

HOLY TRINITY PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY LAND: JAN. 25-FEB. 3, 2022

Guide: Yatim



Pilgrim's Journal captures the reflections and heartfelt reactions of Marie Powers as she journeys through the Holy Sites of the Holy Land. In late January 2022, Marie—along with her husband, Chuck, and 23 fellow travelers—embarked on a spiritual pilgrimage to Israel. Just two weeks prior, Israel had reopened its borders to tourists after a COVID-related closure. With crowds still absent, the group experienced these sacred sites in a rare and peaceful atmosphere.

Departing on January 25, 2022, their journey offered an unforgettable glimpse into the heart of the Holy Land. Through Marie's personal journal entries, you're invited to walk alongside her, witnessing the beauty and spiritual depth of each moment. For a fuller experience, we suggest pairing Marie's writings with Rami's accompanying video of the pilgrimage.

Enjoy the journey.

Day 1: Tuesday, Jan. 25

Caesarea Maritima



On the Mediterranean coast, Caesarea Maritima (CM) was a city and harbor built by Herod the Great about 25-13BC to honor Caesar. The palace served as the primary residence of Herod, who was equally known for his brutality and love of luxury. Herod had members of his own family, including his favorite wife, killed, yet he built a spacious compound that was covered in imported white marble and featured a natural pool built into the Mediterranean Sea, whose ruins still exist. The massive port, constructed on unstable land, was considered an engineering marvel.

Although no evidence exists that Jesus visited CM, the site has religious and historical significance. St. Paul was imprisoned here for two years – we saw the covered entrance to the dungeon where he was held – and tried in the smaller of two amphitheaters, which seated 4,000 people. Prisoners were raised from the dungeon on a platform, where they directly faced Herod's seat. Chained, they could be manipulated by a guard below the platform, who could “yank their chain” to force them to bow to Herod. When Paul stood trial, he requested to go to Rome to face trial before the emperor, since he was a Roman citizen. His request was granted and he sailed from CM for Rome, where he was subsequently executed. Likely one of his last sights of CM was the larger hippodrome adjacent to the place, which seated 20,000 people for chariot races and other events. Serendipitously, we visited CM on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul.



St. Peter also visited CM during his travels along the Mediterranean coast, here baptizing the Roman centurion Cornelius and his family to mark the first recorded gentile conversions to Christianity.

Significantly, CM also yielded proof of the existence of Pontius Pilate, who likely resided in the palace after the death of Herod the Great, when the kingdom was divided among Herod's three sons. The area around CM came under control of the Roman procurator after Herod Archelaus, the son who inherited that region, displeased the Romans and lost control of the territory. Archeological evidence of Pontius Pilate's use of the palace – and his very existence – was found at the site in the 1960s by an Italian team, which discovered a piece of limestone bearing his name. Pontius Pilate would have traveled from CM to Jerusalem for the Passover each year to ensure that order was maintained when Jewish pilgrims crowded into the city.

Some ruins at CM also date back to the time of the Crusaders.

The ancient highway

Located about halfway between the modern cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa, CM was part of an ancient route that was strategically important because it controlled the

trade route between Egypt and Asia Minor. In fact, the strip of land that constitutes Israel, although smaller in size than most of its neighbors, was an important commercial area during the time of Jesus and, thus, important to the Romans.

We had a traditional lunch at a private restaurant near Mount Carmel.

Galilee

Jesus spent most of his ministry in his favorite spot of Galilee, which is considered the most beautiful region of Israel, fitting the description of the Promised Land that flows with milk and honey. Jewish tradition considers Galilee the site of the Garden of Eden. It's also the only one of Israel's five regions that still looks much like it did during the time of Jesus. One difference is the plethora of eucalyptus trees that were imported from Australia to dry out the swamps, with great success.

At the time of Jesus, disciples of a Rabbi had to leave everything to follow him, and Jesus knew that his disciples would return to Galilee after his death. For this reason, after his resurrection Jesus told Mary Magdalene, a follower and resident of nearby Magdala, to tell his disciples he would see them in Galilee.

We departed from the Yigal Allon Center – home to a 2,000-year-old



boat found off the coast of the Sea of Galilee – and sailed under U.S. and Israeli flags across the Sea of Galilee at sunset in the “Noah.” The surrounding countryside included the towns of Capernaum and Bethsaida to the north, where Jesus frequently preached, as well as the gentile region of Gaderenes, where Jesus healed a possessed man and drove his demons into a herd of swine who rushed off a cliff and drowned in the sea. We disembarked in Tiberias, where we celebrated Mass at the St. Peter’s Church in Tiberias, a church from the Crusader era that was restored in the 19th century and is maintained by the Franciscans. This was the first of many churches in the Holy Land to display the Jerusalem cross, the large cross that represents Jerusalem, the birthplace of Christianity, surrounded by four smaller Greek crosses. The red of the cross symbolizes God’s sacrifice for man. The cross has multiple meanings, coming to symbolize the four gospels, Christ’s command to spread the gospel to the four corners of the world, and the five wounds of Christ.

Tiberias, the most important city in Galilee during the time of Jesus, remains the third holiest city for the Jews, after Jerusalem and Hebron, where Abraham purchased a plot to bury Sarah. After the second Jewish revolt, when the Jews were crushed by the Romans and forbidden to live in Jerusalem, many came to Galilee and established Tiberias. During this time, the 613 Jewish laws, or

commandments, extracted from the Old Testament and passed down from oral tradition also were written down.

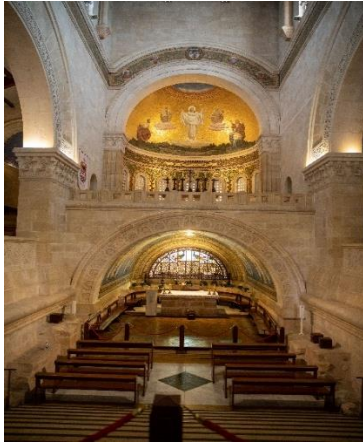
We spent the first three nights at the Caesar Premier Hotel in Tiberias.



Day 2: Wednesday, Jan. 26

Mount Tabor

Situated in Galilee, at the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley, or Valley of Armageddon, Mount Tabor is believed by tradition, based on Old Testament writings, to be the site of the Transfiguration of Jesus, who appeared with Moses and Elijah before Peter, James and John. The significance of the event is more important than the location. Jesus was preparing three of his closest Apostles to go up to Jerusalem (Jews always “go up” to the holiest city), where he would be killed. The next time the three Apostles were alone with Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane the night that Jesus was arrested.



The main church at the two-level *Basilica of the Transfiguration* is maintained by the Franciscans, with side chapels to Moses and Elijah. The mosaic inscription around the altar illustrates the statement by Peter, “It is good for us to be here.” The exterior of the Basilica was designed to represent the three tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah that Peter referenced. The first churches in the Holy Land were built during the Byzantine period (300s-600s AD), many of them under the direction of St. Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine I. She traveled to the Holy Land and uncovered many of the sacred spots commemorating important events in the life of Jesus. In 614, the Persians invaded and destroyed or converted into mosques all but the Church of the Nativity, which bore a reference to the Wise Men, said to come from their territory.

The towns of Samaria and Nazareth are visible from the top of Mount Tabor, which looks down on the Valley of Armageddon, where the Israelites defeated the Canaanites by swooping down from the mountain on an enemy that was mired in mud following a providential rain. Olive, almond and fig trees are prevalent in the fertile region. Many Jews still believe the ultimate battle between good and evil

will be fought in this valley. After the Transfiguration, Jesus walked back into the valley and turned south toward Jerusalem. From this point forward, he focused on the journey to his crucifixion and death.

To avoid crossing through gentile Samaria and becoming ritually unclean, Jews who journeyed from Galilee to Jerusalem often took a longer route that followed the Jordan River to the Dead Sea and passed through Jericho to Jerusalem. The route took several weeks, about double the time of the direct passage through Samaria in the middle of the country. The road between Jericho and Jerusalem was not patrolled by the Romans and so was beset with danger, as Jesus alluded in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Both a priest and a Levite passed by the wounded and half-naked man who had been attacked by robbers because they couldn't identify from his sparse clothing whether or not he was Jewish, and they didn't want to risk becoming ritually unclean on their way up to Jerusalem. Only the gentile Samaritan showed compassion for the man.

Nazareth

A small and neglected town in Galilee at the time of Jesus ("Can anything good come from Nazareth?" asked Nathaniel, who was from Cana), Nazareth today is the largest Arab town (Muslim and Christian inhabitants) in Israel.

At the time of Jesus, who was raised in Nazareth, Jewish boys and girls attended synagogue as part of their education. From ages 7 to 12 they memorized the first five books of the Old Testament. From ages 12 to 17 they studied the rest of the Old Testament. Every Saturday, older Jewish boys were assigned to read a

paragraph from scripture and offer their comment on the passage. When Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61, then sat down to teach with authority, and said, “Today, this prophecy is fulfilled in your hearing,” in Luke 4, the people of Nazareth – the descendants of King David – were amazed and ecstatic. But when he explained that the prophesy applied to all people – that salvation was for gentiles as well as Jews – they tried to throw him from Mount Precipice, located just outside the southern edge of Nazareth. Once Jesus left Nazareth, there’s no evidence that he returned.

The two-level *Basilica of the Annunciation* is built over the grotto, or cave, where Mary is believed to have lived and where tradition says the Angel Gabriel appeared to her. (Orthodox Catholics believe that Gabriel appeared to Mary at nearby Mary’s Well.) Constantine commissioned the original church at the behest of St. Helena. A second church built over the ruins of the Byzantine era church during the Crusades was subsequently destroyed by the Persians. The current church was completed in the 1960s by Franciscans, who maintain the site.



The church’s dome is designed in the shape of a lily, which signifies protection, reflecting the tradition of the lily that sprouted from Joseph’s staff. The church

and courtyard are adorned with mosaics of Mary donated by dozens of countries. We had lunch in a local private restaurant, followed by Mass in the upper church.

Cana

When Jesus called Mary “Woman” at the Wedding Feast of Cana, he was not showing disrespect. During the time of Jesus, male and female guests were separated at weddings. When Mary came to Jesus and said they had no wine, he treated her with utmost dignity in front of his male companions. Weddings at this time lasted about a week, and the groom traditionally was responsible for feeding the guests – typically, the entire village. Mary likely was related to someone in the wedding party and recognized the shame the groom would face by running out of wine. The six stone jars of 30 gallons each that Jesus ordered the servers to fill to the brim with water would have provided wine for about 450 people, which could very well have been the size of the guest list.

We visited the *Wedding Church at Cana*, where we renewed our marriage vows





and remembered the spouses who have gone home to God. In the basement of the church, we saw a typical stone water jar and an excavation of the location thought to be the site of the wedding feast where Jesus performed his first miracle.

The final time that Jesus called Mary “Woman” was from the cross at Calvary. This reference also relates to the Woman, the new Eve, who would crush the head of the snake, or devil, which ensnared the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden.

Day 3: Thursday, Jan. 27

Sea of Galilee

We passed Magdala, which is under excavation, and traveled through the Valley of the Doves, part of the Via Maris and the only valley that allows storms to churn in the Sea of Galilee, on the way to the Mount of Beatitudes. Mangoes and bananas flourish in the subtropical climate of the valley, which is below sea level. The nearby Golan Heights, the disputed region that Israel captured from Syria in the 1967 war and annexed in 1981, is believed by the Jews to be the Biblical “fat

cow” region that was noted for its lushness and fertility. Basalt, or black volcanic rock, also is prevalent in the region. Herod the Great used this material to help construct the sea wall at Caesarea Maritima.

The Gospel of Matthew indicates that Jesus spent most of his ministry in three cities, known as the Evangelical triangle: Capernaum, Chorazin or Korazim, and Bethsaida, all located at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee near Tabgha and the Mount of Beatitudes. We also passed the hillside “cave of Jesus,” where he was thought to spend many nights in prayer.

The octagonal *Church of the Beatitudes* overlooking the Sea of Galilee, originally built during the Byzantine period, is thought to mark the beautiful spot where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus defied nature by going to the summit and gathering people around him instead of sitting at the bottom and



projecting his voice upward in this natural amphitheater. By preaching from the summit, he could point over his shoulder to the piles of salt at Magdala, where fish from the Sea of Galilee were caught and salted, when he said, “You are the salt of the Earth.” Similarly, he could point to the town atop nearby Mount Arbel when he declared, “You are the light of the

world.” These were visual references that his listeners could understand



We traveled next to the Church of the Primacy of St. Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, originally built in the 4th century, rebuilt in the 1930s and maintained by the Franciscans. The altar is situated at the foot of the rock where Jesus built a charcoal fire and fed the Apostles breakfast after his resurrection. At this meeting, Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him. Twice, Jesus



asked whether Peter felt “agape” love and Peter responded with the equivalent of “filial” love for Jesus. The third time, Jesus asked Peter, “Do you at least love me as a friend?” and called him “Simon,” releasing him from the burden of his three denials so Peter could execute his mission to lead the Church. We were encouraged to take a small basalt rock from the shore and throw it into the sea, asking Jesus to lift our own burdens.

Capernaum

We celebrated Mass at the modern St. Peter's Church in Capernaum, believed to be built over the site of Peter's home, visible through a glass panel in the floor, where Jesus stayed when he taught and preached at the adjacent synagogue. Peter's home and the immediate surroundings were the site of numerous miracles, including the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and the centurion's servant and the discovery of the shekel in the fish's mouth to pay the temple tax for Jesus and Peter. In the synagogue, Jesus sat in the position of the "chair of Moses" to teach the people "with authority." Even though he spent most of his ministry in Capernaum and loved the people of the town, they rejected him after the Bread of Life discourse in John 6. Only the Apostles stayed with Jesus, who subsequently counted the three cities of the Evangelical triangle as equal to Sodom and Gomorrah. Christ's prophecy was fulfilled when the three towns were destroyed in 363 by a massive earthquake. Extensive excavations in this area have revealed the ruins of buildings thought to be homes as well as a cemetery.

Our lunch was traditional St. Peter's fish at the Pilgerhaus Tabgha, a guest house operated by the German Association of the Holy Land.

Caesarea Philippi

The weather turned dreary and rainy as we passed the Golan Heights and the fortified borders with Syria to the east (Lebanon is to the north) and approached Caesarea Philippi (CP), situated at the foot of Mount Hermon and one of the last places where Jesus took his Apostles before beginning his final trip to Jerusalem.

Springs from Mount Hermon represent one of three major sources of water to the Jordan River, after first flowing through the Sea of Galilee.

CP had been founded in tribute to Philip of Rome, and the inhabitants worshipped pagan gods, introduced to the region by the infamous Jezebel, wife of the Old Testament King Ahaz. Over time, the pagan rituals had transformed into the worship of Greek gods, especially Pan, the half-man half-goat thought to spend winter in Hades, or hell, and emerge in the spring. The cave at CP was considered by locals to be the entry into hell because it was so deep that it could not be measured. Local residents engaged in both animal and human sacrifice at the site, including the killing of first-born children. A series of niches hewn into the rock face housed statues of the pagan gods, and “a temple of white marble,” as described by the historian Josephus Flavius, was erected at the mouth of the cave, where some of its ruins remain. The site of many deviant practices, CP was considered one of the most depraved spots in Israel.

With the enormous mouth of the cave at CP as a backdrop, Jesus asked his Apostles, “Who do people say I am?” and then, “Who do you say I am?” When Peter responded that “You are the Christ,” Matthew 16 records that Jesus proclaimed, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the *gates of hell* will not prevail against it.” With this statement, Jesus established the Church and assured the Apostles that his Church would triumph over hell itself. From CP, Jesus and the Apostles began the journey south to Jerusalem. The Transfiguration took place about one week after leaving CP.

Day 4: Friday, Jan. 28

Tabgha

After checking out of our hotel in Tiberias and journeying to Tabgha, we learned more about Josephus Flavius. A Jew who had been a military officer for the Romans, he survived the Jewish revolt against Herod the Great that began on Mount Arbel and resulted in the deaths of 7,000 rebels hiding in natural caves on the mountain. Josephus was taken to Rome and pressed into service as a scribe, and his accounts provided much of the historical background about the region during the time of Christ.

The *Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes*, maintained by Benedictine nuns whose order is related to the German community where we ate lunch the previous day, was initially built in the 4th century over the rock that was venerated as the site where Jesus placed the five barley loaves – barley being in season and the cheapest grain, used mainly by the poor – along with two fish before he blessed and multiplied the offerings to feed 5,000 men, not including women and children. The mosaic in front of the altar displays two fish and just four barley loaves, since Jesus represented the fifth loaf in the Eucharist.





Some mosaics on the church floor date back to the original Byzantine church. Artifacts outside the church include a traditional grape/wine press; an olive press used to extract extra virgin oil from the first pass (sent to the temple in Jerusalem) virgin oil from the first weighting (primarily for religious purposes) and oil from additional weighting (used for cooking); and a baptismal font.

Haifa

The third largest city in Israel and the country's industrial center, Haifa also is the primary harbor on the Mediterranean. Jews, Muslims, Christians, a breakaway Muslim sect known as the Druze and the Baha'i sect all live and work here peacefully. The Baha'i gardens, or Hanging Gardens of Haifa, lead up to the burial site of the sect's prophet. Described as the Eighth Wonder of the World, the gardens are one of the most visited tourist spots in Israel.

Mass was celebrated at *The Stella Maris Monastery* (Star of the Sea), also known as the *Monastery of Our Lady of Mount Carmel* on the slopes of Mount Carmel. Here, as described in 1 Kings 18, the prophet Elijah gathered the prophets of Baal before the people. When his sacrifice was accepted, the people believed in the true God. We also enjoyed lunch at the monastery.

Joppa (Jaffa)

Now part of Tel Aviv, this ancient city is considered the world's oldest port. From here, Jonah sailed for Tarshish but was swallowed by the “big fish.” St. Peter's Church, located in the historical part of Joppa and maintained by the Franciscans, commemorates Peter's visit to Joppa from Lydda, when he raised Tabitha (Dorcas) from the dead, as recounted in Acts 9. While in Joppa, Peter stayed at the house of Simon the Tanner and had the vision of the great sheet in Acts 10 in which God permitted Peter to eat all foods. After a vision, Cornelius sent two servants and a devoted soldier to find Peter in Joppa and ask him to travel to Caesarea Maritima, where his entire household was baptized and became filled with the Holy Spirit.

We then traveled to Bethlehem, arriving after sundown. As the Sabbath had begun, traffic was light. We spent the rest of our stay at the St. Gabriel Hotel.

Day 5: Saturday, Jan. 29

Bethlehem

The phrase “no room at the inn” in the New Testament most likely meant there was no room in the main part of the cave (the “living room”) where Mary and Joseph were staying when the time came to have her baby. For privacy, they moved to the back of the dwelling, where the animals were kept, for the birth of Jesus. It's “not possible” that Mary and Joseph would not have been shown hospitality in Bethlehem, where Joseph had many relatives. In the culture of that time (and even today), a family would have been disgraced for not showing

hospitality to a relative. Even today, if a family is expecting four people to come to dinner, a meal is prepared for eight.

Although Joseph is described as a carpenter, he might have been a stone mason who also was a good carpenter. Many skilled stone masons relocated to the small town of Nazareth during this time because there was work on construction projects commissioned by Herod.

The *Church of the Nativity*, located in Bethlehem in the West Bank (so-called because of its location west of the Jordan River), is one of several sites in the Holy Land divided among multiple denominations, in this case, Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian communities. The *Church of St. Catherine* (of Alexandria), honoring the Doctor of the Church who was martyred in the 4th century by her own father, is the largest Catholic chapel at the site, where Christmas Eve Mass is celebrated and broadcast. The Franciscans maintain the Catholic portion of the Church. The exterior, with architecture from different ages, helps to explain the “eye of the needle” in Matthew 19, when Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” These doorways were sufficiently small that a camel loaded with goods would need to be unburdened and persuaded to crawl on its knees through the opening – difficult, but not impossible.

Our Mass was celebrated in a grotto, or cave, at Jesus’ birthplace that was inhabited by St. Jerome, a 4th century monk, mystic and Doctor of the Church who translated the Old and New Testament from Greek and Hebrew into Latin, or the

Vulgate (language of the people). Jerome spent the rest of his life and was buried at the site of Christ's birth until his remains were transferred to the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. We visited the site on the feast of St. Paula, a companion of Jerome, who assisted with the translations, and we prayed at her tomb. St. Eusebius, who inherited Jerome's work, also is buried in the cave. Tradition holds that a section of small graves in these caves beneath Christ's birthplace may hold the remains of the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem who were killed by Herod's soldiers.

After Mass we visited the spot in the church where Jesus was born, marked by the 14-point Star of Bethlehem, recalling the three sets of 14 generations in the genealogy of Christ. Each of us reached through an opening in the middle of the star to touch the spot in the cave where the baby Jesus was laid in a manger. We were privileged to join the Franciscan monks at noon for their daily candlelight procession and prayers at the site of Christ's nativity.

Historians do not dispute this location, which was revered from the 1st century as the birthplace of Christ. The grotto is the oldest site continuously used as a place of worship in Christianity, and the basilica is the oldest major church in the Holy Land. Constantine commissioned the original church in the 4th century after St. Helena's visit to the site. The church underwent numerous repairs and additions, especially during the Crusader period.

Shepherd's Field

The shepherds who were visited by angels announcing the birth of Christ were not ordinary sheep herders but Levitical shepherds, in charge of raising the one-year-old unblemished male sheep used for the Passover sacrifice in Jerusalem. To ensure the newborn lambs didn't suffer injury, these shepherds immediately swaddled them and placed them in mangers. Thus, the message of the angels that they would find the child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger would have been immediately clear: this child was the Lamb of God. Although they visited the newborn child, there's no evidence that these shepherds or their descendants became followers of Jesus.

We visited a cave in Beth Sahour typical of those used by the Levitical shepherds and the tent-shaped *Chapel of the Angels*, which adjoins the remains of a 4th-century church and later a monastery. Three paintings in the chapel depict the angel's announcement to the shepherds, the shepherds paying homage to Jesus, and the shepherds – even their dog – celebrating the Messiah's birth.

Day 6: Sunday, Jan. 30

Bethany

Bethany became part of the West Bank after the Israeli government built the wall, or fence, in the early 2000s. Travel to this area is through the Judean wilderness, which lies east of Jerusalem and descends to the Dead Sea. People who originally came to the Judean wilderness were seeking silence. Bedouins still live in camps dotting the hillsides, living in tents and working mainly as modern shepherds. Since 2008, Israel has been trying to move them, even by bulldozing their tents, which has caused tension. Tradition holds that the functioning Greek Orthodox

Monastery of St. Theodosius in this region is the site where the Wise Men spent the night when they started back to their home countries by a different route after visiting the baby Jesus.

We traveled on a road constructed in 2002 through Area A of the West Bank, which is entirely under Israeli control, through the Valley of Fire – Gehenna, or the Hinnom Valley, mentioned in Joshua 15 as part of the border between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The “Valley of Fire” name refers both to the pagan sacrifices of first-born children to Moloch and to the fires that consumed the remains of the lambs sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem. Today, this is the only road that connects Palestinian areas in the West Bank.

Bethany is now an entirely Muslim village. Every Friday, the Muslim holy day, thousands of Muslims go to Jerusalem to visit their high mosque, the third holiest site in Islam, near the Temple Mount, which increases tensions at the site. During Ramadan, hundreds of thousands of Muslim pilgrims journey to the mosque and Israel brings in extra security – ironically, just as the Romans did during the Passover each year in Jerusalem.

Our Sunday Mass was celebrated at the *Church of St. Lazarus*, which commemorates the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Built above the tomb of Lazarus, the church resembles a crypt except for light that shines through small windows in the dome. After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the Jewish authorities wanted to kill both because Lazarus provided proof of Christ’s healing power. After Mass, we visited and were able to descend the steep staircase built

by the Franciscans in the 16th century into the tomb where the body of Lazarus was placed after his death. The original opening from the church is sealed.

Qumran

This site is located directly across the Dead Sea from Jordan's Mount Nebo, in the mountains of Moab, where Moses viewed the Promised Land but was forbidden by God from entering. God himself buried Moses on Mount Nebo after his death.

The Dead Sea – so-called because it lies below sea level and has no outlet – is shrinking. Its only source of water is the Jordan River, whose usage is controlled by multiple jurisdictions, so the water supply is dwindling. At current usage rates and without intervention, the Dead Sea could disappear in 20 years, creating a catastrophe both for Israel and neighboring Jordan.

The Dead Sea scrolls, discovered at Qumran in 1947, were believed to be written and stored by the Essenes, one of four groups of the Levitical priesthood along with the Pharisees, Sadducees and Zealots. At the time of Jesus, the Essenes distanced themselves from the other Levitical groups, whom they considered corrupt, and sought to establish their own religious community in the desert, where they performed scrupulous cleansing, suggested by a series of ritual baths and wells excavated at Qumran. Bedouin shepherds discovered the first scrolls. Following a series of interactions, the scrolls came to the attention of researchers, and archeologists subsequently located material in a dozen natural caves. The scrolls represent thousands of written fragments from larger manuscripts damaged by natural causes or human meddling. Cave 4 is the most famous

because of its visibility from the Qumran settlement and because it has produced 90 percent of the Dead Sea scrolls and fragments.

Much evidence, but no proof, exists that John the Baptist was associated with the Essenes. “John” is mentioned in some of the Dead Sea scrolls but is not further identified. The description in Luke that John was a “voice crying out in the wilderness,” wearing clothes of camel's hair and living on locusts and wild honey, and the proximity of Qumran to the Jordan River Baptismal site, support the premise that John resided in the Essene community, at least for a time.

There's also some evidence but no proof that Jesus had some association with the Essenes, whose families were thought to have permanent residence in the Mount Zion area of Jerusalem while the men spent several months a year in Qumran. In Luke 22, in preparation for the Passover, Jesus tells Peter and John to go into Jerusalem and look for a *man* carrying a jar of water. Although women and children traditionally performed this job, the Essenes were an all-male community. The sight of a man carrying water would have stood out to Peter and John.

The Essene calendar also is thought to differ by two days from the traditional Jewish calendar. This could explain why Gospel narratives say Jesus and his Apostles had already eaten the Passover meal two days before members of the Sanhedrin, who refused to enter the home of Pontius Pilate following the arrest of Jesus because they didn't want to become ritually unclean before eating the Passover meal.

No history of the Essenes is found after 70AD, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. Scholars believe members of the community were scattered or massacred by the Romans as they marched toward Jerusalem.

Jordan River

The Jordan River, which was roughly 300 feet wide at the time of Christ, is now just a muddy stream that separates Israel and Jordan. Historians agree on the site where St. John baptized Jesus because of its proximity to Mount Nebo, where Joshua also crossed the Jordan to enter the promised land. Jews for generations crossed the Jordan at the same spot to follow the footsteps of their ancestors. Many churches are located in the area, including a site recently returned to the Franciscans for the construction of a Catholic church. We renewed our Baptismal promises and witnessed full-immersion Baptisms on the Jordanian side of the river.

The road leading to the Baptismal site was under attack during the Israeli-Jordanian war, and the land on either side is still restricted due to the presence of land mines. Fields in the adjacent Jordan Valley are irrigated and planted year-round. Dates from the Jordan Valley are considered among the best in the world.

We had a traditional lunch under a wonderful open-air tent.

Jericho

The lowest city on Earth and considered the world's oldest inhabited city, dating back as far as 7,000 to 10,000 BC, Jericho was the first city taken by the tribes of Israel after they crossed the Jordan River under the command of Joshua. The city was a major source of revenue for Cleopatra and remains a significant agricultural community. Jericho is also something of a winter resort town and the headquarters of the Palestinian authority.

At the nearby Mount of Temptations, Jesus was tempted by the devil after fasting and praying for 40 days and nights following his baptism by St. John. A Greek monastery marks the site of the cave traditionally venerated as the spot where Jesus fasted and prayed.

Jesus must have passed through Jericho often when traveling between Galilee and Jerusalem. Gospel narratives associated with Jericho include the healing of a blind man and the story from Luke 19 of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector who was short of stature, climbed a sycamore tree to get a better look at Jesus and immediately became a disciple.

We had a lovely traditional dinner, with karaoke and dancing, at Cheers, a restaurant owned by Rami's family.

Day 7: Monday, Jan. 31

Jerusalem, Day 1

After a 4AM wake-up call, we began our day praying the Stations of the Cross along the Via Dolorosa, entering the Old City of Jerusalem through Herod's Gate.

East (which contains the Old City) and West Jerusalem now constitute a unified city with a complicated political structure. Old Jerusalem is further divided into Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Armenian quarters, with overlapping rights to visit and pray at some of the holy places shared by their faiths.

The Via Dolorosa, built atop the steps where Jesus carried the cross, is commemorated only by a series of simple metal markers. At the time of Jesus, the walk would have been crowded with onlookers who would have jeered, spat and thrown garbage or stones at the condemned prisoner. We began praying along the Via Dolorosa in the quiet and dark, arriving just before dawn at the *Church of the Holy Sepulchre*, where the last three Stations are located. The original church was built in the 4th century under the direction of St. Helena, destroyed by the Persians and then rebuilt by the Crusaders. The church encompasses Calvary (Golgotha), which is honored with an altar built over the site of the Holy Cross. We each venerated the spot, where we could reach through an opening and touch the stone that supported the cross.

We venerated the slab of rock at the entrance to the church on which the body of Jesus was laid and prepared for burial following his crucifixion.

Our Mass was celebrated in the small chapel, designed in the shape of a tomb, built above the spot where Jesus was buried and rose from the dead. The actual tomb was sealed about 500 years ago. Our group participated from the outer room, which contains the slab of rock on which the angel was seated when the women visited the tomb on the third day, while Friar Santo and Deacon Richard

said Mass in the inner room, which contains the altar built over Christ's actual burial spot. Although protocols in the Old City limited our Mass to 30 minutes, with no singing or chanting, everyone had an opportunity afterwards to venerate the altar in the inner room. We also spent time chatting with a Franciscan Friar from Croatia who's on his third rotation assisting with the care and protection of the church.

The *Church of St. Anne*, located in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City under French protection and maintained by the White Fathers, is a preserved Crusader church. Built over the home of Anne and Joachim, the maternal grandparents of Jesus, the church is venerated as the site of the Immaculate Conception and birthplace of Mary. Adjacent to the church lay the ruins of the pools of Bethesda, where John 5 recounts that Jesus healed the paralytic man who had been unable to "stir up the waters" in the healing pools because someone else always entered them first. Because Jesus performed this miracle on the Sabbath and instructed the man to take up his mat, some Jewish leaders began to complain against him.

The Temple Mount and Western (Wailing) Wall

We passed the Temple Mount, where the Jewish temple stood until its destruction in 70AD, and viewed sections of the excavated steps, which Jesus must have walked many times. The steps leading up to the temple were constructed unevenly, forcing people to keep their heads bowed to watch their footing, thus showing reverence to God. The gold-domed Islamic Dome of the Rock is thought a possible former location of the Holy of Holies.

The holiest spot in the world to Jews, the Western Wall is a small portion of the retaining wall built by Herod the Great during the construction of the second temple, which he designed to be twice as large as the original temple built by King David's son, King Solomon. The Jews consider the Western Wall the closest spot to where the Holy of Holies was located. Because it's also the site of Islam's third holiest mosque, continued excavation by Israel has caused tension between the sects. There's no Scriptural reference linking Jesus with this site. We visited and respectfully touched the wall, some placing prayer notes into the rock crevices. Under the watchful eyes of Israeli guards, the square adjacent to the wall had a festive atmosphere of families celebrating special occasions, including (it appeared) weddings and Bar Mitzvahs.

Jesus predicted in Matthew 24 that no stone of the temple would be left "one upon another," and that prophesy occurred when the Romans destroyed the temple in 70AD. They cut down the trees on the Mount of Olives and used the wood to burn Jerusalem. When the fire reached the temple, it burned the wooden spikes that held the stones together, prompting them to tumble and the temple to collapse. The heat was so intense and the wood burned for such a long time that the fire melted the gold used in the temple's construction.

Day 8: Tuesday, Feb. 1

Jerusalem, Day 2

On the drive to Jerusalem, we learned that the tomb of Herod the Great was discovered in 2007 at Herodion, an artificial mountain within sight of Bethlehem and the place where he died. Herodion, the only structure named for Herod, was

built at the site of a major military victory and served as his summer palace. Herod used thousands of slaves to build up the surrounding plain to his specifications, literally “moving” a mountain. Jesus might have referred to this event in Matthew 17 when he told the Apostles that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they could say to a mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it would move.

We drove again through the Hinnom Valley that surrounds Jerusalem from the south and west. This valley encompasses the “Field of Blood,” purchased with the 30 pieces of silver paid to Judas, which he returned before taking his life on the property. The valley also features the Pool of Siloam, where Jesus sent the blind man to wash his eyes and receive healing. At this location, the Hinnom meets and merges with the Kidron Valley, the other principal valley around the Old City.

Garden of Olives

We celebrated Mass at the *Church of All Nations*, maintained by the Franciscans and named because a dozen countries funded its construction in the 1920s. The church’s altar rests on the rock in the Garden of Gethsemane venerated by locals for centuries as the location where Jesus prayed following the Last Supper and before his betrayal by Judas and arrest. Situated at the summit of the Mount of Olives, the church has a commanding view of the Temple Mount and ancient Jerusalem. Some traditions venerate this site as the place of Christ’s Ascension into Heaven. In Luke 24, Jesus took the 11 remaining disciples to the Mount of Olives, where he blessed them and was carried up to heaven. No one knows the exact location, however.

After the Romans burned the olive trees blanketing the Mount of Olives during their destruction of Jerusalem, the hillside eventually became the largest Jewish cemetery in the world, where crypts now are sold for \$60,000 to \$70,000 apiece. Olive trees live hundreds of years, and some are known to be 2000 years old. Eight trees survived on the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane because a Roman camp was located there at the time of Jerusalem's destruction. These trees, still present on the site, likely witnessed Christ's agony in the garden, betrayal and arrest.

Following Mass, we visited Pater Noster Church, built and re-built over the cave where Jesus is thought to have taught the Apostles the Our Father. (A second site is believed to exist, as there are different accounts in Matthew 6 and Luke 11.) The Carmelites manage the current church under the flag of the French government. The Our Father is posted on walls around the church in approximately 170 languages.

The Mount of Olives also is the site of the teardrop-shaped Dominus Flevit church, meaning "the Lord wept," referring to the passage in Luke 19 when Jesus foretold and wept for the destruction of Jerusalem. The Gospels refer only twice to Christ weeping – the other time followed the death of Lazarus – and both took place fewer than two weeks before he died. Several bushes that grow on the grounds of the chapel are thought to be the type used to weave Christ's crown of thorns.

On Palm, or Passion, Sunday, Jesus rode down through the Mount of Olives on a donkey, as local Jews laid palms at his feet. The arrival of a “Messiah” was a common theme in Jerusalem every year at Passover, so some witnesses to this event may have believed Jesus was just another zealot claiming to be God.

Mount Zion

No one knows the location of the Last Supper, but a site on Mount Zion, a hill in Jerusalem just outside the walls of the Old City, is thought to exist in the general vicinity of the actual Upper Room of the Last Supper in a compound known as David’s Tomb.

The possible association of Jesus with the Essenes supports a theory that the Last Supper may have been held in a home in Mount Zion – possibly, even the home of Joseph of Arimathea. No documentation supports this theory, however.

According to the interpretation of Gospel accounts, Jesus was the host of the Last Supper, John was the most trusted guest, seated to the right of Jesus and leaning his head against Christ’s breast, and Judas was the most honored guest, seated to the left of Jesus, where he dipped his hand into the same plate as the host. Jesus wanted to show Judas one last time that he loved him. Peter sat at the lowest place, where he was responsible for refilling plates and wine. Three of the four traditional cups of Sabbath wine were consumed at the Last Supper. Jesus consumed the final cup on the cross, when he said, “I thirst,” and then, “It is finished,” the traditional words of the host to end the Sabbath meal.

It's possible that before he died, Jesus was led in chains across several miles of territory, from the Garden of Gethsemane to the home of the high priest Caiaphas, where he was imprisoned for the night, then to the Antonia Fortress, the residence of Pilate in Jerusalem, then to Herod's palace and back to Pilate, where Jesus was condemned, scourged and given his cross to carry along the Via Dolorosa to Calvary. The *Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu*, built over the residence of Caiaphas, memorializes the appearance of Jesus before the Sanhedrin and Peter's denial of Christ three times before the rooster crowed. Roosters were not commonly associated with a Passover meal so the "cock that crows" could have referred to the person who blew the shofar early in the morning to wake people to prayer.

At the home of Caiaphas, Jesus was lowered into an underground dungeon through a rope, which was the only way in and out. The existence of a torture chamber adjacent to the prisoner's cell suggests he was tortured by Roman soldiers throughout the night. Jesus made the last part of the journey to his crucifixion after being scourged at least 39 times: 13 times on the upper back and 13 times on each side, as limited by Jewish law. Since Jesus was sentenced under Roman law, however, he likely was flogged many more than 39 times. Ruins of the stone pathway adjacent to the Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu are thought to date back to the time of Jesus, and he likely walked this very path.

In Acts 2, the Apostles were said to return with Mary to the Upper Room at Pentecost, where they received the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different languages and proclaim the good news of Christ.

Day 9: Wednesday, Feb. 2

Ein Karem

On our final day in the Holy Land, we visited the site of pregnant Mary's visitation to pregnant Elizabeth and the birthplace of St. John the Baptist. Both sites are located in Ein Karem, a historic mountain village that was incorporated in 1948 into the municipal boundaries of modern West Jerusalem. The region has historical significance as the site of the encounter between David and Goliath. A local legend also suggests that the nearby Eastern Orthodox Monastery of the Cross was erected at the spot where Lot planted the staff of Abraham, which sprouted a tree that eventually produced the wood of Christ's cross.

The *Church of St. John in the Wilderness*, maintained by the Franciscans at a lower spot on the mountain, is thought to be the winter home of Elizabeth and Zechariah – believed to be a wealthy Jew – and the birthplace of St. John. We venerated the small altar and stone that marked the spot of his birth.

At the summit of the mountain, we celebrated Mass on the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple at the *Church of the Visitation*, the summer home of Elizabeth and Zechariah, where Elizabeth retreated during her pregnancy and where Mary greeted her. Mary would have made this trip from Nazareth escorted by female relatives and/or companions.

What happened to Elizabeth and Zechariah? They're not mentioned again in Scripture. A local tradition suggests that both died when John was young, and

relatives placed him to be raised in the Essene community. Another suggests the family, or at least Elizabeth and the infant John, fled when Roman soldiers went to the towns around Bethlehem, including Ein Karem, on Herod's orders to kill boys under the age of two. According to this legend, Zechariah refused to divulge the location of his wife and child and was slain. Elizabeth and John fled into the surrounding hillsides, where a crevice in a rock opened in response to Elizabeth's prayer for protection. A rock in the church bears the imprint of a child. A cave in the church is said to house the graves of the innocents killed in Ein Karem.

It's not clear how long Mary stayed with Elizabeth and whether she returned "home" to Nazareth or Bethlehem, but she's not present for the birth of John in the Gospel narratives.

We burned our prayer petitions in the garden of the church, with our prayers rising to Heaven with the smoke.

We finished our tour with lunch at the Pontifical Institute, Notre Dame of Jerusalem, the official presence of the Pope in the Holy Land, located directly outside the Old City of Jerusalem. Our host, Fr. David Steffy, LC, previously served in Atlanta. The rooftop of the building, which serves as a guest house for religious and pilgrims and an ecumenical and pastoral center for Jerusalem Christians, provided amazing 360-degree views of Jerusalem and its surroundings.

Our farewell dinner at Beit Sahour featured a traditional meal along with a folklore show and dancing.

