A Pilgrimage to the Holy Lands!

Eighteen pilgrims from Westminster Presbyterian Church safely traveled to Saint George’s College in Jerusalem to embark upon a sacred journey most of us believe will be unlike any other we will experience in our lifetime! We have come here not as tourists but as pilgrims; we will not be passing through this place, this place will be passing through us.

With keen attention to the path beneath our feet, our hearts are enlivened at the realization that this is the very land upon which Jesus walked. From the city, we too can gaze on the surrounding hillsides just as Jesus did 2000 years ago.

Seeing such sites with our eyes is stunning; seeing them with our hearts and souls is powerful beyond description. In the few days we have been here we have already come to know that by studying the life and ministry of Jesus in the very place he lived and ministered, we are experiencing our faith in wondrous and awe-inspiring new ways.

Temple Mount – In 37 B.C. King Herod rebuilt the temple originally built by King Solomon in 970 B.C. The ruins exist today and it is astonishing to know that the steps to the temple seen here were steps upon which Jesus would have walked.
In our visit to Beit Abraham, Mount Zion could be seen from the across the Kidron Valley. It is thought that Jesus most likely joined the disciples for the last supper somewhere in Mount Zion, and after supper would then have proceeded down through the Kidron Valley to the Garden of Gethsemane. We could see with our own eyes the long walk that he would have taken to reach Gethsemane. And with our hearts we began to dread the inevitable event that was yet to come. The day we observed this historic hillside, it was rainy and cold, so that the weather itself contributed to our feelings of enormous sadness as we contemplated what occurred 2000 years ago. As our guide discussed the events the night that Jesus was betrayed and mentioned the disciple Peter, it so happened that we heard the crowing of a cock. That moment became not simply ironic, but powerfully and spiritually poignant!

Mount Zion - King David chose Jerusalem to unite his kingdom in 1000 B.C. The city became known as Zion. For thousands of years, this land has been held sacred by people of many faiths. Jerusalem has come to be known as a high place for seeking the divine, a holy place, a place of worship.
And so the first full day of our study and pilgrimage has come to an end. The witnessing of such historic sites is incredibly impressive, but even more dramatic is that which has occurred for many of us spiritually. Journeying with others of faith has added to the unbelievable richness of the experience! With great anticipation, we look forward to tomorrow!

**Day 2 – Exploring Jerusalem from inside the walls!**

Jerusalem...

a city where divinity meets humanity;
a city revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike!

Surrounded by massive stone walls, the Old City of Jerusalem can be accessed through one of ten gates. From within the walls, the Old City has been divided into four quarters: the Jewish Quarter, the Muslim Quarter, the Christian Quarter and the Armenian Quarter. Each quarter has distinct characteristics and religious shrines abound. Yesterday we witnessed the Old City from outside the walls, today we explored the city from within.

In the upcoming days, we will be visiting the Church of the Resurrection in the Christian Quarter of the city as well as the Wailing Wall in the Jewish Quarter. The Muslim Quarter contains the religious shrine know as the Dome of the Rock.
The Armenian Quarter is the smallest quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem. The first Christian Armenians came to Jerusalem in the 4th century and have maintained their community here ever since.

A large portion of the Armenian Quarter is consumed by the Armenian Seminary, Armenian school and St. James Cathedral. There are just a few number of shops compared to all of the other Quarters of the city. By comparison, this Quarter is quiet, clean and far fewer people can be seen in the streets.

A short distance from St. James Cathedral, there can be found a series of shops. We happened upon an Armenian merchant named Hagob, an Armenian Christian living in Jerusalem. Hagob was a young man, wonderfully warm and kind. He has lived in Jerusalem his entire life. He explained that there used to be a community of about 7,000 Armenians living in Jerusalem, but there are currently only about 400. Most have left to live in the United States and Canada. We asked how it was to be an Armenian Christian living in Jerusalem, and he explained that it was very hard. He delicately explained that they feel very much harassed by the Israeli soldiers and feel that they are given “no respect”. He said they always try to do what is right, but life is difficult for them. We asked how he maintained hope in such conditions, and he answered, “By thanking God every day and by praying.”

We assured him we would pray for him as well!
Meeting and talking with Hagob was one of the highlights of our visit to the Armenian Quarter. Pictured with Hagob are Charlie and Linda Reinhardt along with George Patrick.

Another highlight of our visit to the Armenian Quarter was visiting the Armenian Tavern to enjoy authentic Armenian food for lunch. The restaurant was filled with beautiful Armenian artwork, crafts and unique cultural treasures.

Over lunch we decided to continue our adventure by exploring the Walled City from the ramparts of the magnificent stone wall. Little did we know that to traverse the walls you would be required to climb narrow spiral staircases for several stories to reach the passageways of the rampart. With trepidation, we pressed onward. Indeed it was an exercise well worth the effort!
Jerusalem – The Old City!

In the year 66 A.D., the ancient walled city of Jerusalem was 445 acres, more than twice the size of the Old City today. Ruins of the ancient wall can still be seen well beyond the Old City. It was breathtaking to walk the ramparts, to see views looking outside the city walls of such places as the Mount of Olives on a distant hillside, and to use one’s imagination to reflect on the fact that this is a city and a land that was well traveled and well known by Jesus.
And so, the end of Day Two! What is memorable about the first two days is the contrast in our activities. On Day One, we saw Jerusalem from a hilltop overlooking the Kidron Valley. We saw the city from outside the walls. Such a vantage point provided a broad view of this Holy Land, with Mount Zion, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Kidron Valley, the Mount of Olives and the walled city of Jerusalem all in clear view. One could clearly sense the divinity in this scene.

Day Two put us in touch with humanity as we visited the city of Old Jerusalem from inside the walls. And it is here that we experienced humanity. Filled to the brim with people of many different cultures, many different religions, and many different lifestyles, one could not help but be saddened by those whom we saw who suffer from poverty and oppression. Yet, in meeting Hagob, we came full circle. For in Hagob, we could see divinity. God was surely present in his beautiful soul!

Despite the conditions that exist here in Israel between the Palestinians and the Jews socially and politically, to witness a marketplace where people of different religions and cultures live and work together within a walled environment, one can only have hope that solutions can be found to resolve the anger and fears that exists between their peoples.

Thus to date, our journey has been intellectually stimulating, spiritually enriching, and at times, emotionally heart wrenching! And that is just after two days!

Without Charlie to lead the way, it is certain that we would still be meandering our way through the crowded alleys and streets of the Old City.
Day 3 – A Recreation of the City of Jerusalem in 66 AD

In 63 BC the Romans conquered Jerusalem. In 37 BC, Herod the Great became King of Judea and subsequently rebuilt the temple. By 66 AD, prior to the Jewish Revolt against the Roman Empire, the ancient city was at its largest, covering an area of 445 acres. Visiting the model, we were able to gain an excellent sense of how the city most likely looked at the time of Jesus.

Greg Jones studies the model of the Temple in the walled city of old Jerusalem.

Part of the Westminster contingent and pictured to the left are: Suzie Hurlock, Ruth Nace and Gill Timon.

The dome shaped building behind them is The Shrine of the Book, a museum dedicated to the exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1947.
Herodion, one of Herod the Great’s most ambitious building projects, served the Judean King (37 – 4 BC) as summer palace, fortress, monument, burial ground and district capital. The immense Herodion complex, about 12 miles south of Jerusalem, near the ancient roads to the Dead Sea, was built between 23 and 20 BC. Today Herodion is part of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

Herodion is located in the West Bank of Israel and to access it you must pass through Israeli checkpoints. This was our first experience in passing through such a checkpoint and as a result, we were required to have passport identification in our possession as we traveled to the West Bank. This area is defined as Zone B, land that occupied by the Palestinians, but controlled by the Israeli military. Palestinian citizens living in Zone B are not provided with any form of health insurance, unlike Zone A (Palestinian occupied land, regulated by the Israeli military, with citizens of this area able to receive services such as health insurance).
From Herodian, we traveled a short distance to Bethlehem, also located in the West Bank of Israel. Our first stop was a visit to Shepherd’s Field, near the village of Beit Sahour, a place thought to be in close proximity to where shepherds heard the news about the birth of Jesus. We sang hymns of praise in the beautiful chapel of the Sanctuary of the Shepherds. The experience prepared us well for the next step of our pilgrimage to Bethlehem and the place thought to be the birth of Jesus.

This amazing experience was punctuated by the sound of our own voices as it reverberated throughout the domed sanctuary, causing us to feel spellbound for the brief time that we spent there thinking of the events that occurred two thousand years ago.
But before visiting Bethlehem, it was time for lunch! Our organizers had chosen a wonderful restaurant in Bethlehem called The Tent. The experience was delightful, but the highlight of our stop was having the opportunity to spend precious time with Kara Francis, who grew up at Westminster. Kara is currently living and working in Bethlehem.

Pictured with Kara are: Camilla Jones, Bob Cox, Ned Bedrossian and Greg Jones.

Also pictured to the left are: Gill Timon, Suzie Hurlock, and Babs Harris. Pictured above are Ruth Nace, Linda Reinhardt, and Charlie Reinhardt. Pictured to the immediate left are: Bill Nace and Ned Bedrossian.
Day 5 – A Visit to Masada – King Herod’s Winter Palace!

Herod, King of Judea, who ruled from 37 BC to 4 BC, was well aware of the strategic advantages of Masada. He therefore chose the site as a refuge against his enemies, and as a winter palace. During his reign, luxurious palaces were built here in addition to well-stocked storerooms, cisterns, and a casemate wall. After the death of Herod in 4 BC and the annexation of Judea to the Roman Empire in 6 AD, the Romans stationed a garrison at Masada.

The plateau of Masada is located on the eastern fringe of the Judean Desert near the shore of the Dead Sea. Built by King Herod, Masada was a palatial fortress in the style of the ancient Roman Empire. If you look closely, you will see the path we followed to view the portion of the palace pictured above. The plateau is located 450 meters above the level of the Dead Sea.
Most people took the cable car to the top of the mountain, but as you can see, Greg and Alan, a new friend from Australia, climbed their way to the top.

Going down the mountain, many brave souls decided they would accept the challenge and walk. Pictured below you see Fred Carspecken leading a group, and pictured to the right are George Patrick, the Reinhardts, Suzie Hurlock, and Bill Nace.
Day Five also included a visit to the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is located east of Jerusalem bordering Jordon. Masada is located on the western shore of the southern portion of the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is approximately 1,400 feet below sea level, the lowest point on earth. The Dead Sea has about 35% salt content whereas ocean water is about 9%. Based on the salt content of the Dead Sea water, the level of buoyancy is greatly enhanced as evidenced by the pictures below. Actual swimming is not advisable as the high level of salt content is damaging to the eyes.

Through the ages, the muddy soil on the bottom of the sea has been thought to be therapeutic. A common ritual is to cover the skin with the Dead Sea mud. Pictured upper left, is Greg Jones; upper right, Ned Bedrossian; and floating to the left, Steve Poole.
Our band of pilgrims departed from Jerusalem and traveled to the city of Caesarea, located on the Mediterranean Sea. This magnificent Roman city was built by Herod the Great, and in 10 BC it was dedicated to Augustus Caesar, Emperor of the Roman Empire. Its remarkable features were a great breakwater, port, massive city wall, an enormous amphitheater, hippodrome, high level aqueduct system and sumptuous palace.

Caesarea was one of the most important Palestinian cities in the days of the early church. It was Philip’s home and Peter preached here to a Gentile congregation. Paul came here twice, was sent to Caesarea for trial, imprisoned, made his appeal to Caesar, and then was sent to Rome.
By the year 6 BC, Caesarea became the headquarters of the Roman government in Palestine. After the Romans deposed Herod’s descendants, Rome took direct control of Caesarea. The most famous representative of Rome was Pontius Pilate, and an inscription mentioning him has been found in the Caesarea excavations.

One can only imagine the beautiful city that Caesarea once was. It is not difficult to also imagine the many challenges faced by the followers of Jesus after his death as they were subjected to deadly consequences imposed by Roman rulers. Pictured above are Jan and George Patrick, grateful to be a part of Westminster’s pilgrimage to the Holy Lands.
Day Three Continues As We Travel to Nazareth –
The Hometown of Jesus!

Eighteen members of Westminster joined with 22 other pilgrims from the US, Canada, England and Australia to participate in the Saint George’s College “Palestine of Jesus” course. Joining Camilla and Suzie for lunch at the Holy Land Restaurant in Nazareth is a new friend, Polly Chatfield.

Our first stop in Nazareth was the Basilica of the Annunciation, the most impressive architectural and artistic monument in the town. Five churches have risen in succession, starting in the year 365, to commemorate the spot thought to be the place where Mary received the news from the angel Gabriel that she was to become a mother.
Within walking distance of the Basilica, we visited another site called Mary’s Well. The main spring of the well, which for twenty centuries has supplied water to Nazareth, is directly under the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Gabriel. It was possible for us while visiting the church, to touch our hands to the stream of water flowing from the spring. Pictured to the right is the sanctuary of the Church of St. Gabriel.

The city of Nazareth sits on the western slope of a valley in the hills of lower Galilee and is not far from the huge lake of Tiberias (also called the Sea of Galilee). Today in this hometown of Jesus, about half of the residents are Christians (most are Palestinians).
Day 8 took us back to the city of Jerusalem where we explored the area of the Temple Mount, inside the massive walls of the city. In the higher part, is the “Dome of the Rock” pictured below which stands out like a jewel against the rock of Jerusalem. It was originally built in the 7th century. The fine majolica decorations were added by Suleiman the Magnificent in the 16th century. Inside the Dome, a wooden railing encloses the rock which is sacred to Jews (Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac) and Muslims (Muhammad’s ascension to heaven) alike.
The Wailing Wall stands beneath the Dome of the Rock. This wall is the focus of Judaism. The massive stretch of wall is a large segment of the sustaining wall of the Western side of the Temple built by King Herod in 18 BC and destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD in response to the Jewish uprising.

The Pool of Bethesda is very close to the Lions Gate of the Old City. The imposing remains of the pool with two baths and five porches confirm the story told in the Gospel of John. “There was once a gate there called the Sheep gate, near where a sheep market was held, and animals to be used in the city’s sacrifices were washed in the pool. In this place Jesus performed the healing of a cripple” (John 5:1-9).
Above, Greg steps out of the ritualistic purification baths located near the temple. To the above right, Gill and Suzie relax on the steps leading to the ancient temple. And below, our pilgrim group takes time to reflect on the events of the day as we sit on the very steps Jesus would have used to enter the temple.
Day 9 – The Last Supper!

Our first stop on Day Nine was to the Syrian Orthodox Church of St. Mark. This site is thought to be one of two possible locations where Jesus would have met with his disciples for the last supper.

Our next stop was the Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu. Beneath this church archaeological explorations have revealed an ancient Byzantine basilica. It is believed that this spot was specifically marked by the Byzantines, for beneath the Byzantine church archaeologists have found caves thought to have been used as prisons in the time of Jesus. Jesus was put into prison after his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, and this well could have been where he was held the night before he was crucified.
Day 10 – The Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane!

From the Mount of Olives, Jesus could see the walled city of Jerusalem. The Church of Dominus Flevit was built in the 1930’s on the site of the remains of a 5th century building. The name of the church is taken from the Gospel account of Jesus weeping for the city’s impending destruction. The window over the altar of this Franciscan church offers an incomparable panoramic view of the walled city of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives.

Some of our best times together throughout our journey as pilgrims have been the opportunities we have had to combine singing with prayerful meditation in sacred places throughout the Holy Land. Here at the Mount of Olives, we could imagine all of the pilgrims throughout the centuries who have made similar journeys.
The Garden of Gethsemane is where Jesus was betrayed and arrested. We spent prayerful and meditative time in this garden on a hillside overlooking the city, a garden to which Jesus loved to come. One could not help but reflect on the fateful night Jesus spent here before he was arrested.

As our visit to Jerusalem soon comes to an end, we had much to reflect upon. We had been to the mountain; we had been to the sea; we had been to the desert; and now we were in the garden.

Pictured above is Babs Harris. Pictured to the right is Greg Jones.
Day 11 – The Way of the Cross – Via Dolorosa

The “Way of the Cross” is an adaptation of a practice widely observed by pilgrims to Jerusalem: the offering of prayer at a series of places in that city traditionally associated with Jesus’ passion and death. At 6:00 a.m. on Day 11, our group of pilgrims left for the Old City to join the millions of pilgrims who have gone before us throughout the centuries, winding our way through the streets, stopping, praying, and singing in commemoration of Jesus’ suffering and death.

The Church of the Resurrection (or Church of the Holy Sepulcher) is one of the most imposing churches in Jerusalem.

The Church of the Resurrection is located above the spot that once was a quarry and the site of executions, and was therefore situated outside the city walls. “...And they took Jesus, and led him away. And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha” (John 19 vs. 16-17). Excavations performed in 325 brought to light the place of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial.

Elizabeth Poole is pictured to the right carrying the cross back to the St. George’s College after completing the “Way of the Cross”.

Elizabeth Poole is pictured to the right carrying the cross back to the St. George’s College after completing the “Way of the Cross”.
As our pilgrimage was about to come to an end, we walked along the ruins of an old Roman road that could easily have been the Road to Emmaus. We guarded each other’s silence, as we were now accustomed to doing. Andrew had asked us to consider if we were to meet Jesus on this road, what questions would we ask of him and what questions might he ask of us? As we prepare to leave the Holy Land, such questions will be worthy of our consideration for a long time to come!
With Gratitude
to the Leadership Team and Staff of St. George’s College!

Andrew Mayes

Kevin Hackett

Benjamin Drury

Azaam

Stephen Need

Joseph

Barbara Flannagan

Jacobien Heydenrijk

Ranan Khoury and Genian Stephan