



May this day be a blessing to you and may this note offer you peace.

You are now six months from a great adventure. March 3th is our departure date for the Holy Land. Now is the time to begin preparing your heart.

Each week until our departure, you will receive a meditation to prepare your heart. Most meditations will involve specific places. Consider the meditation a way of preparing a place to put your experience. Let these reflections be the material to build a place in your heart.



We go so many places unprepared. A pilgrimage is a way of learning how to walk and listen and look around you with the intent of devotion. Learning how to walk this way will change how you walk wherever you go after the Holy Land.

Modern Israel is a frenetic place, loud and busy. And then it is not. Just outside of Jerusalem is a place of wild emptiness, barrenness and quiet. As a pilgrim you will walk in the swirl of the old market of Jerusalem in the morning, and then, later in the afternoon, you be in quiet and arid silence of the Dead Sea.

The places a pilgrim walks in Israel is rife with history; it is as if the centuries are piled on top one another. Standing in the ruins of Herod's place at Caesarea and the harbor he built there jutting into the Mediterranean, you are standing in the 1st century, but behind you are the crusader fortifications built in the 13th century. If you pause and linger in this place, you can read the *History of the Church* by Eusebius who wrote in the 4th century while gazing at the modern power plant and condominiums just down the road. You need to be prepared for manifold of history.



Perhaps the most important part of a pilgrimage requiring preparation is devotion. Almost every place we visit we will see devotion. Long before Jesus, Jerusalem was the site of the temple where pilgrims made their way to pray, to sacrifice, to be healed, and to be blessed. If you prepare your heart, you will see many stopping places in our journey have layer upon layer of prayer. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre has called to pilgrims for more than 1600 years. When you stand in this sanctuary, you are engrafted with centuries into the devotion, the prayer and hope and faith, of generation upon generation.

Before we go to a specific place, I want to offer a word about walking. To go to Jerusalem is to walk in a certain way. Anyone who travels to the Holy Land, knowingly or not, becomes a “saunter”. In English this title is found in the word “saunter.” Literally to saunter means to be one who walks to the Holy Land. We will fly, of course, but soon enough you will be walking.

It is good to consider how many different ways we can travel.

- You can be a tourist.
- You can be a missionary.
- You can be a crusader.
- You can be a student.

I would encourage you to consider traveling as a pilgrim, to saunter.

The other forms of travel will all be present as we venture forth. Buying a nice wall hanging made by Bedouins is the act of a tourist. Hearing the story of the conversion of Cornelius in Caesarea should evoke the missionary zeal of Acts. Stepping into the persistent struggle over the West Bank when we travel to Beit Shan demands you reckon with the crusader. And, the enormous amount of archeological work at Megiddo should evoke the student in you.

All of these will shape our travel. Yet, I encourage you: devote time and energy so to walk as a pilgrim.

A pilgrim has one key distinction from the above list. A pilgrim seeks a blessing. The blessing may be for you; it may be for your family; it may be for your church or community. No matter who the blessing is offered to, pilgrimage is the seeking of a blessing.

When you are blessed you discover the presence of God and goodness. A blessing illumines your heart and mind. Many who need forgiveness find the blessing of grace offered to them.

Don't worry about determining what blessing you seek. It is better if you leave it alone. The Holy Spirit is not a vending machine. Jesus said, "the spirit blows where it wills." In other words, in these six months open your heart to the possibility. Don't try to determine the outcome.



The possibilities of blessings are as wide and deep as the ocean. I have seen people blessed by seeing the Church of the Beatitudes or blessed by dipping their toes in the Mediterranean. Sometimes the blessing comes in fellowship; other times solitude.

To be blessed is to see the intended beauty of creation and to hear the deep song of creation and redemption.

You can be blessed anywhere. This is true. Yet, how often have you began a journey seeking a blessing? How many times have you joined a path walked by billions over the course of millennia? This is a special place we are seeking.

Begin the journey by considering the blessings you already have. Where and when and how has the holy spirit shown you the beauty of life? Such a sight can be a place, a person, a time, even an absence. The calm of a sunrise is truly a place of blessings as light gains more and more bringing the new day. Where are the places you seek to be blessed right now?

As an act of devotion this week, consider reading the long pilgrimage of Jesus found in Luke. It begins at chapter nine verse fifty-one "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to Jerusalem." With this Luke begins his description of Jesus walking from Galilee to Jerusalem. The pilgrimage ends at chapter nineteen verse forty-one "As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!'"

I encourage you to take time this week and listen to the stories and parables and healings of Jesus as he made his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Consider this Luke's pilgrim devotional. He collected pieces of Jesus' life and teaching for those who would "set" their face toward the city.

You will receive another missive like this next week.

May your day find the beauty of creation; may your heart hear the tune of blessing.

Fred Garry