

Email Log: Westminster Israel & Bethlehem
Pilgrimage of Faith and Partnership
January 9-22, 2011

Monday, January 10

We have arrived in Tel Aviv. All are tired, but well. (Carters' flight canceled; they'll arrive tomorrow). Tim

Tuesday, January 11

Hi all - our long flying day ended in Tel Aviv with a too-big dinner (we've already discovered the enormous buffets at hotels here), a walk in the dark in the rain for some, and much-needed sleep for all.

Tel Aviv was Israel's capital until the 1967 war, after which the seat of government was moved to (newly captured) Jerusalem. Tel Aviv is the second largest city in Israel (first is Jerusalem, third is Haifa), on the Mediterranean, about 25 miles north of Gaza, just out of reach of rockets occasionally fired by extremists there.

Our hotel, the Dan Panorama (a very nice chain; we'll stay in the DP in Jerusalem, too), was right on the beach. Some rose early and walked on the beach for a bit as the sun rose over the city. Beautiful way to start the day! Then on to the bus with our guide. Yousef (Joseph) and driver Musa (Moses). Both are Palestinians. Both live in Jerusalem. Yousef is Christian; Musa is Muslim. As Palestinian residents of Jerusalem they are in a kind of legal limbo when it comes to citizenship. They have Jerusalem ID cards, but a Jordanian passport, as they don't live in the Palestinian territory but are not in what was once Israel, so don't have Israeli citizenship - even though they now live in a city which Israel vows never to give up. Their situation is a good illustration of the complexities here.

Our bus ride began with a brief morning prayer service led by Kathy: "O Lord, you have been our dwelling place for all generations." Then we were off to Jaffa (biblical Joppa), only 3 minutes away. We walked the cobbled streets of that old village (now a neighborhood in Tel Aviv, a modern city), and stopped to read the story of Peter, Cornelius, and Simon the Tanner. Look it up in Acts 9. It is the story of Peter falling asleep on the roof of Simon the Tanner's home in Joppa. While sleeping he has a dream in which a sheet is lowered to the ground from heaven, a sheet full of animals which he is commanded to eat. He protests because the animals are "unclean" by Hebrew standards, but God tells him that he should not call unclean what God has made. It is a theological turning point in the life of the early Christian community, where they learn that the gospel is not only for Jewish followers of Jesus, but for everyone - even the so-called "unclean."

After Peter's vision he goes to where the Roman soldier Cornelius lives. Peter baptizes Cornelius, thus enacting a more open position toward non-Jews. We followed Peter's route up the coast to Caesarea, stopping at the national park there. Yousef led us on a tour of the site - a large complex built by Herod the Great right on the water. We saw the theatre, the hippodrome, Herod's palace, and lots of other ruins. Also walked through the castle dating from the Crusader era. Yousef talks through a microphone, that is broadcast directly to all our headphones so we

can hear him, and lingers awhile to look at something as he moves on. And he doesn't have to shout!

From Caesarea we turned inland (after stopping to look at the aqueduct that brought fresh water to Caesarea) toward our eventual destination of the Sea of Galilee. We had lunch in a lovely Druse-owned cafe in a small town. It consisted of falafel and vegetables - and we all loved it! Next stop was Megiddo, an ancient town (not occupied during Jesus' time) in the key Jezreel valley. Megiddo (the site of the imagined end of the world, in Revelation: Armageddon) was destroyed and rebuilt 25 times, over hundreds of years. The visit to the hilltop ruins concludes with a walk-through of the tunnel that was dug for water supply.

Then - on through the hills of Galilee and down to Tiberius. The Sea of Galilee is about 700 feet below sea level. We are in the Scots Hotel, an old Church of Scotland hospital, still owned by the Scottish Presbyterians who converted it into a first-class hotel. We had time to wander the streets, as the sun went down on what had been a spectacular day, weather-wise (65 degrees or so and sunny), before dinner. Another buffet (roasted goose was a delicious choice!) - which at one point was interrupted by applause when Bob and Diana Carter walked in. Their flight had been canceled, so they were a day late. Bob's suitcase was delayed, so it won't be here until tomorrow! We were glad to see them.

We are having a great time, and people are healthy. Tomorrow after breakfast we will have morning prayer in the small Scottish church here, which they will open for us.

We are reading in international press about the situation in Arizona. People here are aware of it and, like us, are terribly saddened by it. We also read of the vote in Sudan that likely promises a new day for the people in the south. The world is full of contradictions and paradoxes - hope in one direction and anguish in another. Through it all we trust that God will accompany us and, in the end, welcome us to a great banquet where we will feast on love and justice will abound.

More later - take care - we miss everyone!

Tim Hart-Andersen

Wednesday, January 12

Greetings from the fifth floor of the Scots Hotel. It's 9:30 at night; from my room I look out over the blackness of the Sea of Galilee eastward toward the Golan Heights. There are two lines of yellow lights: one stretched low, almost on the water itself, the other much higher, striding across the hills that ring the formerly Syrian side of this body of water. The waves land on the beach at the foot of the hotel's property.

The Sea of Galilee, we have learned, is about 700 feet below sea level. There's a gauge along the shore in Tiberius that keeps constant vigil on the water level; it's currently at 213.97 meters below sea level.

The "Sea" is actually an inland lake, about 15 miles long and half as wide. It has various names, some biblical, others contemporary (Sea of Galilee, Lake Geneseret, Lake Kinneret, Lake of Tiberias). Considerably smaller than Lake Mil Lacs in Minnesota.

Our day began on the hills above the lake's north shore, at a spot called the Mount of the Beatitudes. Jesus delivered his "Sermon on the Mount" somewhere near the place where we gathered with dozens of other pilgrims from around the world. We sat on boulders under a tree-canopy and listened as Kathy Michael read Jesus' words... "Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are the meek.... Blessed are the merciful..." She read all the way through Matthew, chapters 5-7. "A city set upon a hill cannot be hid," and we glanced out across the hills of Galilee and saw a hilltop town, not unlike what Jesus was referring to.

We prayed together and sat in long silence as the breeze from the lake blew up the hill to us. Then we visited the chapel built on the site, a rather hard, cold space until a Korean group - against all rules but "how can we keep from singing" - lifted their voice in a hymn of praise. Some of us were inside the Chapel, other outside. We all stopped and listened in wonder at the sound of this impromptu choir.

From there we took off hiking down to Capernaum. I thought some of the group would opt for the bus to carry them down to the next site, but was pleasantly surprised when all the travelers said they wanted to walk. Ninety minutes later we arrived at the gate to Capernaum, tired but thrilled that we had walked where Jesus had walked.

Capernaum is one of the most significant sites in the life of Jesus. He moved there after his own neighbors in Nazareth force him to leave. Kathy read from the Gospels as we stood by the excavated site of what people think is Peter's home. Then we went into the 4th century synagogue built on top of the 1st century synagogue, the place where Jesus taught.

Jesus spent about three quarters of his ministry in or near Capernaum. It is among the most "authentic" and powerful places to visit here - Very quiet, almost hushed, right on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. We all sat together in the ruins of the synagogue and prayed, offering names of those we knew who had a particular need for healing.

From there we walked back to the bus to pick up box lunches for a picnic on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Then back on the bus for a 30 minute trip to Zefat, a hilltop Jewish town (no Muslims or Christians; they were driven out). It is an intense and tense place. People who live there are deeply religious - mostly ultra-Orthodox Jews. Our Arab guide and driver were anxious, sensing that they were not welcome. We, too, felt it. After walking through the narrow stone streets we browsed some of the galleries in the artists' quarter. We were back on the bus early; people were ready to leave (and also were tired from the long walk at Capernaum).

We all collapsed for a rest before another delicious dinner at the Scots Hotel. Lots of conviviality around the tables. Our group has "gelled."

Tomorrow off to Nazareth. All are well and send greetings. Shalom/Salaam,

Tim Hart-Andersen

Wednesday, January 13

Greetings from Tiberias, on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee. Our last night at the Scot's Hotel - a wonderful place. Began as a Scottish Presbyterian mission hospital in the 19th century. On the grounds may be found part of the old Crusader-era wall. The Hotel is right on the water. It's a terrific spot if you ever come to Tiberias.

We started the morning with prayer in St. Andrew's Church, a small chapel located across the street from the hotel and historically associated with it. The pastor also serves as a sort of chaplain to the hotel. His name is Colin Johnson - from Scotland, of course! We've enjoyed getting to know him. He served 15 years in Zambia as a missionary for the Church of Scotland before coming here a year ago. His little congregation can be as small as one person on Sunday. Christian churches are in severe decline here, and St. Andrew's, Tiberias, is no exception.

Tiberias is a mostly Jewish town. In contrast, Nazareth is almost entirely Arab - one third Christian (that number has dropped fast in recent years) and two thirds Muslim. We drove the 45 minutes to Nazareth after breakfast (which includes bacon even though we're in Israel; not many Jews stay at the Scots Hotel!).

Our purpose in Nazareth was really to explore the town with Mary, the mother of Jesus, in mind. We learn in the gospels that she was a native of Nazareth. Our group members were sharing their early Sunday School image of Nazareth: a small pastoral village. In fact, it was probably just that in the time of Mary - maybe 30 or 40 houses. Today it is the largest city in Galilee - population: 85,000.

On the way to Nazareth we drove through Cana (pop. 25,000), the place where Jesus performed the first miracle - turning water into wine at the wedding feast. There are three Christian churches in Cana; they're all called "The Wedding Church!"

In Nazareth we did a walking visit of Mary's Well - where "tradition has it" that Mary came to draw water (meaning that there is no biblical or even extra-biblical evidence for the claim) - a lovely little Greek Orthodox Church built over the well (an actual spring that does supply the city with water) - and, finally, the Church of the Annunciation. It is a huge basilica built at papal insistence maybe 20 years ago, the most modern church in the Holy Land.

The sweeping central roof flies up right over the place where, "tradition has it," Mary lived and was visited by the angel Gabriel, who informed her of her unique, key role in the incarnation. There was a Korean Catholic group worshipping in the lower grotto near the "location." Once again we found ourselves listening to an impromptu Korean choir lifting songs of praise as we wandered the building and grounds.

All around the upper church are "gifts" from Catholic communities across the world. Each depicts in the cultural and ethnic medium of the particular national church the events of the annunciation to Mary or a scene of Mary and the baby. There is an enormous mosaic Mary on the wall in a kimono holding a tiny Japanese Jesus. Same for Africa, the Philippines, Poland, and so on. A powerful expression of the universal quality of the incarnation: Christ is born in Bethlehem - and in every human heart and community.

After that visit we headed back to Tiberias on the bus, stopping at a lookout on the mountain above the city. From there we could see the Golan Heights (formerly Syria), Jordan, and almost to Lebanon - all as we looked out at the full expanse of the Sea of Galilee.

We met Professor Andy Overman and Kathy Murray for lunch at a lakeside fish house (we ate "St. Peter's fish" - tilapia). Kathy is the provost (chief academic officer) and Andy a faculty member at Macalester College in St. Paul, back home. Andy has led an archaeological dig in northern Israel for years; Kathy was here to set up an exchange with an Israeli university nearby. Andy knows our group, as he had been part of our preparation for this trip. We had a wonderful visit with Andy, who answered questions from our travelers.

They left for "J-town" as Andy called it (Jerusalem) and we headed for a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. The wind was blowing hard; we wondered how it would be on the water. Turned out the large wooden boat handled the waves just fine; I did not have to calm the storm, although I was prepared to try!

The boat ride started in surprising fashion. No sooner had we pulled away from the pier than we heard a drum roll over the loudspeakers and watched as a crew member began running the Stars and Stripes up the flag pole, next to the Star of David. Then the Star-Spangled Banner began and we all stood to sing our national anthem - not exactly what one would expect on the Sea of Galilee. I admit to being moved by it, thinking of the national grief back home over the Arizona shooting. While we were singing another boat of Americans came by and waved and cheered.

Next we had a short feeding frenzy with seagulls, who were so keen on consuming the pita bread given to us to offer them, that they would seize it right from your fingers while in flight! Once again, not what you expect on the biblical body of water.

We finally did get into a better place on the lake. Our guide Yousef spoke to us of the sites we could see from the water. Over two thirds of the ministry of Jesus took place within sight of the boat floating in the Sea of Galilee. Then I made a few comments, got the skipper to lower the engines to nearly full stop, and led us into silence. For about ten minutes we floated there, quietly aware that this was the geographic heart of the gospel. I closed with prayer and we motored back to shore.

We then visited a fascinating museum that tells the story of the recovery and preservation of a first-century fishing boat found about 20 years ago by kibbutz members living there. It was a boat in use on the Sea of Galilee in the time of Jesus.

Back to the Scots Hotel for our final night. On to Bethlehem in the morning! All are well.

Salaam and shalom,

Tim Hart-Andersen

Thursday, January 14

(Preface to this communication: Tim was not in a place where the computers worked so he sent me text messages on my phone. 38 messages on my phone and here it is as I copied what he wrote. Hopefully it's all in the right order. Isn't our technology amazing? Kathy Fisher)

We started our last day in Tiberias on the shore of the Sea of Galilee as we have every morning – with morning pray in St Andrew's parish church by the Scots Hotel. As Kathy Michael was reading the morning psalm (121), a woman came and stood at the door, looking as if she wanted in. Kathy invited her to join us. She did. A few minutes later she came forward to Kathy and gave her a book (looked like the New Testament in Hebrew) and then took Kathy's head in both hands and kissed her on the forehead. Kathy looked surprised, and then the woman walked out. Colin, the local minister, followed her out. Turns out she's a messianic Jew from Eastern Europe. Doesn't speak much English, but Colin was able to learn that she worships in a Jewish/Christian congregation that meets in St. Andrews each week. Someone said, "She's an angel." Colin offered a prayer and we were on our way shortly thereafter.

First stop, Jordan River. People were surprised by how small the Jordan actually is – more like Minneapolis' Minnehaha Creek than the mighty Mississippi! And the commercialism is a bit much. We paid our admission and walked through the turnstile to make our way to the water. There 4 or 5 "stations" for groups to use - ramps and railings winding down into the Jordan. About half of the group rolled up their pants and waded in. Lots of laughter and photos. Then Kathy and I led a brief service reaffirming our baptismal covenant. We used the liturgy from last Sunday's service at Westminster. I ended by sprinkling the Jordan out over our group. Those in the back stretched out their hands so the water would reach them. I described Jesus' baptism as an act of divine solidarity with our human mortality: dying in the water and rising to new life. Our reaffirmation of baptism at the Jordan was, similarly, an act of solidarity with baptized people everywhere. I spoke especially of those killed recently simply because they were part of the community of the baptized.

After our experience in the water we started up the Jordan's banks just in time to see several muskrats swim upstream!

To exit the baptismal stations you have to go through the gift shop, of course (or to the restroom, which would cost you half a buck). On the way out of the shop one of the group members noticed a little film playing. It was a movie of our group from the time we arrived in the baptismal station until we left. He paid \$15 for a copy of it. We all thought it was creepy that they were filming us without our knowledge. Needless to say, with the possible exception of the ritual of baptismal renewal, our visit to the Jordan was not quite what we expected.

A few miles down the road we stopped to see Bet She'an, an absolutely amazing city in ruins dating from 2000BCE. Paved stone streets, a 7000 seat theater, an amphitheater, lots of shops, a bath house, a temple, and more. All in massive stone. It all came tumbling down in the mid-8th century when a powerful quake shook the area. The site – mentioned in the Hebrew texts as the site of a major defeat of Saul's army – has been partially restored. A true marvel. 45 minutes to Jericho. Some miles out of that biblical and modern town we entered Palestinian Territory. Big difference to the Israeli landscape. Except for frequent Israeli settlements in their fenced-in

lushness, the Palestinian terrain is hardscrabble and dry.

We ate falafel in Jericho, after visiting the archaeological site of the old city of Jericho. It claims to have been a city for over 10,000 years – the oldest city on the earth. It is also the lowest: about 1000 feet below sea level. The Dead Sea was visible from the top of the ruins. We turned away from the Jordan Valley just south of Jericho and began to climb to Jerusalem. It took about 45 minutes to go from 1500ft below sea level to 3000ft above. Along the way we drove past Bedouin groups in makeshift houses and then large Israeli settlements, or suburban developments. They are large colonies; one we saw has 60,000 people living in it. All the while the land was as barren as I have ever seen.

I was a sobering trip – made all the more somber when we first saw the Wall. We drove through Jerusalem to get to Bethlehem, right through the wall at a checkpoint. The Israeli side of the 30 foot concrete wall has lovely flowers and a cheerful welcome painted on it. I actually says “Love and Peace” on it, written by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism. The moment you enter the Palestinian side you see a drastic change. The wall has graffiti all over it, mostly protesting the wall.

We stopped at a shop called Shepherd’s Store. Lots of olive wood purchased! Finally made it to the Shepherd’s Hotel in Bethlehem, where Abby and Samir were waiting for us. Abby’s mother is Barbara Mauk, one of our travelers. Abby married Samir, and they live nearby in the West Bank. He brought a plate of desserts and the hotel offered juice. A warm welcome! Before we had dinner, Mitri Raheb, Pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church (two blocks away) came by to greet us. It was great finally to be with him. Thus begins the next part of this adventure in faith: three days with our partner congregation in Palestine.

Ed Cunningham and I took a walk after dinner down the dark streets of the neighborhood in Bethlehem where we’re staying. There was a sandstorm blowing. It was like walking in the rain, except that the water was sand instead. All in all, quite a contrast to the serene beauty of rural Galilee.

All for now. We’re all well, and miss everyone!

Salaam and Shalom,
Tim Hart-Andersen

Saturday, January 15

Greetings from the West Bank.

Our first morning in Bethlehem began with a light breakfast (no chocolate cake, as in the Scots Hotel in Tiberias, which is just as well). A group had been up early, walking the streets as the sun came up. A beautiful, cool day (around 60 degrees).

We walked the two blocks to Christmas Lutheran Church, up a slight slope in the old stone street called Pope Paul VI. Wonder if anyone here appreciates the irony of the Lutheran church being located on a Roman Catholic road.

We met Mitri Raheb, the pastor, shortly after 9:00 - a nice surprise, as he was not supposed to be the one giving the tour. We explored every nook and cranny of a rabbit-warren of a building, with some parts dating back to the 1860s and others to only a few years ago. The Finnish government selected the church for a major capital grant of \$5.5M; those funds made possible a stunning renovation and new building that beautifully connects the several older structures with one another.

Mitri took us down into an underground crypt, discovered accidentally a few years ago during renovations. It is an ancient house. It has not been retouched. We gathered in the low-ceilinged, rough stone room. When all were quiet, Mitri spoke in a solemn voice: "Holy Protestant tradition has it that Jesus was actually born right here."

We all laughed; in fact, his comment relieved a bit of tension that has arisen about the tourist sites where this or that, "according to tradition, this is actually where _____ happened." That gets old. It is not necessary. If our faith rests on the "verifiability" of this or that religious site, then we are standing on thin ice. Better for us to be standing on ground made holy by those who are there today, than to try to prove one thing or another by "evidence" from 2000 years ago. Our group is not keen on the exploitation of religious narrative for profit.

Mitri did explain what cave-like houses in the time of Jesus were like. That helped us imagine how people lived in those days.

Mitri's tour introduced us to the International Center of Bethlehem. The ICB is housed in the church buildings, and hosts a number of programs, most notably a Guest House, gallery, gift shop, and restaurant. The whole thing is under the umbrella of the Diyar Consortium, the name of the church's outreach ministry.

We ended up in the sanctuary for our morning prayer. It is a handsome stone building, dating back over a century. The Germans built it as a mission; the wonderful stained glass features a Germanic, blond (beard and hair) Jesus. Mitri had warned us.

We sang a Taizé chant, heard scripture read (the Bethlehem birth story), sat in silence, and quietly prayed together. Those moments are powerful in these locations.

The group next met with Rana Khoury, an administrator at the ICB. She explained the various programs; I met separately with Mitri to discuss details of worship the next day and our visit in Bethlehem. We sat in his office under the bullet holes on the ceiling from the Israeli army in 2002, when their tanks shelled the church and troops stormed it. Mitri was arrested and the Israeli army used the church building as their combat headquarters for some time during the standoff with Palestinian forces holed up in the Church of the Nativity two blocks away. Mitri's book, *Bethlehem Besieged*, tells the dramatic story; the cover photo shows him in a shot-up window, which was right behind the desk where he now sat with me to talk about worship. The church decided to leave the ceiling hole-reminders, as well as a jack-hammered hole in their art classroom to tell the story in ways speech cannot convey.

At lunch the group split in two, with one group heading to eat in Ramallah with a Palestinian-

American businessman to discuss investment options in Palestine, while the other went to lunch and visited the Church of the Nativity and Manger Square.

I went with the Ramallah group. With several checkpoints and border crossings we ended up spending 3.5 hours in the car and 1.5 hours at lunch. Ramallah is 12-15 miles away.

We all met again at 5PM at the church bar (yes, BAR) for drinks and conversation with young church leaders. Fascinating conversations. I spent time talking to two young Muslim women who are in a film documentary class. One is working on a project telling the story of the Israeli government eviction of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem, through the eyes of an 11-year old boy who lives there (and who has been arrested and jailed - at age 11 - by Israeli forces).

Dinner was at the ICB. Great food! Off to bed (well, I went back to the hotel to work on my sermon).

All are well; the group is having quite a moving time together.
Salaam, Shalom, Tim Hart-Andersen

Monday, January 17

Hello from Bethlehem!

Another early morning walk, this time the 7-8 blocks to the wall built by Israel to separate Bethlehem from its neighbors and secure Israeli towns and settlements. I've seen it several times, but it never ceases to startle me: standing 30 feet straight up in the middle of the street, it is an impenetrable barrier. The Palestinians have turned its flat, grey walls into colorful artwork offering resistance to the occupation. We took photos (under the watchful gaze of Israeli troops in guard towers) to share with people back home. To exit the path along the wall that we chose, we had to walk through a Muslim cemetery that abuts the wall. The juxtaposition was remarkable: 11 American Christians standing in a Muslim graveyard in occupied Palestine, watching the sun rise over the wall built by Jews in Israel.

It was Sunday morning; on the way back to the Shepherd Hotel we could hear bells ringing across Bethlehem, echoing down the rocky streets, calling people to worship. With the Armenian and Syrian Orthodox and Roman Catholic faithful, after breakfast we made our way, as Presbyterians, to join the Lutherans in worship at Christmas Church.

(Most of us have been awakened a little after 5 AM each day to the sound of the Muslim Call to Prayer.)

The 19th-century stone church was packed, with about 150 Palestinians and 75 visitors - all from the U.S. (another Presby group and two Methodist groups). Extra chairs filled every available space. Worship began in Arabic and continued in both English and Arabic, at times simultaneously. The hymns were familiar tunes - including, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," an Epiphany hymn here. The "last Christmas" (Armenian) is Jan 18, so the season is extended through that date by all the Christians and, in fact, by the whole town; there are Christmas decorations - trees, stars, Santas, angels - everywhere.

The gospel text was printed in English and read in Arabic by Mitri, after which he introduced the visiting preacher from Westminster Presbyterian in Minneapolis. Mitri described the partnership between the two churches; he even read the Covenant in both languages. I thanked him and launched into a brief homily on the call of Simon Peter by Jesus.

Peter, a fisherman, resisted the call at first, largely because he had no imagination. When Jesus said "Through your net in the water on that side," Peter said they wouldn't catch anything, as they'd been out all night and caught nothing. He threw the net in anyway - and there were more fish in it than he could haul in one boat. He looked at the empty net and saw, well, an empty net. Jesus saw something else altogether.

The gospel calls us to have a vivid imagination about how the world might be, but so often there is a failure of imagination in our churches. We are called to be stewards of God's imagination on behalf of the world.

After the sermon we commissioned the new prayer partners. The WPC folks - Bonneville, Cochranes, and Barbara B - came forward, along with their Palestinian partners. Kathy Michael and Mitri prayed, and then they all met one another and shook hands. A moving moment.

After worship the Westminster group went for coffee; I joined Mitri and the congregation for the election of new elders - which only happens every five years. There were seven candidates for five positions. Each ballot was read aloud and tallied on newsprint in front, while the entire congregation stood and watched, hushed. It took an hour, but they got there - two women and three men!

After the meeting the five retiring elders and their families joined us for lunch at the church. The prayer partners sat together and had a wonderful time. The lunch was delicious and plentiful, as usual, with lots of good conversation. At one point a few remarks were made and Rodney presented the He Qi painting of the resurrection/nativity as a gift from Westminster. Martha A. gave them a prayer shawl and explained that ministry.

Following lunch almost all our group took a walk through the old city, led by a church member. It was fascinating - mostly because a lot of it was "behind the scenes," as only a local could do. He seemed to know everybody. At one point we found ourselves - all 32 of us - filing into the home, and then bedroom, of an 83 year old Muslim woman who was delighted to see us. Her family gathered around and we all had a lively conversation, standing wall-to-wall.

Our walking tour concluded in time for us to relax a bit before dinner (it seems we're doing a lot of eating!). It was a "biblical" meal. We were told it had three foods from the Bible. We readily identified the lamb, but were stumped on the other two. In any event, it tasted great!

Another long, wonderful day in Bethlehem - and off to bed!

All are well; we miss you! Salaam and Shalom, Tim Hart-Andersen

Tuesday, January 18

Greetings!

Our last full day in Bethlehem. We have commented about how "at home" we feel here. Our hotel is only two blocks from the Christmas Church, which is only two blocks from Manger Square. We eat each evening at the church; and off and on during the day we are there. We do a lot of walking through the narrow streets of old Bethlehem, with the cats. They are everywhere! One of our travelers turned the corner and saw nine cats sitting there. He got a photo.

There are lots of small shops throughout the old city selling every imaginable item. Tea vendors on every corner tend little charcoal fires under their tall, ornate silver tea pots. We walk by a bakery each morning. Today they offered us a sample - it was warm and delicious!

Wherever we go we are greeted as neighbors. The children who pass by say "good morning." So do shopkeepers, police, teenagers, and just about anyone. We feel safe on the streets. People are glad to help us with directions or point out the sights. We feel welcomed in this town.

Our day began with a short trip from the hotel in the bus to Dar al-Kalima (House of the Word), the school and community outreach center run by Christmas Church. It is an impressive facility and program. We saw the Health and Wellness Center, the college, and the art gallery. We met with the Dean of the school, Dr. Nuha Khoury (PhD from Univ. of Mich.), who described the educational philosophy of the college. Their goal is to help Palestinians develop a sense of the future, to teach them to use creativity and the arts to grow hope

From Dar al-Kalima we made the 30-minute trip to the Herodian. On the way we drove through Beit Sahour, House of the Shepherd, where the shepherd's field (as in, "and in that region there were shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night..."). We actually passed a flock of sheep!

The Herodian site is a high hill made by human hands as place for a palace for King Herod the Great. They recently found Herod's tomb at the site, too. It is a long walk up, but well worth it. From the top we could see over the hills of Jordan to the east and Jerusalem to the west. And we could easily see the makeshift hilltop Israeli settlement at the base of the Herodian. A few mobile homes scattered around the peak of the hill. An Israeli army camp was only a couple hundred yards away to protect them.

The next hill over from the Herodian holds a much bigger, fully completed Israeli settlement. They're both illegal by the world's standards, but that does not deter Israel from building more of them. In fact, they are. It is hard for us to understand how the Israeli government can simply flaunt the law, but they do.

Ruth D., Pete C. and I went exploring down a small staircase on top of the hill. It led down into a series of wells and tunnels. We followed the path down until we came out at the bottom. We learned along the way of the Jewish revolts, the first in 66 CE and the second in 132 CE. The rebels used the Herodian as an attack base. We passed a group of young Israelis learning about their heroes of history inside the hollowed-out hill.

We left the Herodian and travelled back by the shepherds' field. They were still keeping watch.

Part of our group met Sami Awaad, the Executive Director of the Holy Land Trust, to discuss investment opportunities in Palestine, while the rest went to the wall.

We met up again at the church later that day for a conversation with Mitri Raheb, the pastor. As usual, he offered a biblically based perspective on contemporary issues. He wants an end to the occupation and is perfectly willing to say so.

Dinner was wonderful. During the meal Mitri brought in a large box with a ribbon. I opened it - and was delighted to discover that Christmas Church was giving us an olive wood cross. Mitri told us that after learning from me that Westminster was looking for a cross, he asked the church's cook to make one. It is simple and just the right size. We intend to use it during Holy Week worship, when we will pass crosses through the congregation.

Dinner concluded and we all headed downstairs to the theater to watch a performance by the Diyar Dance Theatre, part of the outreach of the church. Their piece demonstrated the power of hope in the face of the difficulties they live with every day. The dancers were on their way the next day to perform in Madrid at an international gathering of folk dancers.

As we exited we found that we weren't through with Bethlehem: several of us wanted one last walk. We went down to Manger Square, crossed it and headed down a street past the Milk Grotto to a spot where we could easily see on the far eastern horizon the outskirts of Amman, Jordan.

On the way we ran into a bunch of young women who had also been at the dance performance. One of them, called Honey, is captain of the Palestinian Women's National Soccer Team. She was there to greet us - a remarkable young woman, part of why we have hope for the future here.

Off to bed and getting ready for Jerusalem tomorrow.

All are well! `Salaam and Shalom, Tim

Wednesday, January 19

Greetings from Jerusalem!

Our Tuesday began with a small group taking one last early morning walk through Bethlehem. We ended up in the Church of the Nativity, as we've discovered the best time to visit is before the rest of the world is up and about. We got there just as a group of nuns was concluding their morning mass in a side chapel of the Catholic basilica. They were not visible to us, but we could hear them singing their Alleluias. Standing in the main nave, we joined in, adding harmony to their melody. The sounds hung in the air at the end of each phrase. It was a wonderful way to begin the day in worship.

We climbed aboard the bus for the short journey (less than 5 miles) to Jerusalem. We arrived at the Israeli checkpoint and our bus was not allowed through at first. Then we were waved forward. The driver followed instructions, but the soldier then told him to back up. We backed

up. Then we were waved forward, then back, then ahead again. It was a strange little game being played with us. Finally the soldiers (around age 19 or so) stopped the bus and got on. They asked for ID from our Palestinian guide and driver. They had a long "debate" with the two men, and then slowly moved through the bus, fingers on weapons, asking to see our passports. They took the camera of one of the travelers because they had seen her take a photo of the two of them. He deleted the shots and returned the camera. They moved through in an intimidating fashion, finally getting to the back door, where they stopped and talked and laughed between the two of them (all in Hebrew). Needless to say, it was disconcerting - especially the arbitrary nature of it.

We were "sobered up" by that experience. They let us go, and off we went to the Mt. of Olives. There we walked out to view the old city of Jerusalem - a spectacular sight. The long wall. The gates to the city. The cemeteries outside the walls. The towers. The mosques. The Dome on the Rock. Churches. The Valley of Kidron. To look out at the city like that is a powerful way to be introduced to the city of David.

We walked the "Palm Sunday Road" down the hill from the Mt. of Olives to the Garden of Gethsemane. Although this site is not unambiguously the place where Jesus prayed with his disciples on the night of his betrayal, it is quite moving. Standing in an olive tree grove, looking at tree trunks that may have been there when he prayed that night, hearing and watching the pilgrims from all over the world, seeing the walls of the city rising up across the valley - it pulled me into the biblical story.

We visited the Church of All Nations next to the olive trees, where we sat around the perimeter as a Korean group held a worship service. We seem to be following that group around. They were at the River Jordan, too. Being with Christians from all across the globe is an unexpected surprise and adds much to the experience of this pilgrimage.

Then back on the bus and a quick trip to the Israel Museum. There we visited the outdoor massive built-to-scale model of Jerusalem about the time of Jesus (second Temple period). It's a great way to get a sense of the extent and organization of the city we will explore in closer detail on foot over the next couple days.

Next stop was Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial. This was my third visit; as with my other experiences of this profound memorial, I found myself reacting with physical revulsion at the horror it shows. That human beings could be so evil is a crushing realization. Winding through the displays of photos, short films, artifacts, and commentary draws the viewer into the context of Europe in the 1930s and 40s - and it is hard to be there. But be there we must, in order not to forget.

Unfortunately our guide was working with a bit of a politicized script. She repeatedly made the case that the Holocaust actually happened - which none of us needed. She made allusions to the contemporary political and religious reality in the Middle East that were not necessary. The brutality of the Nazi regime speaks for itself, needing no effort to interpret it in light of today's situation.

Our group was especially moved by the Children's Memorial. It is built into the ground. You

descend into it, and once inside the darkened space you move around a central area where five candles produce light that bounces into a million fragments around the circular, mirrored room. As you stand there looking at the light, voices intone the name and ages of children killed in the Holocaust. There were over 1.5 million of them, and each had a name. And parents. And family. We stood in the dark, listening, and wept.

We were glad to arrive at our hotel, finally. We needed to rest and reflect on what we had seen and experienced today - from the armed soldiers walking menacingly through our bus to the betrayal of Jesus, to the horror of Yad Vashem. Humanity is capable of much good, but it also has the capacity for great evil, we forget that at our peril.

We all fell into much needed sleep. All are well. We miss you! Salaam and Shalom, Tim

Thursday, January 20

Greetings from the City of David!

Our day in this ancient city began with an early morning walk for some; we made our way through the empty, narrow streets of the old city as the sun rose over the Mt. of Olives. It is such a different place before the shops open and the winding passageways fill with busyness and noise.

We were back in those same streets after breakfast; our visit to the old city as a group started with passing through the checkpoint at the base of the long wooden ramp leading up from the Jewish Quarter to the Temple Mount. Climbing the ramp lifts visitors high above the Western Wall. We looked down at the women praying right below us and at the men at the wall farther away. Some of the women were standing on chairs to look over at the men. Last week a woman rabbi was arrested at the Western Wall in the woman's section because she led the women in prayers. That is the prerogative only of male rabbis.

On the ramp up toward the Muslim area, the last thing you pass is a storage box full of riot shields, in case the Israeli police and army need to respond to disturbances. Everywhere there is tension near the surface, but not nearly as much as two years ago during the Gaza conflict.

The Temple Mount is a large (maybe ten football fields?), raised section of land - several stories above any surrounding area. At the southern end is Al Aqsa Mosque and in the center is the Dome on the Rock. Jerusalem is the third holiest city for Muslims (after Mecca and Medina - both in Saudi Arabia). They revere the site for its being the place where the Prophet Mohammed ascended - and descended again - to heaven. For Jews it is the site of the Temple of the city - destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 of our era. No place more embodies the conflict than the Temple Mount and the Western Wall below it - which is actually the foundation of the ancient Temple. The religious intersection is obvious and jarring. Throw in the Christians, for whom this city is the place of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and you begin to see how complicated things are.

We stood next to an outdoor madrassah (Islamic school), while an imam taught about fifty men seated in a circle. Our group listened intently as Yousef, our Palestinian Christian guide,

explained the significance of this location for both Jews and Muslims. We took a group photo on the steps leading up to the Dome on the Rock, which is an octagonal structure covered in wonderful colorful tile and topped with a gold dome. With the beautiful weather we've had continuing on this day, the sight was spectacular!

Yousef then led us off the Temple Mount and into the Muslim Quarter; we stopped first at St. Anne's church, a little stone building that is renowned for its acoustics (not to mention that it is one of the oldest extant churches in Jerusalem, dating back over a thousand years). We patiently waited for an evangelical Christian group from the U.S. to conclude its singing and then we offered several Taizé prayers, led by Kathy whose lovely voice sounded even better there.

Then we began the slow walk up the Via Dolorosa, the Way of the Cross, the path Jesus walked to his crucifixion. Rodney had the idea of passing a small cross along through our group as we walked, to give each one a chance to "bear the cross" for a moment on that path of sorrow. It was quite a juxtaposition, as we walked in silence up toward the place they called Golgotha, stopping at each station of the cross for a brief time. The street was jammed with people and full of life, yet somehow our pilgrims managed to have an experience of the passion of Jesus as we moved through the bazaar and market and merchants, being jostled by the crowds. Several members of the group said the hawkers left them alone; people could tell we were walking the Way of the Cross and not looking to buy anything.

When we got to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre Yousef introduced us to the two Muslim men seated just inside the church whose families have been responsible for opening the door of the church "for 843 years," according to one of them. The church was built by the Emperor Constantine to commemorate the place where Jesus hung on the cross, died, and was buried. It was packed with a lot of people, but we found quiet little places to have our own thoughts. The "actual" tomb had a line that would have taken 3-4 hours to get through, so we did skip it! The crowd waiting there (mostly Russian) was rowdy and cantankerous, almost coming to blows. Another paradox: Christians fighting each other at the tomb of Jesus.

We had a wonderful falafel lunch after we left the church and then continued our walk through the old city. We ended at the Western Wall. The women in the group separated from the men and we all approached the sacred stones, to touch them or to leave a prayer along with the thousands that filled the cracks and crevices in the ancient wall. Men and women were praying all around us. A circle of young Jewish boys was dancing with a rabbi who looked to be in his 70s. Soldiers with their weapons. And the blue sky shining over us and over the Muslims studying together on the rock high above.

Our day concluded back at the hotel with a Jewish diplomat. We talked with him for almost two hours. He gave us, in his words, "the Israeli Jewish narrative." We didn't agree with all he said, but it was helpful to hear him.

Another wonderful day in this amazing place. All are well. Shalom, Salaam, Peace, Tim

Friday, January 21

Greetings from Jerusalem. Shabbat Shalom. It's Friday afternoon and the Sabbath is about to begin. The Jewish parts of Jerusalem are starting to slow down. Many areas will cease all movement and work shortly. Roads will close, stores will shutter, restaurants will stop serving. A great weekly winding-down is beginning. Keeping Sabbath is an ancient spiritual discipline, a way for the Creation to acknowledge the presence of the Creator.

Many of us have commented that both the Muslims and the Jews seem to adhere - or at least recognize - their spiritual traditions with more commitment than do we who follow Jesus.

Yesterday (Thursday) we left Jerusalem to go visit a site where the discipline and commitment of ancient Jews is legendary - Masada. The drive from the City of David to the Jordan River valley and the Dead Sea is remarkably short. After the last checkpoint we are out of the hills and down below sea level in 30 minutes. We can see Jericho off to the north as we turn south. Our path takes us through Palestinian territory along the Dead Sea. Another 45 minutes and we are pulling into Masada. We have all heard of it; seeing it is quite another thing. It is enormous. A high plateau rising straight up into the air from the flat lands along the Dead Sea. Here the last Jews holed up in the time of the first revolt of the Hebrew people against Rome, in the late 60's B.C.E. The Romans laid siege to the high mountain, but the Jews on top were tenacious. They hurled down stones and burning oil and anything else they could to stop the attackers. The Jews - Zealots - had water and food to last a long time; the Romans eventually made their way to the top by constructing a huge, long ramp of earth, still partially visible today. When the Jews knew that all was lost, they selected ten men to kill all the rest. Only a few hid and survived - the rest perished, men, women, and children - rather than be captured by Rome.

Most of our group took the cable car up to the top. Eight of us took the 45-minute snake path up. It was a great way to see the views and sense the height of the mountain, but the walkers missed part of Yousef (the guide) telling the story and explaining the ruins. Herod built a palace here as a kind of getaway place, if he ever needed one. The engineering and water works constructed to make the desert mountaintop habitable were impressive, to say the least.

From Masada we headed to the ruins of the ancient Essene community at Qumran, on the north eastern shore of the Dead Sea. This is where the "Dead Sea scrolls" were discovered by a Bedouin shepherd one day in 1947. The rest, as they say, is history. Only Cave 4 is visible; it looks like a little hole in a cliff. The site itself is not much to write home about; what came out of those caves, though, has huge significance for biblical scholarship.

By about mid-afternoon we left the Dead Sea scrolls area and drove across the road to the Dead Sea itself. About half the group headed for the water; the others cheered us on from the shores. Our guide gave us detailed instructions on how to enter the water. It cannot get in your eyes or mouth or ears; it will burn and can make you ill. So we all walked in, turned around, and sat back into the water, lying on top, suspended in the mineral-laden, oily-feeling liquid. Until you've tried it it's hard to describe the sensation. The body is so buoyant you simply cannot sink. No paddling or thrashing about needed. It is like being weightless. We "mudded" ourselves on the beach, for the full treatment. The photos will tell that story.

A clean fresh-water shower (delicious!) and we were off again, back up into the Judean hills toward Jerusalem. The psalmists speak of "going up" to Jerusalem, and that is exactly what happens as you approach the city - driving past Bedouin encampments, Israeli settlements, barren hills, Palestinians villages, and complicated aspirations.

We ended the evening with a worship service that included communion, right before dinner. As Kathy and I said the Words of Institution over the bread and the cup, we could not help but remember that they were first uttered at the Last Supper, held not far from where we were gathered, about 2000 years ago. It is a meal of memory for us, and the memory was vivid indeed that night for our group of Westminster pilgrims.

Following dinner we gathered for our closing ceremony - a somewhat raucous time as Kathy presents "awards" to everyone. Lots of laughter and a few tears. Our trip is ending. It has been powerful in many ways - and the group has bonded deeply.

Our last day, today (Friday), was largely unscheduled. We started the morning with a wonderful conversation with Rabbi Rob Kahn. Rob had served Temple Beth-El (next to Benilde-St. Margaret's) in St. Louis Park, MN, for 15+ years. He came walking into our group today wearing a Minnesota Timberwolves shirt. We liked him immediately. He spoke with us for well over 90 minutes. Much of that time was spent asking about Judaism; we also got into the political issues around peace. He shared his own struggles with Israeli policies and the challenge of bearing a prophetic tradition that commands hospitality toward the stranger in your midst. That inheritance is strained in the context of strangers who seek your demise, as do some of Israel's neighbors. We were grateful to listen to Rob.

Much as did our conversation two nights ago with Martin Flax, our time with Rabbi Kahn gave us new appreciation of the nuances and complexities of life in this part of God's world. Nothing is simple, and yet everywhere we have gone people here have seemed willing to keep at the hard work of making peace. For Palestinians that means learning to live with the reality of the State of Israel and getting at the task of building a neighbor-nation. For Israelis it means coming to terms with a moral and ethical tradition that calls the Jewish people to live in peace with all God's people and to do so by letting justice roll down like waters for their Palestinian neighbors and not only for themselves.

We leave richly blessed for having made this trip. We also depart knowing that ours is not to solve the conflicts in this land, but instead to trust that God is at work among those who live here. One day peace will break forth.

Our flight takes off around midnight tonight in Tel Aviv; we leave Jerusalem at 7PM. Looking forward to seeing our families and friends again soon!

Shalom, Salaam, Peace,

Tim