“Sabbatical Reflections”
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
August 12, 2012
Psalm 148

It’s hard to believe that the last time I was in this pulpit was on Easter Sunday. The past four months have rushed by at warp speed, which I take as one of the signs of a hugely successful sabbatical. A few weeks into this time away from ministerial responsibilities, I stumbled upon a quote by Mark Twain that epitomized the approach Camilla and I attempted to follow on this sabbatical. Twain wrote, “Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So, throw off the bow lines, sail away from the safe harbor, catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”

Prior to embarking on the sabbatical, I thought of it as time to rest, reflect and renew my energy and enthusiasm. These things happened, but they unfolded in ways I had not anticipated. Leading up to this time away, I had toyed with the idea of spending at least one week on a spiritual retreat spending full days reading, praying and reflecting, with only minimal interaction with others. Thanks be to God I did not pursue that idea!

Some people feel energized by such an experience, but I would have been driven mad. I loved having time to read, pray and reflect, but only in measured doses. For me, what was re-energizing was traveling to new places, seeing extraordinary sites, meeting some very dear people and having the opportunity to do it all with my best friend, soul mate and true love.

The Clergy Renewal Program of the Lilly Endowment that financed this incredible adventure, encourages pastors to design a sabbatical in which you – in their words – “do what makes your heart sing.” That was a golden piece of advice and I hope you have an opportunity to take some time away from your normal routine. Do what makes your heart sing. For Camilla and me, that is travel. We love to explore this amazing planet and the grant from the Lilly Endowment made it possible to experience some powerful places and to strike up friendships with some beautiful people.

We experienced radically different environments: from the sweltering heat of the arid Jordanian desert to the cool, lush isle of Iona; from the wide open spaces of Ghost Ranch, New Mexico to bumping shoulders with people in the bustling Old City of Jerusalem; from the stately St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh to the breathtaking buildings hewed out of rock in Petra; from the bombed out ruins of Coventry Cathedral to the new, contemporary church building next to it.
These dramatic contrasts brought home in very compelling ways the astonishing variety in God’s creation and how people around the globe thrive in extremely different settings.

We visited the oldest continuous city on earth, Jericho, which is 10,000 years old. And we walked the site of some of the oldest discovered dinosaurs, Ghost Ranch, where these creatures roamed the earth 220 million years ago.

When we are awake to the wonders of God’s world, it transforms our hearts and our minds. Experiencing the pleasant surprises that come with new places and new people remind us to wake up to every moment and to be aware that each day can present us with new insights, new possibilities and new friendships.

Some of my reading in the first few days of the sabbatical reminded me of the importance of being fully awake to each moment. I realized that I had become so task-oriented that I focused with laser-like precision on the job at hand and shut out everything else. During our adventure I finally took the time to pause and gaze upon some beautiful skies. I soaked them in, reflected on their vivid colors and allowed myself to be awed by God’s jaw-dropping creation.

Stepping out of my normal routine for a period of time and living each day according to a different rhythm gave me the opportunity to think about what I normally do and how I do it. It’s too soon to comprehend the full impact the sabbatical has had on me but I know that I feel measurably calmer, work seems less daunting, and I’m more open to experimenting with new ways of doing things. I have always been grateful for our marvelous church staff and for so many of you who in small and large ways make our church family a dynamic congregation that touches many lives in vital ways, but this time away prompted my gratitude to soar to a new standard.

Traveling to new destinations, seeing stunning sites and meeting people from other parts of the globe, I am more aware than ever that each day is an almost too good-to-be-true blessing and that I want to say in every prayer: “Thank you, God. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

I can closely identify with the writer of this morning’s psalm who is awed by God’s amazing creation and wants all parts of the world to join together in praising God. The psalmist is so blown away by the majesty of God’s works that he encourages the sun, the moon, the stars, the angels, the mountains, the hills, the trees, the mammals, the reptiles, the birds, the sea monsters, the men, the women, the children, even the fire, the hail, the snow, the frost and the stormy wind to all praise God. God is the creative power of the universe that makes all life possible, who has created and continues to create a dazzling world, and so the first words on our lips as we rise out of bed ought to be: “Thank you, God, for this awesome world and for the gift of another day.” And perhaps we might even sing in the shower the hymn that has been recorded by a number of different musicians, “My heart flows on in endless song…How can I keep from singing?”

Prior to our travels, some expressed their concerns about us going to Lebanon, Jordan and the West Bank, but they were fabulous parts of our journey. And I’ve never experienced more gracious hospitality than from Middle Eastern Arabs. After awhile I realized that Arabs do not extend hospitality out of obligation, it is an essential part of their being. Expressing a warm greeting, making you feel comfortable, serving you a cup of tea comes naturally. Not to extend hospitality would be an aberration.

Warm and sincere greetings were extended to us each time we reentered our hotel or we passed a shopkeeper on the sidewalk or went to a restaurant or simply stood on a street corner with a map in our hand and a bewildered look on our faces. People would ask, “Where are you
from?” And despite the fact that our government’s policies have a history of making many Arabs’ lives more difficult, they would say to us, “You are welcome. Welcome.”

While in Beirut, we met the Lebanese parents of a friend who lives in Philadelphia. Our plan was to treat her parents to a meal and to introduce them to Rami Khouri, the syndicated columnist, who spoke at Westminster last fall and was hosting us in Beirut. But, in typical Middle Eastern fashion, they would not hear of us hosting them. They took Camilla and me, plus Rami and his wife, to a luxury hotel where we had an amazing Lebanese meal while overlooking the turquoise waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

During the meal, we quizzed Grace and Maurice about their lives in Lebanon, and at one point Grace told us about their early days of marriage in the late 1940s. This Christian Lebanese couple lived in a modest apartment and one day a longtime friend stopped by to see them. However, his visit was not merely social. He said he had something he needed to leave with them for a few days. They were happy to oblige, even though he never told them what he was about to stash in their home.

He carried in a canvas bag, bound with rope, and promised to be back in three days to retrieve it. They were curious about the contents of the bag, but since their friend did not disclose the contents, they did not try to open it.

After a day, an unpleasant odor began emanating from the bag. They tried to ignore it. After two days the odor was quite unpleasant, so they dragged it to a part of their house where they would not have to encounter it. On the third day, the smell overwhelmed their little apartment. It wreaked of something dead and they began to talk about throwing it out. They decided that if their friend did not show up by bed time, they were pitching it.

Fortunately, their friend knocked on the door that evening. He apologized for the disgusting odor. Since they had endured the smell, they felt entitled to know the contents of the bag. They hypothesized that it was a dead animal.

He told them he was not quite sure what he had in the bag, but it might be valuable. He had purchased something from a Bedouin shepherd and it appeared to be very old. Like today’s Antiques Road Show, he was taking it to an expert to render a verdict on whether he had been fortunate to buy something of value or if he had been scammed.

It turned out to be something valuable indeed. The contents of the bag that smelled so badly it was nearly pitched, turned out to be two of the Dead Sea Scrolls! You won’t read about it in history books, but it’s one of those delightful surprises that you stumble upon when you take an adventure.

Next week I’ll share some reflections about the biblical sites and impressive churches we visited, but I want to end this morning by thanking you. You remember that prior to leaving, I asked you to write a prayer or a note that Camilla and I could read while we were away. You responded with this large basket full of letters that we carried around with us. On many days, we pulled out the notes and read several of them. Some of you shared very touching prayers and it meant a great deal to us to pray them. As you know, about half way through the Sabbatical, when we were in Istanbul, my mother died. Many of you responded with beautiful notes of sympathy. We added those to the earlier notes and over the weeks of the Sabbatical we read each note, prayer and sympathy card at least twice. And after reading each one, we prayed for you. It was very special to think about each of you individually, to reflect on your spiritual gifts and to pray for you. It was a terrific reminder that some of you are extraordinarily compassionate and in meaningful ways you touch the lives of people who do not even show up on the radar screens of most others. Some of you excel in kindness, some in generosity, some in
wisdom, some in organizational skills, some seek justice for the mistreated, and some are authentic peacemakers. It is a moving and gratifying experience to ponder the wealth of gifts among the members of our church family and it brought home to Camilla and me how much we cherish you.

The sabbatical renewed my enthusiasm for ministry and for leading our community of faith. The time away, and especially praying for members individually, brought home to me how much I love you and how blessed I am to be serving such an amazing congregation.