

Fr. Jason's Wishful Thinking... Israel Pilgrimage 2018

It is hard to believe that we are already in mid-September and our group of thirty parishioners and friends are back from Israel. Since arriving home on Tuesday, there have been lots of questions about the trip: "How was it over there? Did you feel safe? How was the food? Did you have a good time?"

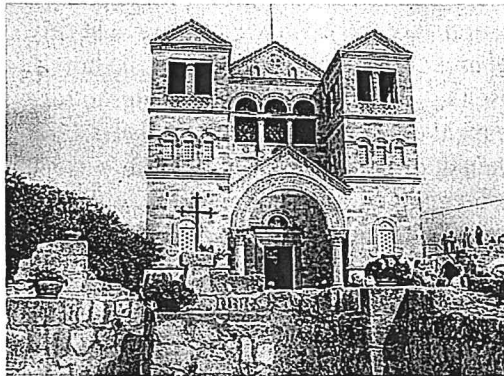
The answers to the questions are: (1) it was great, but HOT (2) we never felt unsafe, (3) the food was excellent but at times redundant, and (4) yes, we had a marvelous and grace-filled time. Israel proved itself to truly be "the Holy Land". So I want to take this week's article to summarize the trip and share a few biblical insights.

We left St. Joseph Church LATE on **Sunday, September 2nd** due to a misunderstanding with the charter bus company, who thought that our pick-up was at 7:00 pm instead of 7:00 am. We ended up making an executive decision to call Deacon Jimmy who generously drove us in the *Glorious Mystery Machine* down to the airport in New Orleans. Thankfully, we made it in plenty of time and the airport was not too busy. Deacon Jimmy returned to French Settlement only to back the bus into the HVAC condenser behind the old church... no good favor goes unpunished, it seems. ☹ We arrived in Newark, NJ and took an early evening flight to Tel-Aviv. There were lots of orthodox Jews on the flight heading to Israel to celebrate the Jewish New Year. There were lots of crying babies as well—so it was pretty difficult to sleep on the ten-hour flight.

We arrived in Tel-Aviv on **Monday, September 3rd** and waited a really long time getting through Israeli passport control. We met our tour guide Amer Shehadeh after baggage claim and boarded our charter bus with David our driver. We left Tel-Aviv and headed northwest to the Mediterranean port of Haifa. We ate lunch at a Druze restaurant (the Druze are an ethnic group of Arab people who believe in monotheism and practice Unitarianism, but were originally Muslim) and I quickly learned that Israeli hospitality is expressed through FOOD. We sat down at the table and all of these dishes of salads, humus, and pita bread arrived. It was literally a small feast! At the end of the meal, Amer told me that I didn't have to pay for lunch on this trip—that I was his guest and the least he could do was offer me lunch for bringing a group to the Holy Land instead of another place in the world. Everyone was full when we left the restaurant! We went up a large hill overlooking Haifa and saw the original Baha'i Temple and the beautiful terraced gardens from the top of the hill. We then traveled to Mount Carmel to celebrate Mass at Stella Maris Church and visited the Cave of Elijah. Mount Carmel is the place where Elijah prevailed over the 500 prophets of Baal (a false god) in 1 Kings 18, and it is the home of the Carmelite order of priests and religious.

We left Haifa after Mass and traveled downhill, east to the region of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee sits 700 feet below sea level and it is the lowest fresh-water sea in the world. It is also unseasonably HOT right now in Galilee! To the Christian world, the top 1/3 of the Sea of Galilee is important because it is the place where Jesus' most important public ministry moments took place. These miracles and moments are all detailed in the Gospels. Our hotel (The Ron Beach Hotel) was located on the western bank of the Sea of Galilee, in an ancient Roman city called Tiberius. It is one of the ten cities known as the Decapolis in Sacred Scripture. The hotel was very nice and they fed us a good breakfast and dinner buffet each day. At dinner, they even had a carving station with beef! Everyone crashed after dinner and slept well that night (thanks to good air conditioning in our rooms), preparing for our first full day in Galilee.

On **Tuesday, September 4th** we left our hotel early and traveled about 45 minutes to Mount Tabor. This mountain—approximately 1,886 feet tall—is the place where the Transfiguration of Jesus took place. Pomegranates were in season,



so we were able to try fresh-squeezed pomegranate juice at the bus stop where we boarded vans that took us up sharp switchbacks to the top of the mountain. This is one of numerous sites that are under the custody of the Franciscan order, and they safeguard the holy shrines of Israel. We support them financially each Good Friday with a special collection. It was good to see firsthand how those funds are being used. The Church of the Transfiguration is on a plateau overlooking a vast area of Israel. On clear days, you can see Tel-Aviv as well as Jerusalem, which is about 90 miles away. The church is designed to resemble three tents, and to allow as much light into the central nave as possible, highlighting the glory that surrounded Jesus at this moment of history.