

“The Fifth Gospel: Lessons from the Holy Land”

Luke 4.21-30

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Let’s say that you just spent two weeks in the Holy Land, and someone asks you, “How was your trip?” ... how do you even begin to respond? It was ... *amazing*. And it was ... *a lot* to take in.

I’ve now been to the city where our Savior was born. I’ve visited the town where he grew up. I’ve stood in the river where he was baptized. I’ve seen the mountain where he was tempted. I’ve gone for a run along the Sea of Galilee, the very shores where Jesus found a few fishermen and called them to become apostles. I’ve stood on the mountaintop where he gave that inspired sermon, and on the other mountaintop where he was transfigured. I’ve traveled the road between Jericho and Jerusalem, where the parable of the Good Samaritan takes place. I’ve processed down the Mount of Olives, heading to Jerusalem. I’ve been on the mount where the temple once stood. I’ve been in an upper room, like the room where Jesus ate his last supper. I’ve prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he did. I’ve seen the steps he was brought up as he was taken to the council. I’ve descended into a dungeon, maybe the very one where he was flogged. I’ve walked the streets that he walked as he was led to his death. I’ve touched the stone where the cross might have stood, where our Savior died. I’ve seen a tomb, like the one where he was laid. And I’ve been to Bethany, where he ascended to the heavens.

I met an Israeli man whose daughter was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber, and a Palestinian woman whose husband was killed by Israelis, both of whom are now trying to promote goodwill between the two sides in the ongoing conflict. I met Palestinian Christians who are working and praying for peace. I got pulled aside for questioning at an Israeli checkpoint. I watched a handful of Israeli troops shoot tear gas towards some kids who had thrown a rock at their armored vehicle. I stood under the 30-foot-high concrete barrier that is Israel’s equivalent of the Berlin wall, being monitored by a camera with a gun. I reunited with an old friend from college who moved to Jerusalem and is now an Orthodox Jew. I sang the Lord’s Prayer in Arabic. I prayed for peace at the Western Wall.

There is a saying: “Four gospels record the life of Jesus. Four you will find in books and one you will find in the land they call holy. Read the fifth gospel and the world of the four will open to you.”

That’s what happened to me in the Holy Land. The world of the gospels *opened* in a new way.

I have been writing detailed one-page reflections about various portions of the trip. Sixteen are done; more are coming; I will share them all with you, and we’ll bind a copy for the church library.

What did I *learn*? I learned a lot of history, a lot of geography, a lot about religion and culture, and a lot about the current political situation. I learned that the Sea of Galilee has rocky beaches, that there's an IKEA in Nazareth, and that I can't walk on water. (Although, I'm not sure I was really *trying*!)

I came home with twelve specific lessons that I would like share with you, briefly.

1. Everything is *so close together* in the Holy Land. Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, is only about six miles from Jerusalem. Jericho is only 15 miles away; Mount Gerazim, where the Samaritans lived, is only 30 miles away; Gaza, where the Philistines lived, is only 50. Up in Galilee, a lot of the places in the Gospels are within *easy* walking distance of each other. The distances seem *so small*.

2. And yet – Jesus and the disciples would have also done some serious hiking. When Jesus took Peter and John to Mount Tabor – where the Transfiguration probably happened – that would have been a 24-mile hike from Capernaum. And it's a *huge* mountain! Our bus took us halfway up, then we had to switch to smaller shuttles that could handle all the switchbacks. If you want to climb the mountain, like Jesus did, the path goes up in an unrelenting straight line. A good hiker can do it in about two hours.

3. Everything is *so incredibly old*. You go to Boston – things are old. You go to London – things are *really* old. You go to Rome or Athens – things are *really, REALLY* old. Jerusalem makes *all* those cities look young. There were shepherds there, camping by a spring, *six thousand years ago*. There were people living in Jericho *twelve thousand years ago*. History goes *very* deep in the Holy Land.

4. We are still discovering amazing things in the Holy Land. In the Gospel of John, there's a place in Jerusalem called the pool of Bethesda. For most of Christian history, we had no idea where this pool was. Some scholars even questioned whether it existed at all. But then, starting in the 19th century and continuing into the 20th, archaeologists found the remains of a pool – buried under layers of rubble – that *precisely* matches the description in John's gospel. In 1986, along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, the remains of a two-thousand-year-old fishing boat were found, like the boats that Jesus and his disciples would have used. Nearby, there is a town called Migdal; two thousand years ago it was called Magdala; it's where Mary Magdalene was from. Just ten years ago, excavations there uncovered the remains of the oldest synagogue found in Galilee. We saw the stone benches people would sit on as they worshiped. (Be thankful you all have cushions!) We saw beautiful mosaics in the floor. Our guide explained, the question is not, "Did Jesus come here;" the question is, "*How often* did Jesus come here?"

5. We know *exactly* where *many* events in the Bible occurred. We know *exactly* where the valley was (and still is!) where Joshua blessed the twelve tribes of Israel. We know where the well was (and still is!) where Jesus met the Samaritan woman. Mountains don't move. Wells don't either. There are some places that we're not 100% sure about. But there are many others where it's *very* clear.

6. Every place where Jesus did something important, there's a church. Sometimes these are small chapels; sometimes they are huge basilicas. Sometimes they are simple and unadorned; sometimes they are magnificent and grand. There's a church on Mount Gerazim that *contains* the well where the Samaritan woman was. There's a church that is suspended *over* the remains a house in Capernaum that might have been the home of Peter's mother-in-law. And just when you think you've seen every conceivable church, you walk into the next one, and it absolutely takes your breath away.

7. Christians and Muslims seem to be getting along *just fine* in the Holy Land. Most of the people who live in Nazareth are Arab citizens of Israel. 69% of them are Muslim; 31% of them are Christian;

they are doing *just fine*. Bethlehem is similar: Muslim majority; Christian minority; getting along fine.

8. Bethlehem today is very impoverished. The unemployment rate is about 29%. The city (which is not small!) has also been dramatically affected by the building of the barrier wall, which cuts right into the city. I am never going to be able to sing “O Little Town of Bethlehem” the same way again.

9. Our culture is *so incredibly secular*. Sure, there are people who still claim that we are a Christian nation. But are we, *really*? How often do you see people stopping to pray at designated times during the day? How much does our society really observe the Sabbath? Muslims have five designated prayer times every day. Orthodox Jews have three. *You are awakened early in the morning by the sound of bells ringing, telling you it's prayer time*. And the Sabbath is taken *very* seriously. For Muslims, it's Friday; for Jews it's Saturday; for Christians it's Sunday. In Jerusalem, where all three faiths are well represented, you can *feel* it when it's a Sabbath day. It really is treated as a *holy* day. (Not like here!)

10. There are some incredible opportunities to serve in the Holy Land. We visited two places that are actively looking for volunteers. One is a reconstruction of what Nazareth might have been like two thousand years ago, complete with people in costume – a shepherd, a carpenter, a weaver woman – and meals prepared using only ingredients that would have been used back then. You want to volunteer for a week? A summer? A year? They'll take anyone from college students to retirees. They are also looking for volunteers at the excavations in Magdala. And, I suspect, in many other places as well.

11. The stories really do come alive in a whole new way. Take our gospel passage for today, for example. Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, goes to the synagogue in Nazareth. He reads from Isaiah, implies that he's a prophet, and greatly offends the people when he indicates he has been sent to help other people, not them. “Everyone in the synagogue,” Luke tells us, “was filled with anger. They led him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff.” Today, there is a small Christian church in Nazareth, that – it is believed – might be the *very same building* where that synagogue was long ago. It's not big – probably half the size of this sanctuary. There's also a hill crest. Nazareth is actually in a valley, *surrounded on all sides* by a large hill, kind of like a crater. What this means is that the people in the synagogue hauled Jesus *up that large hill*. From the valley to the rim, that's an ascent of 550 feet, the equivalent of a 55-story-high building. This wasn't just a *short walk* around the block! They hauled him up, and they were going to throw him off, and that would have been the end of his story – except, of course, he's Jesus, and his hour had not yet come, so he just ... slipped away. Stories like this one take on a *whole new meaning* once you've been there.

12. Which brings me to my final lesson: *You all need to go*. Every Christian, at some point in their life, if they have the ability, *really needs to go*. I didn't use to think this. I do now. “Four gospels you will find in books and one you will find in the land they call holy.” It is absolutely true. I would heartily, enthusiastically, recommend, *urge* you to go, if you have an opportunity. We met another tour group on the airplane. That group was entirely composed of pastors who interested in learning how to organize pilgrimages to the Holy Land for their own congregations. I found myself thinking, *that could be us*. So I want to make a deal with you. We need to pay off the mortgage from our renovation. Once that's done – what if we started planning a trip for anybody from here who wants to go? I'm thinking maybe three or four years from now. That'll give you time to start saving up. I want *you* to be able to experience everything I experienced. It truly was ... a *holy*, and *inspiring*, experience.

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