

*Psalm 46, 1 Cor. 13:4-7, Matt: 5:44, Luke 6:37, Mark 10:19-21, John 8:10*      *word count: 1,801*

We got back last night from our trip to Israel, and it was an eye-opening experience. The ability to visit so many historic sites that form the background for so many stories from the Bible is awe-inspiring. I should say up front that we had a wonderful time and that everyone said that they were happy we traveled together and shared this event. The thing that added another dimension to the trip was the discovery that we were with a tour company that melded Messianic Judaism with fundamentalist Christian end-time believers. This means that Christians and Jewish believers in Christ come together to witness the scenes where scripture fulfills itself so that the end times will draw near.

We looked across the plains from Megiddo, to where Armageddon is supposed to occur. The Antichrist is presumed to be about to arise in order to set up his power in Jerusalem. He will then claim to be the Messiah, and abolishing the Jewish religion, will build a Temple, and command the worship of humanity. Then, Christ will return and rapture the true believers to heaven.

Shortly after this lecture, I took our guide aside and had a polite word with her. We were fifteen progressive Christians who did not believe in end-time theology or a literal reading of the Bible. She was surprised. “You are Christians? You did know this was a Christian tour?” she asked. I told her that we joined every mainline Protestant denomination as well as the Catholic Church in a non-literal reading of scripture that was devoid of a belief in a coming Armageddon. And, if we were to continue, one of the pastors on our tour was going to have to stop preaching to all of us.

By the next morning, the tour assumed a more moderate feeling. We were traveling with a mixture of people who wanted a tour of the Holy Land, but the majority of the tour was made up of IUCC people traveling with members of the Carrtown Whole Truth Bible Church (*name changed*) in rural Texas, whose pastor stopped speaking to me that day. The members of each church had meals with each other and got to know each other better, but it was interesting that the two pastors could not have a conversation.

There is tension throughout Israel—thick and oppressive as its fortress-like architecture and the garbage that spills down the hillsides in Bethlehem to where it is said that shepherds once watched their flocks by night. That tension could be felt everywhere, even permeating our group.

At the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, I stood outside the entrance to one of two tombs said to be where Jesus’ body rested after the Crucifixion. The Orthodox priest let a man with Down Syndrome cut into the line with his mother to go in and see this Holy site, but when the father also went in with them, it caused the priest and a nun to become apoplectic. They stopped everyone from going into the tomb, and stood shouting at the parents in front of their adult child who could not understand what he had done. The sight of the priest in his tall black hat and cassock with his huge cross swinging from his anger while the nun pointed to the heavens crossing herself, unmindful that a frightened man-child stood before them made me ashamed for them.

Later in Jerusalem, we stood before the Western Wall of the Second Temple. I sat down to write my prayer to fold and place into a chink in the wall. Some Hasidic Jews became territorial about their space and broke into an argument that became loud. I looked around at the dozens of people reciting in Hebrew and nodding back and forth while our fundamentalist Christians in baseball caps hugged the stones silently. I had already written my prayer for this church, for my

family and for myself. I unfolded the paper and on the back of it, I added, “God, protect us from your followers,” and placed it in the wall. I felt nothing.

Carl told me what an incredible experience he had—he could feel all the energy of all those prayers reverberating off those ancient walls. So, I decided to try again.

Confirmation class—this is where you come in—you were with me that day and I could feel your presence. I moved to a new spot against the wall, opened the Bible that my church gave me when I was young, and found the scriptures that you chose to learn for this day. As people were reading prayers aloud all around me, I decided to read your scriptures out loud to the Western Wall. That was when I had my experience there.

Anders, you chose the 46<sup>th</sup> psalm. It is my favorite psalm, and it speaks about knowing that whatever turmoil there may be in the world, God is with us. If we can just be still and focus for a moment—we can know that we can be centered and strong in the presence of the Divine already moving within us. “God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved,” I read to the remaining stones of these walls, over two thousand years still standing.

Sarah, you chose 1 Corinthians 13. This is the famous passage by the apostle Paul that teaches us that love is at the very center of everything that is good. It rejoices in truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. These words sounded the most truthful as they came back to my ears from this wall that has heard so many things spoken to it.

Sean and Mike, you chose short passages from each Gospel that go to very specific points. From Matthew, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” From Luke, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” From John, a fragment; “Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’” And most challenging to those of us who live in a culture that is infected with Affluenza, Mark’s gospel speaks of selling everything you own and giving it to the poor.

Hearing the words you chose bounce off of the great Western Wall was very powerful. It gave me hope that after these fifteen months of Confirmation classes, you have chosen to interpret, understand and live out a faith that is based on an understanding of who Jesus is and what he means to us today that incorporates how we live lives that lift up these values in our own lives. God is the ground of all being, supporting all of creation—glimpses of which we feel moving in our lives from time to time in what we call the Holy Spirit. Can claiming your Christianity mean finding a strong center from which to live that gives love freely and without judgment; forgiving others and asking for forgiveness in return, and being comfortable knowing that there are more questions than we have answers for.

I mentioned earlier that the pastor of the Whole Truth Bible Church stopped speaking to me. This is not entirely true. On our last afternoon, we gathered together at the second possible site of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial. It is a beautiful place, and there are many spots set aside for groups to gather for Communion. We were going to close our ten days together by sharing the cup and the bread as brothers and sisters. The pastor turned to me as we walked to this spot and said, “Your church group is going to be over here, and I am taking mine down there.” This was the only full sentence he spoke to me. Because of who I am and what I stand for, he would not let his church share Communion with ours. A pastor from Texas and his wife, hearing about this, showed up at IUCC’s Communion service. I turned around, and they were there. It was a moment of true grace. I asked him to give our closing prayer, and we all sang our “Alleluia.”

You learn about your neighbors’ religion not by reading about what it teaches or even by attending their services. You learn about another’s religion by observing how your neighbors act

and live their faith in the world. How they are impacted by their belief and how they consequently influence the world around them is the true test.

I watched one pastor lead his flock by a set of rigid rules that were intended to help them seek their own personal salvation and exclude all others. I watched as another pastor and his wife were led by their understanding of Christianity to simply act in the way that was most loving. Showing up at our Communion service was only one of many examples of their great hearts.

A week ago, I stood in the Jordan River with four members of our group, having a Rededication of Baptism for each of them—Linda Hidy and Susie Feick can tell you about that experience of being dressed in a white robe and going down into the water where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. I brought water from the Jordan River for our Baptisms today. I want your experience of embracing faith in claiming your Christianity to be like fresh, cool water; joyful, surprising, life sustaining.

The faith you profess today should be one that refreshes you and those around you. Hold it close to you, and give it away every day. There is a never-ending supply, and it will change you every day that you practice it. Ours is an open faith and an open table; everyone must be welcome, else we are rule-followers, rather than true followers of Jesus.

Welcome to the discipleship of this church.

If you come to be disciples in a faith tradition that makes you judgmental and narrow, then what does that say about how you come to know a God we define by the word “love”? If the church in which you practice your faith makes you more open and more loving, then what are the fruits of finding your home here, and within the United Church of Christ?

I hope that your faith is an unenclosed one. Unlike Mary McCarthy’s famous quote, “Religion makes good people a little better and bad people a little worse,” let faith make you open and more loving, more accepting of others, willing to accept that your God is bigger than you ever imagined, and grateful to know that life is precious and you are a part of God at work. Amen.

### **Scriptures for Sunday, May 16, 2010**

#### **Ps. 46**

1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; 3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. (Selah) 4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. 5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. 6 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. 7 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Selah) 8 Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. 10 "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." 11 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Selah)

#### **1 Cor. 13:4-7**

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

**Matt. 5:44**

44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

**Luke 6:37**

37 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

**Mark 10:19-21**

19 You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.' "  
20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

**John 8:10**

10 Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"