

“Galilee of the Gentiles”

Isaiah 9:1-4 • Psalm 27:1, 4-9 • 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 • Matthew 4:12-23

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

January 22, 2023

3rd Sunday after Epiphany

I want to do something a little different this morning. I want to talk about *Galilee*. This is the region in northern Israel where Jesus grew up, and where much of his ministry took place. Nazareth, Capernaum, Cana – these were all towns in Galilee. The Sea of Galilee was, as its name suggests, in Galilee. You might have an image in your head that it was a beautiful land, fairly idyllic and peaceful, far away from the busy and bustling city of Jerusalem, about a hundred miles to the south. And you’re partly right. There’s a world of difference between Galilee and Jerusalem, both then and now. But the Galilee that Jesus lived and ministered in might be a bit more complex than you may have thought.

Let’s start with a map. This is a topographical map of the modern state of Israel.¹ That’s the Mediterranean Sea on the left. Straight to the north of Israel is Lebanon; to the northeast is Syria; to the east is Jordan; to the southwest is Egypt. This map also shows the outlines of the three regions whose status has been disputed for many decades – the Golan Heights in the north, bordering on Syria; the large West Bank, in the center; and the Gaza Strip, in the southwestern corner. Generally speaking, if you start at the Mediterranean Sea and move eastward from practically any point in Israel, you begin with a long stretch of flat coastal plains, then you move into a hilly and somewhat mountainous region, then you descend into a very deep valley, that plunges more than 1000 feet below sea level. That is where the major bodies of water are: the Sea of Galilee in the north, the Jordan River, and the Dead Sea. If you keep moving east, you will ascend up onto a high and relatively flat plateau.

Jerusalem is roughly in the middle of this map, in that little green indentation surrounded on three sides by the brown hills of the West Bank. That’s where Jesus’ ministry would end. But it’s not where his ministry began. For that, we need to go north. Let’s zoom in for a closer look.

Here is the northern part of Israel. There’s the Sea of Galilee, and the Jordan River flowing into it from the north, and out of it to the south. There is also another river at the top of this map. That’s the Litani River; it is the longest river in Lebanon. It flows mostly south, but takes a very sharp turn to the west not far from the northern border of Israel, and then heads pretty much straight to the Mediterranean Sea. I want you to imagine that all the black lines aren’t here, and all you can see is the topography. Galilee is a roughly rectangular geographic region. It’s bounded on the north by the Litani River, on the east by the Jordan River, and on the south by the mountain range at the bottom of this map, which ends at Mount Carmel at a point that juts out into the Mediterranean Sea. That’s Galilee: a geographic region with clear natural boundaries. About a quarter of Galilee is in Lebanon.

¹ A very useful map is here: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7c/Israel_relief_location_map.jpg

Galilee is a beautiful land. It gets a lot more rain than many other parts of Israel, and the temperature is mild, with the result that the land is lush and fertile. There are some trees and plants that are unique to this region. There are fields and flowers, amidst plains and streams and waterfalls.

There were people living in Galilee before the Israelites arrived, especially in a magnificent city called Hazor, about ten miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Archaeological remains from Hazor extend back to about 28 *centuries* before Jesus! Archeological evidence reveals that Hazor was destroyed by fire around 1200 BC. That is consistent with what is recorded in the Old Testament, which says that Joshua “put to the sword” all the city’s inhabitants and “burned Hazor with fire.” The Israelites divided the land among their twelve tribes; the region of Galilee was primarily given to Zebulun and Naphtali.

The Israelites built a number of new settlements in Galilee. Some of these were given away by King Solomon to the king of Tyre, in exchange for timber and gold. It was a political exchange: land for goods. A couple centuries later, Israel was invaded by the Assyrian Empire; the Israelites were utterly defeated, and many of the Israelites were carried off to Assyria. This was a common strategy in the ancient world: conquer a region, carry off its inhabitants, and settle your own colonies there. Galilee came to be inhabited by many non-Jews – which is why Isaiah calls it “Galilee of the Gentiles.”

For about the next 600 years, Galilee remained outside Jewish control. About a hundred years before the birth of Jesus, it was reclaimed by a Jewish dynastic family called the Hasmoneans, who had revolted against foreign rule in Jerusalem forty years earlier and had been slowly but surely gaining control of more and more land that had previously belonged to Israel. But the Hasmoneans were themselves defeated by the Romans in 63 BC. Some parts of Galilee managed to stay independent of Roman rule, especially an important city called Sepphoris, which was situated less than four miles north of Nazareth. But even Sepphoris eventually fell, when Herod the Great took it in 37 BC.

This is the land in which Jesus was raised: a land which had been inhabited for *thousands* of years, and had been taken and re-taken by invading armies numerous times throughout its history. It was a land of Jews *and* Gentiles, a land of poor people and rich people, a land of farmers and fishermen and bureaucrats and overlords. By the time Jesus lived there as a young child, some towns and villages were predominantly Jewish – like Nazareth, his hometown, and like some of the fishing villages around the Sea of Galilee, like Capernaum and Magdala, the hometown of Mary Magdalene. But other cities, like Sepphoris, had a more mixed population. There was a large Jewish population there, but after Herod the Great seized control of it, it quickly became the most Roman city in Galilee. The Roman administrators of Galilee lived there, including Herod Antipas, the Governor of Galilee and the son of Herod the Great. A Roman theater was built there, either just before or during the lifetime of Jesus. Remains of that theater stand to this day. Remember, Sepphoris was less than *four miles* from Nazareth; it was closer to Nazareth than we are to Lansing, East Lansing, or Okemos. Jesus lived closer to a Roman theater than we are to the Wharton! In fact, we know that he was a carpenter for about a dozen years before he began his ministry; some scholars have suggested he might have even worked in Sepphoris. That’s speculation, but it’s certainly not outside the realm of possibility!

When Jesus was about 20, Herod Antipas began building a new city, along the Sea of Galilee. He called it “Tiberias,” after the Roman Emperor. It was probably built on the site of an old Jewish fishing village. It, too, quickly became a very significant Roman city; Herod settled Romans there from far and wide; he moved his administration there; he built a palace there. It was so incredibly Roman that many Jews refused to step foot in the city if they could avoid it. The Romans started calling the “Sea of Galilee” the “Sea of Tiberias.” Later, after the fall of Jerusalem, Tiberias would become a center for the Jewish religious establishment; many important Jewish religious texts were written there.

The Sea of Galilee stretches 8 miles from east to west at its widest point, and it extends 13 miles from north to south at its longest point. If you were to walk all around the entire perimeter of the lake, you would walk about 33 miles, and you would pass through numerous villages and towns, like Tiberias, Magdala, Capernaum, and Bethsaida. There are impressive archaeological remains from the first century in some of those towns, including portions of house walls, and even synagogues, like this one in Magdala where Jesus himself probably prayed and worshiped and maybe even taught. In 1986 a fishing boat from the first century was discovered on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. It's called "the Jesus Boat," and you can visit it in a museum near the lakeshore, although there's no evidence Jesus himself ever sat in that *specific* boat. There were *lots* of fishing boats like that one!

All of that was on the *west* and *north* sides of the lake. But what about the *other* side? The side of the lake on the far side of the Jordan River? There are some stories in the Gospels about Jesus and his disciples traveling to that far side, the east side, which the Gospels call "the region of the Gerasenes" or "the region of the Gadarenes." No Jews lived there. Other people lived there, people who raised pigs, which the Jews considered unclean animals. There was a city called Gadara, several miles southeast of the lake, a thoroughly Greek city. It was part of the "Decapolis," a league of ten Greco-Roman cities with a common language, culture, and religion. Another city of the Decapolis, called Hippos, was situated on the hills on the southeastern shore of the Sea. Generally speaking, Jews did not visit these cities – but Mark tells us that Jesus and his disciples did. Matthew also tells us that some of the people who followed Jesus were from the Decapolis. Jesus was breaking down barriers.

Most of Jesus' ministry in the region of Galilee was conducted in the Jewish towns ... but not exclusively. Most of his hand-picked twelve apostles were Jews – but not *all* of them. Matthew and Mark tell us that one of ones whom Jesus called was known as "Simon the Cananaean." He was a Canaanite, one of the non-Jewish people in the region. Remember, this was "Galilee of the *Gentiles*."

So what does all this mean for us? We need to understand that Galilee was a more diverse and more complicated place than we might assume. Its peoples were varied; some were fully Jewish; others were descended from the Assyrians; others were Greek, or Roman; still others were descended from the Phoenician people living near the city of Tyre; some may even have descended from the inhabitants of old Hazor. It was by no means a single, homogeneous people. Jesus was raised in a *Jewish town* in a *multicultural region*. Much of his ministry reached out to Jews, but he also reached many non-Jews as well, and he intentionally "crossed over" periodically to the other side of the lake, and to people who from a different ethnic heritage. Indeed, the New Testament is the remarkable story of a religion birthed in Judaism that quickly expanded to embrace people from other cultures and who spoke different languages. That was revolutionary. That's not what most religions through the ages have done. Most religions stay embedded within one particular culture. Not Christianity!

Isaiah writes: "In the former time he (the LORD) brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined." This is exactly what Jesus did. Matthew quotes that verse and makes it clear that Isaiah was talking about *Jesus*. He started with the Jews. Then he expanded *beyond*. He *crossed over*. He started bringing light to the *Gentiles*.

Which is also what *we* are called to do. We can start by reaching out to people who look like us. But we should never *stop* there. Jesus sends us out to reach *everyone*. *All* peoples. *Everywhere*.

© 2023 Rev. Bill Pinches