

Travel to Jerusalem

In June, Pastor Kristi and I are traveling to Jerusalem. Kristi spent five weeks there in 1991 but it will be my first time. We are traveling with a St. Olaf adult study group. One of the advantages of this type of travel is that the college has decades of experience and contacts in the area: they know people on the ground. Our participation has involved almost a year of preparation for the trip and a lifetime of preparation for the journey. There are different areas to pay attention to on a trip like this one and each has its own demands.

As a journey of faith, this trip can be considered a pilgrimage. We are traveling to a place that is foundational to the Christian story. We will visit Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Jericho, and the Sea of Galilee. We will have the chance to stand where the crowds gathered as bread was passed out as the 5000 were fed. We will have a chance to pray on the Mount of Olives where Jesus knelt in prayer after the Last Supper. We will visit the Church of the Nativity, built on the traditional site of the birth of Jesus. These places are all important, but they are also just a narrow slice of the long history of the area. Layer upon layer of faith stories occupy every hill and valley. I have visited important religious places in the past: Wartburg castle in Germany where Martin Luther translated the Bible, St. Mark's in Venice, built just before the split between the Eastern and Western Church, and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, built on the site of Peter's martyrdom. Standing in these places offers a new appreciation for the stories of faith.

This is also a journey to a place where people continue to live. It is a place that people call home. Jews, Muslims, and Christians continue to want the same things for their families as we want for ours: freedom to worship and work, safe streets and homes, access to education and health care. This continues to be an unsettled time for the region. We will have the opportunity to listen to and visit with people who live amid the tension of Israeli domestic political

tension of Israeli domestic political protests, ongoing Jewish/Palestinian conflicts, and the return of tourists who want to see the sites but ignore the people who live there. Some of the recommended pre-trip reading include reflections on living in a place that has been occupied by others far more than it has been free to determine its own path as well as a current novel by an author who lives near Jerusalem.

Kristi and I do ask for your prayers as we embark on this journey. Prayers for safety for us and for the group are welcomed. But also pray for an openness to hear the stories of people who are living today in the region. There are shepherds, and farmers, and merchants who make their living doing the things that people have been doing there for thousands of years. The shepherds heard the angels singing and traveled to Bethlehem to see the thing that had been told them. After telling Mary and Joseph all that they had heard, they returned to their flocks. Some of their descendants have stories to tell as well about what they see God up to in the world. This trip straddles the time from the Biblical witness to the lived testimony of living people.

Pastor Erik
