs steps believed to be from the actual house where Mary lived. Look at the photo and trust Jesus to do the amazing things that he wants to do through you. Respond to him just as Mary did.

Well, this is all so good and wonderful, but it’s time to leave this beautiful place and travel to the city of Jerusalem (Slide 29), where it all came to a brutal, crushing end for Jesus’ life here on earth. Luke tells us in 9:51 of his gospel, that at this point “Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” He set his face towards Jerusalem, knowing what it meant.

- III. The ending, the Mt. of Olives, Gethsemane, the via dolorosa, the cross, the burial, and the empty tomb (Luke 23:26-43; Mark 15:33-41; 16:1-8)

As we approach Jerusalem, we stand on the top of the Mt. of Olives, a very significant place for Jesus and for all pilgrims to the Holy Land. It’s a two-mile long ridge just east of Jerusalem’s old city. (Slide 30) Pilgrims coming from the east over the barren lands, were overjoyed to see the holy city, standing on top of a more fertile area with olive trees all around. Jesus spent much time on this mount as he visited Mary and Martha in their village of Bethany and began his long descent into the city on the back of a small colt that had never been ridden. (Slide 31) I was surprised how steep the descent was and wondered just how Jesus maneuvered an unriden colt all the way down that steep hill side.

(Slide 32) Today, a chapel called Dominus Flevit, which is Latin for the “Lord wept,” marks the spot where Jesus stopped to weep over the city of Jerusalem. The modern building is shaped in the form of a tear drop. (Slide 33) Jesus wept over the city and said, “[Jerusalem] if you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:42). And he went on to lament the fact that Jerusalem did not recognize the time of God’s coming to them. Look at the photo and be reminded that Jesus weeps for you too.

His weeping now takes us to the end of the week. (Slide 34) We visit the upper room where Jesus had his last supper with his disciples, washed their feet, taught them and prayed for them. Today, a 12th century Crusade room, built somewhat like it might have originally been, marks the spot. (Slide 35) Leading out from the room are stair steps that do date back to the first century and are most likely the authentic steps that Jesus and his disciples walked down after his supper and before his arrest in the garden. (Slide 36) There in the Garden of Gethsemane he sweat great drops of blood and asked that the Father remove his cup from him. But in obedience he affirms, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

(Slide 37) Today, the wailing wall is a significant holy place for Jews and Christians to pray. Visiting this place reminds us of the importance of prayer in our lives, how we can communicate directly with our Lord and Savior, knowing that he will answer and that he already understands. (Slide 38) I was thrilled to pray at that wall and to place our prayer requests in the crevices of the wall.

Now it is time to walk down one of the most famous paths that Christians can take today (Slide 39). It is called La Vía Dolorosa in Latin, the Way of Sorrow. (Slide 40). There are fifteen stops on this journey, beginning with the Praetorium, where Jesus was condemned to death on a cruel cross. The crowds and the Pharisees had won. They had cried out, “Crucify him. Give us Barabbas.” His conviction had to do with making himself to be a king, the King of the Jews. And anyone who makes himself to be a king is no friend of Caesar or the kingdom of this world. As you look at the photo, be reminded that this world is not our kingdom and that as they persecuted Jesus, so they will persecute us as well.

As I walked down the way of suffering and sorrow, I, too, saw the narrow streets, the places where he fell time and again; the place where he spoke to the women. (Slide 41) “Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not over me,” he said. “weep rather over yourselves and your children. For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed’ (Luke 23:28)! I also saw where Simon of Cyrene took up his cross for him; and the place where it is said that Veronica wiped the sweat from his face. (Slide 42) I followed Jesus all the way to the end of the sorrowful way, where he suffered excruciating pain on a cruel cross. Today, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre marks the spot where he was crucified. A Greek Orthodox altar, ornamented in Easter style, stands over the Rock of Calvary.

(Slide 43) With all the other pilgrims, I stooped down to touch that rock where Jesus died. Tears formed in my eyes as I began to realize what Jesus had done for me – to take away not only the sins of the whole world, but my sins as well. Words, cannot begin to express the gratitude for a Savior who took away all my sins. He died for me and took my place on this cruel cross and then he rose from the grave all for me. That's the sensation that each pilgrim has, making his or her spiritual journey down to the foot of the cross where the ground is even for all of us; and then journeying to the empty tomb. Look at the photo and be reminded of what Jesus did for you. He took away your sins, too. All you have to do is trust in him and follow him wholeheartedly. Walk with Jesus down that sorrowful way and know that he did it for you and for me.

Then go and view the place where he was laid and see that it is empty (Slide 44). It is empty, because he rose up from the grave in victory over death and sin giving us the same power and the same victory. On this sixth Sunday of Easter, we continue to celebrate and live out Jesus' powerful resurrection. That is our hope and our joy. And it is our mission to take the gospel message to our neighbors, co-workers, family members, and to the world.

Here we return to the text in Phil. Chapter 2 that helped start our journey with Christ becoming human and being obedient unto death on a cross. (Slides 45) "Therefore," Paul says in verse 9, "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. To the glory of God the Father" (v. 9-11). At the end of this journey, we come to recognize that Jesus is truly Lord. He is worthy to be our Lord. He is not a dictator, but one who endured the suffering and shame of the cross so that we might go free and live for him.

The best way to conclude our spiritual journey this morning is to take communion together, just as our team did at the empty tomb (Slide 46). The table is open for all, all who earnestly repent of their sins and desire to live a new life with Christ

Communion

(Have servers come up first and do the liturgy)