

JANUARY 13, 2013

YOU ARE THE HOLY LAND
by Pastor Clarissa Martinelli

Psalm 122

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

¹ I was glad when they said to me,
‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’

² Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

³ Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.

⁴ To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

⁵ For there the thrones for judgment were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.

⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
‘May they prosper who love you.

⁷ Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.’

⁸ For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’

⁹ For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good.

During fall semester of 2011, flyers were posted throughout Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary announcing an upcoming tour of the Holy Land in December 2012.

“Walk where Jesus walked... immerse yourself in the culture and people while fulfilling your cross cultural requirement.” We were promised to tour the sites which are mentioned in the gospels: the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, Jericho, many historical archaeological sites and the empty tomb.

The numbers of participants were limited and the cost – well nothing we get or do is free. Most of all the flyer advertised that the experience is guaranteed to strengthen our faith.

Many of our members have had the awesome opportunity to experience spiritual transformation not only in foreign lands but right here in Salem, Wisconsin. Regardless of the location – I believe that we would affirm that it was an enormously meaningful experience.

So what about those that have not have their spiritual transformation? Well, after my life changing international Holy Land spiritual transformation - I think what we ought to pray on is taking a group in two years to the biblical Holy Land. Yes, let's just take everybody.

I know—there are problems. You'd have to get somebody to check your mail and water your plants. But it would be great. Surely it would impact our faith and Christian life if we were to go to see the places where Jesus actually walked. What we ought to do is to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. A pilgrimage is a journey, especially a long one, made to some sacred place as an act of religious devotion.

After all, people of faith make pilgrimages all the time. The idea is that there are certain places in our world that are especially holy, places where “there has been a unique manifestation of divine activity, and where it might happen again.” The hope is that if we actually go to the places where Jesus was, that maybe some of Jesus might rub off on us. We don't just want to see these places, we want to experience them. We want the faith of Jesus to take hold in our lives.

But as Christians we believe that a person doesn't have to go just to the biblical Holy Land to be on pilgrimage. There are other holy places in our world where people go.

But before any travel can be planned, we must first have a valid passport. Now the earthly passport is important to man because you will not board any commercial plane, boat or other modes of transportation without a valid passport. This passport identifies a person's citizenship and opens doors to international travel. As a Christian, we also have another citizenship. We are citizen of Heaven. Our passport is the Holy Spirit, and it guarantees a free passage and access to God.

I am reminded of a story - A pastor was taking a group of parishioners on a tour of the Holy Land. He had just read them the parable of the good shepherd and was explaining to them that, as they continued their tour, they would see shepherds on the hillsides just as in Jesus' day.

He wanted to impress the group, so he told them what every good pastor tells his people about shepherds. He described how, in the Holy Land, shepherds always lead their sheep, always walking in front to face dangers, always protecting the sheep by going ahead of them.

He barely got the last word out when, sure enough, they rounded a corner and saw a man and his sheep on the hillside.

There was only one problem: the man wasn't leading the sheep as the good pastor had said. No, he was behind the sheep and seemed to be chasing them. The pastor turned red.

Flabbergasted, he ran over to the fence and said, "I always thought shepherds in this region led their sheep — out in front. And I told my people that a good shepherd never chases his sheep." The man replied, "That's absolutely true... you're absolutely right... but I'm not the shepherd, I'm the butcher!"

As our group of seminarians walked in both traditional and historical places – we were filled with emotions as we entered the historical site of the Garden of Gethsemane. We recalled the story of the anxious disciples who listened to Jesus on that night before his death. Jesus was talking about going away. Going away! For these previous days and months he had been their life. Their lives had been made holy just by being in his presence. But now he was going away. What would happen then? If he left, then what would happen to their faith? They might struggle along a little bit, but would their lives still be holy? The world would be just like any other place. No wonder they were worried.

So Jesus speaks to them, and tries to calm their anxieties. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray to the Father to send you another Advocate, to be with you forever. . . . He will abide in you and will be with you. I will not leave you orphaned.”

Later on that night, Jesus would say: “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, then the Spirit cannot come.” If Jesus had stayed on earth, then we would have to make a pilgrimage to see him. His presence and his power would be

confined to the physical place where Jesus was. Jerusalem would be the place where people of faith would have to come in order to be touched by the faith of Jesus. And the farther away you got from the earthly Jesus, the farther away you would get from his holy presence.

But, thanks be to God, and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, it doesn't work that way. I am going away, and when I go, the Spirit will come. And here is the good news: the Spirit is not limited to one place and one time. The Spirit of God abides in us and is in us. That's what Jesus says. You don't have to make a pilgrimage to one particular place to experience Holiness. God's holy presence in Christ is now available to anyone who loves Christ and keeps God's commandments.

And here we are, seeking as best we can to love Jesus. Here we are, truly and sincerely wanting to keep God's commandments. We really do. And what does Jesus say? Just this: the Spirit of God is in us. "I will not leave you orphaned." We don't have to make a pilgrimage to the biblical Holy Land, for the Holy Land is here right here in Salem Wisconsin.

Do you want to take a tour of the Holy Land? We can do it right here right now.

Come with me to the Jordan River (the baptismal font). Here Jesus was baptized by John. Here the dove descended upon him. Here the voice called from heaven and said: "This is my beloved Son." So, every time a believer comes to this place, and every time parents present their child before this water, God descends upon him or her and in the name of Christ we affirm the voice of God: "This too is my beloved child." It is holy water, and this is Holy Land.

Come to the Temple where Jesus and the disciples watched the poor widow putting her meager offering into the offering box (the offering plates). Others were impressed with the size of the offerings that were given by others and beside theirs what this woman gave was almost nothing. But Jesus said: "She has given more than the rest, for she has put in her whole life." So whatever you put into this plate, it is enough. The smallest offering by the smallest child causes the angels in heaven to rejoice, because it is holy, and this is the Holy Land.

Come with me to the mountain, where Jesus opened his mouth and taught (the Bible on the pulpit). Here Jesus teaches: "Blessed are the poor in Spirit." Here he challenged us to "love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you." The people that sat at Jesus' feet long ago recognized that this was no ordinary teaching, but a teaching with authority. So, every time we open our Bible and read again

these same words and they touch our ears and fill our hearts, we are given the gift of the Spirit of Christ. This is truly a Holy Bible, and this is Holy Land.

Come with me to the Upper Room (the communion table). Here Jesus gathered with his disciples for the final time before his death. Here he said: "Do not let your hearts be anxious, neither let them be afraid." Here he offered them his broken body and shed blood. So every time we gather at this table, we are a part of that company of believers who knows that we do not deserve to be here, but are present because of the gracious invitation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For this is a holy table, and this is Holy Land.

Come finally to the empty tomb, where a dead body was laid but is dead no longer (where the casket is placed for a funeral). Here it was where women came expecting, well, nothing very much. And what they found instead changed the world. So every time we gather in this place for a funeral and every time the casket is placed here, we know that this is not the end, that death no longer has dominion and that truly we do believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. For this life is holy, and this is the Holy Land.

So I pray that we would like to endeavor to see the biblical Holy Land and all the essence and once in a life time experiences that it will bring. But always know that if you cannot wait to save up the money to make the twelve-hour plane ride to walk where Jesus walked and be immersed in the biblical Holy Land, look to your right now to your left - you have found 21st Century January 13, 2013 Holy Land – for it is in this place and in God's people.

Remember the words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. . . . I will not leave you orphaned. I will send you an Advocate, the Holy Spirit of God. He will abide in you and will be with you."

Look around. You don't need to make a pilgrimage to another place for it to be holy. The Spirit of God is with us and in us - You are the Holy Land.

To God be the glory. Amen, amen, amen.