

Reflection #6

“What holy sites did you visit?”

In 1999 an El Al employee asked me this question as I waited for a flight to New York from Tel Aviv. I was traveling alone, without my group; I was flagged as inconsistent. El Al takes security very seriously.

“I’m Presbyterian,” I told the young woman. “I visited many historical sites that have been objects of devotion for centuries. But I don’t believe a physical site can be holy per se.”

Wrong answer.



She asked me to come with her and soon handed me over to a very large man who looked like he could crush me without much effort. The large man spoke to me for about 30 seconds. This is how long it took for him to see I was only a danger to myself.

Almost twenty years later I can say without hesitation, if I were asked the question again, I would answer, “I visited many holy sites. I visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; I visited the Dome of the Rock; and, I visited the Wailing Wall just for starters.” There are many, many more holy sites.

The change in my view was not determined by fear of another interrogation. The change came through pilgrimage. I travel as a pilgrim to holy sites. I have done so in Rome, in Santiago de Compostela. The pilgrim path to Istanbul, to Athens, and even London and Paris has been a great adventure for me. Each of these are places of devotion; each are places where I sought to see and hear the voice of God; each one is holy.

There are three parts of holiness that are front and center for the pilgrim.

- The first is that a place is remembered where God and a human heart communed.
- The second is that people have ventured to a place to find mercy.
- The third piece is that you are open to such an encounter.

All of these are important for a site to be holy.



In 2019, one of my fellow pilgrims asked me this question. Her name is Lisa Koch. She wrote:

One thought that came to me as I was reading about the wailing wall is whether Christians are allowed to place a note in the creases of the wall. Should we want to even knowing that God hears our prayers as we are, where we are?

The first question is straightforward. Yes, Christians are allowed. You need to approach the wall according to your gender as there is a space for women and one for men. You are free to come and pray. Many people leave written prayers in the cracks on the wall.



In the photo above you can see small bits of white in the cracks. You can see an American tourist because he is wearing a ball cap. You can also see the seats for rabbinical student as well as two orthodox Jews. The wailing wall is a microcosm of Jerusalem: sacred, diverse, chaotic, and swirling with images.

The second part of Lisa's question though is not as easy to answer. Should we invest a value or intention in praying in a particular place or see prayer as something that happens where the heart is open to the Holy Spirit?

The short answer is: yes to both.

The long answer is this: there is a transcendent dimension of life. In a transcendent dimension we encounter what is ideal. In this dimension the particulars of life fall away. The Apostle Paul was speaking from this perspective when he said, In Jesus Christ we are no longer male or

female, slave or free, Jew or Greek. And this is true. We are all souls seeking freedom in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. There is no boundary to our prayers.

In the sixteenth century this was a big part of the Reformation. The church had created a number of barriers and levels to prayer. You needed saints to intercede for you; the Virgin Mary was the one to whom you were to pray if you wanted God to hear. The Reformers said, no. The prayers of the priest are the same as the parishioner; the altar and the pew are just as powerful.

Yet, and this is key to pilgrimage, this truth need not exclude the particular prayer, the particular place. In Christ we are not bound by gender, but we are yet male and female. There is another dimension of life that has all of these particularities. This is what Soren Kierkegaard called the "scandal" of the life of Jesus. God is everywhere and in all. True. But the gospel proclaims that the "word became flesh." And not flesh in general or flesh everywhere. Jesus was born of Mary; Jesus lived in Capernaum after leaving Nazareth in the 1st century when Rome occupied Palestine.

Both the transcendent and the enfleshed are true. Both are part of the mystery of God and thus prayer.

We pray for world peace, but we also pray for a moment of peace with a neighbor. We pray, "thy kingdom come" but we also pray for "daily bread." Indeed the way Jesus taught us to pray is a balance of these two.

The first three petitions of the prayer are transcendent:

1. Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name
2. Thy kingdom come
3. Thy will be done on earth as it is heaven

The second three petitions of the prayer are about the flesh/the particular life:

1. Give us this day our daily bread
2. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
3. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

You can see one is about truth above and the other is about truth below. They do not cancel each other out; they are meant to complement one another.

So when you reach the wailing wall, realize you are in a place on earth that is deep with meaning and saturated with prayers. Is it different than other places? Yes. Is it one place amongst all others? Yes. It's both. Jesus taught his disciples to live in the prayerful place between these.

Great question Lisa!