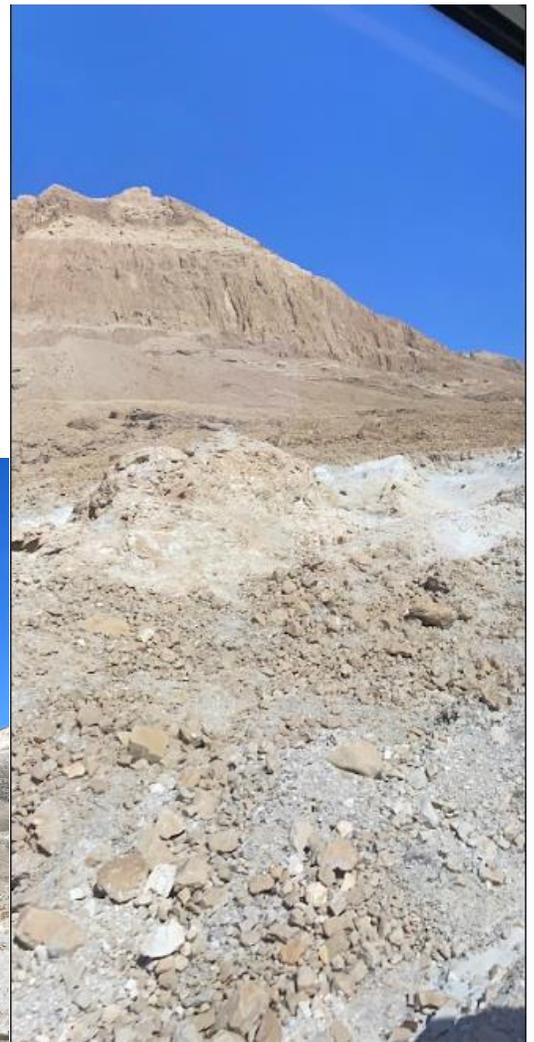


Day 8

We began the day well rested - which was a blessing considering how much we have packed into this 8th day! While we did rest from our labors on this Sabbath - we certainly managed to go, see, and do a full day's agenda.

We left at 7:30 prepared for a 90-minute trip which begin with Todd leading us in *Open Our Eyes* and Laura Katherine praying with us and sharing the Travelers' Prayer. We prayed for our friends and family at home who would be soon heading to worship. We also acknowledged the 38 degrees and wintery-mix being experienced back home – doesn't compare to our 70 degree sun-shiny day! Our shepherd for the day was Alan Hicks and Alta Witte was our chaplain.

We traveled east to the northern shores of the Dead Sea then south to Masada. The topography changed very abruptly as we left Jerusalem. It quickly became mountainous, dry, barren, desert terrain. We saw numerous herds of sheep and goats grazing on almost vertical mountainsides.



This map helped orient us to the locations we visited today. If you note the dotted line running through the Dead Sea, it is the Jordanian border. While we did not cross the border, we were just feet away from it at times. We did cross back and forth between the Palestinian and Israeli controlled areas – including driving through No Man’s Land. We never stopped – and certainly no one wanted to get out and walk - as that area is filled with land mines.



The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a very significant route during the time of Jesus. It was traveled many times during a year as the Jewish faithful went to worship at the temple. About half way between Jerusalem and Jericho, we passed the Inn of the Good Samaritan. Since 385 this spot has been deemed the likely place for the parable told by Jesus in Luke 10:25-37. Also, slightly southwest of Jericho, we passed through the Valley of the Shadow of Death where King David hid from Saul and wrote the 23rd Psalm while in that dry barren land.

Our first stop was at the Masada National Park. The park sits atop a plateau that abruptly ends in cliffs steeply falling about 1,300 ft on the eastern side and 300 ft on the western. While there is a hiking trail to the top, we took gondolas up and back! We all took hundreds of pictures, but none can do justice to the magnificence of this area.







After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, nine hundred Jewish zealots retreated to a mountaintop fortress originally constructed by Herod the Great between 35 – 15 BC. Beginning in 73 AD, five thousand Roman troops laid siege to the fortress and the zealots held out for 3 years. Knowing it was a lost cause, they determined they would rather die with dignity than be taken as slaves of Rome. Lots were drawn and 10 men killed the other men, women, and children – then they drew lots for the last man to kill the other 9, then himself. Two women and 3 children survived by hiding under Herod’s palace and the story was recounted by a Jewish writer.

For those who do not know the story, I would encourage you to Google and read – or at least watch the 1981 movie “Masada” with Peter O’Toole. The claim today is Masada fell one time, but never again. For many years, the Israeli military commissioned their pilots at Masada, and today wealthy US Jews bring their sons to Masada for their bar mitzvahs.

Following the massacre, the site was abandoned until the 6th century. A group of Byzantine monks established a chapel on the plateau where the ruins still stand. The fortress and chapel were discovered in 1960 by two young men looking at the cliffs through a telescope. It is one of the greatest archeological finds of the 20th century.







We left Masada and rode north around the shore of the Dead Sea. At 1,300 feet below sea level, it is the lowest spot on earth. The Dead Sea is 33% salt water and is famous as a place to float rather than swim! With a shoreline 42 miles long, it is a deep blue color at in the northern part where it is 1,200 feet at its deepest. The southern part is more shallow and the water is very green. No life survives in the sea.



The Dead Sea is shrinking by approximately 1 centimeter (a little less than ½ inch) per year. This is due to high evaporation and no sources to feed the Sea other than the end of the Jordan River and a few mountain springs. You can see how far back the water has receded as the shoreline was next to the road. There is a joint project between Israel and Jordan to try and save the Dead Sea. Considerations include opening water channels – but that would bring fresh water into the sea and change the mineral content. Additionally, there are financial issues – who would actually pay for the work???



Across the water on the Jordanian-side we could see Mt Nebo. This is the place where Moses was allowed to see the promised land. Looking at the barren land, it did not look like a land of promise – but then we were able to see Jericho! That city is 840 feet below sea level and was/is an oasis in the desert where Moses sent his spies – who describe it as ‘flowing with milk and honey’. Jericho became the first place to be conquered by the Jewish people as they took the lands given to them by God.

We headed to the city of Jericho for lunch and shopping and we could not help but sing along with Todd, *“Jericho – and the walls came tumbling down”*. Due to copious springs in and around the city, Jericho is the oldest inhabited city in the world. The remains of the oldest settlement are from 9,000 BC – this is 11,000 years ago! It is called the City of the Moon and also the City of Palm Trees as it is so famous for its dates.

As we entered the city, we stopped by the last remaining sycamore tree in Jericho. It is over 2,000 years old and is purported to be the tree from the Luke 19 story where Zacchaeus climbed up to see Jesus. Laura Katherine read the story for us and we again just had to sing - following Todd - in that favorite children's song about the short man!



Overlooking the city is a 1,300-foot mountain, the Mt of Temptation. This is the site where Jesus went to fast and pray for 40 days and nights prior to the beginning of his passion. We stopped at the Mt of Temptation Restaurant for lunch – and some incredible shopping! This area is famous of its handblown glassware. Along with chocolate covered dates, Dead Sea bath salts, facial mud, and mineral body lotions – numerous boxes of glassware are being shipped to Apex!!



Before leaving the area – we faced one more temptation! In the parking lot, we met Sam – an 11-year-old camel who was available for rides. I know several folks took a ride on Sam, but I missed getting photos because I was still inside negotiating my glassware. So, Jim and I were the last to ride – and several cameras (and videos) captured it! Needless to say – this will have to make it into an Epiphany sermon one of these years!



Leaving the city, our driver, Moe, stopped on a street corner, and exited the bus! We couldn't image what might be the problem, until he returned, carrying a full stalk of bananas purchased from a fruit vendor he knew. Todd delivered the treats down the aisle – and he certainly got a bicep and shoulder workout – that thing was heavy!!



Moving west, we rode through No Man's Land to arrive at the Jordan River which is the international border line.



אתר הטבילה
קאסר אל-יהוד

מوقع المعمس
قصر اليهود

BAPTISM SITE
QASER AL-YAHUD

ברוכים הבאים
אתר הטבילה החדש של המוסלמים בנוי בסיוע ותרומה של מדינת ישראל. אתר הטבילה נפתח לציבור ב-2017.

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Please respect the site and obey the following rules:

- Obey the instructions of Israel Nature and Parks Authority personnel.
- The site is open only to the designated area. Do not cross the fence.
- Do not use loudspeakers.
- Maintain quiet and appropriate dress.
- Do not bring food to the worship area.
- No fire allowed.
- Worship area is open from 8:00-17:00.
- Admission fee: 16.00-20.00 NIS.

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Gathering beside the river, Laura Katherine led us in prayer and we sang *Let's Go Down to the River*.



Alta Witte led the devotion, reading the baptism of Jesus story from Matthew 3 using The Message version. She focused on the incarnate view of the story and the relationship between John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus. What a very personal event that baptism must have been for two young men who had grown up together and now they shared kingdom life. It was a reminder that kingdom life is not only to be found in heaven, but is to be lived here on earth. She referred us back to the vows we took, or were taken for us, at our baptism.

Laura Katherine then led us in remembering our baptismal vows, including reciting that ancient statement of our Christian beliefs, the Apostle's Creed. We sang the beautiful baptism song written by Joette Winberry which we sing in our traditional baptism services. Laura Katherine reminded us that while this was one of the last things for the day, baptism is not an ending, but a beginning as our life begins in Christ.





I have to share the “money shot” as the professional photographers call the best picture. As Laura Katherine was praying, a dove landed on the railing immediately behind her – took a drink from the river - and flew away. Could anything have been more impactful than to see a dove at the Jordan River as we prayed?



Our last stop for the day was at a resort on the Dead Sea. The changing/shower rooms were an experience never to be re-lived! But floating in the water was magical and worth the 250-steps down and then back up to the water.

The water appears colorful from a distance, but up close – it was murky. The most difficult part of the experience was actually getting in and out of the water as there is not a gradual slope into the water. It is actually a series of rock ledges – which you cannot see because the water is not clear. Stubbing of toes seemed to be the shared experience of the day!



Tomorrow, we will visit the Western Wall, see a few more sights, and end our time in Israel celebrating the Lord's Supper. We pray for a night of restful sleep as we prepare for a long journey homeward bound.