

## SERMON "WHAT DIRT TAUGHT ME, digging in Israel" 3/5/23

My first trip to Israel was in 1985 and was a group tour of supposedly biblical, New Testament sites. The group was almost all ministers including a couple colleagues I knew from Long Island. ***I learned I didn't want to travel with ministers.*** I know that sounds like a Groucho Marx joke. All were assigned a day to lead the group in a prayer at a supposedly special place. Somehow they didn't take into account Jesus' admonition not to be like people he knew who said long prayers in public. My turn to lead the group in prayer came at the last site, at the base of a pyramid outside Cairo. I said, I don't think we can improve on silence so let's try that.

A couple things about that first trip made it memorable but not in a good way. We had a simple but touching communion service at a place we were told was the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed before his crucifixion. Then we had a time of reflexion at a place we were told was Golgotha where Jesus and two others were crucified. Later we were told both those spots were found and named by a British general who thought they had the right feel for what he wanted to think HAPPENED THERE. But real archaeologists were pretty sure the two events happened elsewhere. After that, some sites were called traditional, meaning convenient to think something happened and some sites were called actual,

On one day we spent twenty minutes at the Qumran caves where the Dead Sea scrolls were found. Later that day we spent two hours at a gold and diamond merchant. We weren't told anything biblical happened there but we did learn that our guide got a percentage of all purchases. That was a sour realization: twenty minutes at a profoundly historical place, the Qumran caves where the Essene scrolls were found, and two hours for shopping. Thus began my budding UU skepticism.

I learned while there that archaeology was going on in many places and volunteer novices like myself were welcomed and closely supervised. One site just beginning to be dug was thought to be the ancient city of Bethsaida, meaning the home of the fisherman. It was in north Israel about a mile north of the body of water known as the Sea of Galilee or Lake Tiberias or Lake Ginoserat. We were told the ancient city, home of the fisherman was a mile north of the body of water because of geological shifts over the centuries.

I want you to see a couple minutes of the area with the help of Youtube and Corina.

Following that is a group of pictures at the site where I and our band of novice archaeologists dug. There were a couple ministers but mostly lay people who wanted

the experience of digging in a place we thought of as spiritually significant if not historically significant. It was thought to possibly be both because in the New Testament Jesus is said to condemn the city of Bethsaida for not being more responsive to him. So that suggests he was there.

Which brings me to what I thought I was going to get out of this, me on all four, with a spoon more than a shovel in the early morning Middle East heat. We started at 6 AM to be done before the worst heat of the day. We were told we had to be spread evenly around this plot and dig or spoon or sweep in tandem. We would be watched because the crime of novice archaeologists was to dig down more quickly than the rest of the team to get to relics of value FIRST. Digging too quickly heightened the risk of damaging what might be awaiting us. After a couple days of this a woman professional archaeologist from the Univ of Munich unearthed what looked like a small genie lamp. A few of us wondered if she had planted it there but a few months later it appeared on the cover of the BAR, the Biblical Archaeological Review. So I guess it was legit; it certainly was motivating to keep on with our grunt work.

Here's what I was looking for and not finding. At the time I was moved by spiritual music like "I Walked today Where Jesus Walked, I climbed the hills of Galilee..." You've heard such. For heaven's sake it's called THE HOLY LAND; I expected to feel the holiness. It was the birthplace of three world religions who have fought like hell historically and actually. I didn't expect the dirt to ooze GOOD VIBES, like your good vibes, Janet, but I expected something. I expected spiritual, so I was searching and digging.

So I'm sorry if this sounds like a Forrest Gump quote, but we've learned that holy is as holy does. How could it be otherwise? And where is holy? Holy is wherever you look for it, BECAUSE YOUR LOOKING IS THE HOLY. And if you have been blessed or graced or lucky you RAISED to discover that holy spans from faces as young as birth and as old as death, you don't need to travel very far. Holy like beauty is in the eye and the head and the heart of the beholder.

(This is a parenthetical I can't resist: if you watch the somewhat curmudgeon Michael Smerconish on CNN Sat morning and on XMSirius radio daily I guess: yesterday he interviewed a guy who drove all over America taking pictures of all kinds of people and asking them the meaning of life. The common denominator was, people found the meaning of life to be HUMAN CONNECTION. So Michael asks, are we really as divided and divisive as is being reported? This young photographer thought media and certainly social media catches and peddles people at their worst. His pictures and encounters said differently.) I like the imagery: we all start out connected, the cord, get disconnected to be born and then spend our unique journeys finding a new connection.

So what did the holy land, the holy dirt teach me?

Holy seems diminished and fading when people are fighting over the land. When I started going there the settlements of Israels on land taken from Palestinians was beginning and the end result was obvious, WAR OVER LAND. And now the government of Israel is intent on weakening the independent judiciary of Israel. Which threatens to end democracy in the one Middle Eastern democracy. Three religions starting there did not add to the holiness of the land. Many Christians who call that land holy believe Jesus will return there and start a fire ridding the world of any believers but themselves. Save us from that holy!

I thought of this when I learned and unleashed upon you last week that a pope around 1500 blessed conquistadors, colonizers, conquerors to take any land around the world and subjugate, conquer, annihilate the natives who believed they had a holy connection to the land. As did so many tribes of native Americans. As did so many native Africans ripped from their lands and shackled and shipped to this land. And religions helped perpetrate this brutality. Is it any wonder that leaders who believe they are the best want to be able to rewrite history so they never have to face what their ancestors **did and took** so we could be free and the best?!

That word to be avoided at all costs, REPARATIONS, is popping up all over the world. Germans are having to give back art stolen from conquered colonies and from Jewish victims of Nazi ideology. A number of European museums are negotiating with former colonies to return stolen art and artifacts.

The combination of holy and land has been deadly and devastating historically, and tarnishing more than beatifying. Holy and Roman were once in tandem to elevate the power of pope and emperor alike. The political power of the pope once called the pope's temporal power was particularly strong before the countries of Italy and Germany were unified countries. A BLOODBATH IN EUROPE, called the thirty years war, between Catholics and Protestants, got us the separation of church and state, thank whatever holy you might believe in, because the combination of church and state was all about power over people and NOT THE HOLY IN PEOPLE.

I want holy to be about spiritual, about beauty and about truth and meaning just as that photographer on Smerconish was finding in all kinds of people in America. When holy is tied to one religion and one land, like Buddhism in Myanmar, and Orthodox Christianity in Russia and white supremacist Christianity in too much white America and one brand

of Islam in Saudi and another brand of Islam in Iran, there goes deity and there goes holy and there goes peace.

I hoped to experience holy in the holy land. It wreaked too much of pain, the pain of the Jewish people who needed their own safe place, the pain of the people who were already there and felt displaced. So many leaders have tried, Carter, Clinton, Begin, Sadat. So many leaders have not even tried. Holy can't be another world you have to die for. It's got to be a world we believe in and are living for.