

Dear Friends,

The past week was remarkable in many ways. We visited Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Judean wilderness and a number of places in Galilee including Nazareth. Our group was small - only 9 persons plus our course leader and an assistant course leader. The priest who served as our chaplain was one of the group members. The smallness of the group meant that we were able to get to know one another more easily.

We had three persons from England (one of whom now lives in Switzerland), one from Canada and five from the US. Our course leader is originally from the US but has been in Israel for over 40 years. There was one other woman in the group besides for Virginia. One person in the group was over 70 - but he won't tell us exactly how much. The younger members of the group were in their early thirties.

One thing this course taught me is what it is like to be a guinea pig - because this is the first time St. George's College has offered this course of "Hiking the Holy Land." Most of their courses do not do as much hiking as we did. Our course director had to be flexible in order to adjust the schedule based upon our actual walking time. Also, we even had to rearrange a couple of our days because of the occurrence of Yom Kippur because we could not drive through Jewish sections of Israel.

Our days began early - getting up sometimes as early as 4:30 or 5:00 a.m. and hiking before breakfast, or eating an early breakfast in order to begin hiking right after breakfast. A couple of nights we had evening walks around Jerusalem. One night we slept under the stars on Mount Deborah in Galilee. The days were sometimes long, yet they were tremendously meaningful.

We climbed up and down mountains, such as Mount Horeb, Mount Tabor and the Mount of Olives. We walked around the city walls of Jerusalem and walked from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. We did travel between locations by van, but then actually went to the sites on foot - like pilgrims have done for centuries. Our hikes lasted from 2 to 3 hours and sometimes with two hikes in one day.

Some of the hikes were more challenging than others with steep slopes, rocky ground and loose soil. Except in Jerusalem, we were usually not on streets or roads. Occasionally we were on gravel roads, but that was the exception. I am still astounded at some of the places we hiked, and the things we saw - so just wait until you see some of our pictures (you don't want to see them all because there are 100s).

I believe the most important aspect of our hiking is how we encountered the land, and how we related it to the Scriptures. Our course leader talked with us and gave us a number of mini-lectures as we hiked. We read passages from the Scriptures reflecting the places and their role in the history of Israel and in Jesus' life. We prayed and worshiped in the places we stopped along our hikes. Many times I felt we were walking the land just as Jesus and his disciples had done nearly 2,000 years ago. This encounter with the land has brought new depth and meaning to my understanding of the Bible.

This past week was sensual: filled with tasting, touching, seeing, smelling and hearing the Holy Land.

This past week was challenging: mentally, physically and spiritually.

This past week was: satisfying, stimulating and surprising.

This past week was: exciting, exhilarating and exhausting.

This past week was: profound, powerful and prayerful.

This past week was: dry, dust and demanding.

This past week was: hot, humbling and holy.

This past week was a blessing.

Peace, Bruce +