

Day 10

We are home!

We arrived at the Tel Aviv airport at 8:00 pm Monday evening. Our flight departed at 12:20 am. Some were thinking – why in the world would we need to be at the airport 4 hours before departure??? Well.....it was a most fortuitous decision as the airport experience was like none other any of us had lived in travels all around the world!

The lines were long, airport personnel were in short supply, and thousands were attempting to do the same things we were!

We had to first stand in line to clear a security check – show our passport, answer questions, and receive a white tag for our luggage. The questions were most interesting – and no joking around was even considered. These were serious people doing serious jobs. We are in a segregated line for group travel and the guards knew we were a church group. While serious – it was still humorous when Todd Arant was asked how often he attended church – and he politely said once a week rather than try to explain his position on staff!

From there, we stood in line to check in, receive our boarding passes, and drop our luggage. Then we moved to security where we stood in line – a very long Disney-ese winding line – where we and our carry-ons were scanned. For several with artificial joints and pacemakers – it was an even longer ordeal! Chris Kiper, our good shepherd for the day, and Laura Katherine, were the end of the lines and managed to get us all to the gate with time to spare.

Most of us were already exhausted from a 17-hour day which had included 9 hours of sights visits and bus travel. While most of us did not sleep much on the flight over, most slept some on the 10-hour flight to Dulles in Washington DC. Even though we arrived 30 minutes ahead of schedule, unfortunately, that is where the travel frustration began. We were scheduled (for 75 minutes, plus now the extra 30 minutes) a total of an hour and 45 minutes to clear immigration, customs, and change planes.

Dulles has a great connecting hall for international arrivals which allows you to deplane, go through immigration and customs without having to exit security. We had been warned that the connecting hall might be closed. And sure enough - due to a shortage of workers, we were not able to access the hall. This meant we had to leave the C Concourse and travel by a bus to the A Concourse to clear immigration and security there. With all flights routed through that one area, and being low on workers so not all lanes were open – our group became separated and some encountered problems clearing immigration, security, and both!

Thanks to Laura Katherine and Todd Arant working with United to hold the original flight another 10 minutes, and our amazing shepherd Chris Kiper, everyone made the flight except for 10 people.

The able shepherd stayed with his flock. Laura Kiper sent the below picture of the group who had several names for themselves – the Left Behind – the Lost Sheep – to name a few! As shown by the photo – they did not lose their sense of humor and all made the next flight to RDU, arriving safely home just before noon.



Thus ends the 2023 pilgrimage of Apex United Methodist Church to the Holy Lands.

From Mar 16th Crosspoints – our weekly AUMC newsletter



Pictures are worth a thousand words – this is a photo of the actual steps Jesus walked from Mt of Olives, after his betrayal by Judas, to the palace of Caiaphas where he was held overnight following his trial. 52 members and friends of AUMC returned this week from a 10-day pilgrimage to the Holy Lands where we walked on the very stones touched by our Savior.



Over the months leading up to this trip, when I shared our plans with friends, every single person who had been there used the exact same words – “This. Will. Change. Your. Life.” I became a tad skeptical - thinking this must be a tag line for all the Holy Land tour companies! Having been there with these wonderful travel companions, I must agree with them.

There were moments of over-whelming emotions – looking into the cave where Jesus asked Peter “who do you say I am” – floating on the Sea of Galilee where Jesus walked on the water – standing at the bottom of the pit where Jesus was held prisoner - singing *Amazing Grace* in the chapel over Mother Mary’s home – reaching down to touch the earth where the cross stood – receiving communion in the garden of the tomb.

None of us will ever read words of scripture again without remembering the impact of this place upon our senses. That first sight of the Sea of Galilee, the sound of the bells tolling over the city of Jerusalem, and the smell of fresh mountain air around the Bethlehem field of the shepherds.

Each day individuals volunteered to serve as our shepherd – which was a BIG responsibility to keep this flock of 52 together as we moved from place to place. We also had daily volunteer chaplains who read scriptures describing the events at various locations, gave devotions, and prayed one-on-one with many. Todd Arant added so much depth to the days using hymns and songs that told the stories of the places and events we were experiencing. The sermons by Laura Katherine at some of the more pivotal locations were inspiring and gave us even more ways to relate to the places and events of God’s unfolding story of love for us.

We are thankful Laura Katherine’s contact with Betty Anne of Alpha Christian Tours (ACTS) placed us with our amazing guide, Rula and the incredible driver, Moe. Their knowledge and experience of living in Israel gave us a sense of safety and security as well as thousands of teaching moments.

This trip brought the words of scripture alive for us. Thanks to Brittney Pettis who set up our blog site and posted all our information, we have shared the journey in photos and a daily blog. Read the previous blogs to follow a daily recap of this incredible pilgrimage.

We give thanks for the staff who carried through with events, worship services, congregational care, and all the other duties needed to care for AUMC while we were away. We especially give thanks for Pastor Laura Johnson who was the shepherd for the stay-at-home flock, preaching both Sundays and covering all the administrative and pastoral duties. And for those who traveled together, who planned and executed the trip, and who prayed for our safe travels, we offer our thanks and blessings. It was an honor to walk the places of Jesus during Lent leading up to Easter morning when we can all rejoice that Christ lived, Christ died, and Christ is risen!