

DR. CHRIS LOOKER ON SABBATICAL IN THE HOLY LAND

February 13 – April 16, 2011

First Day of Sabbatical: Sunday, February 13, 2011 at 3:41pm

Well, today is February 13, 2011...the first day of my Sabbatical. I preached this morning at the First Presbyterian Church of Annandale, where I am the Senior Pastor. It was a joyous service...thanks be to God. There was a great deal of beautiful music, with a special solo from Christine Germain, a blessed soprano from the Singing Sergeants. Wow! What a voice she has been given by God...and my O my...how she has been a good steward of one of the most beautiful voices that I have ever heard!

I'll be travelling to Israel tomorrow for a 6 week course in Post Doctoral Studies at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute. It should be a very nice time of travelling around the country, with excursions planned for Mount Sinai, Egypt, and Petra, Jordan.

I feel very sad leaving my church family and especially my wife, Genny, and sons, Ben and Sam. We just hooked up SKYPE and got it to work!! I'm really trying to get into the 21st century!!!

After the service today, my church family gave me a wonderful reception (leave-taking). There were presents, cakes, and other goodies...with lots of hugs! That was very, very fun and nice. The First Korean Presbyterian Church of Virginia pastor and two of his elders (respectively Pastor Choi, Elder Sam Hwang, and Elder Gerry) came over and presented me with a generous gift to express their love for me. And, O, how I love all of them so, as well.

I think that I am the most providentially blessed pastor in the world! With an internationally rich church to serve and so many blessed friends. I know that all of them will be praying for me often and I shall be praying for them every day.

Off to Israel in the morning! Sunday, February 13, 2011 at 10:07pm

Well, this is my second entry into my new Facebook blog. I'll be getting a good night's sleep (I hope) and leaving in the morning. I'll be praying for all of you. And, I'll be in touch whenever I access an internet sight. God bless all of you.

Second day on my Sabbatical. Monday, February 14, 2011 at 3:39pm

Well, it's February 14, 2011. I am now in the Toronto Airport, where I walked in as a sloppily clothed pastor (with a collar). Upon my arrival at the area of the gate, a beautiful lady came up to me and addressed me as "Father". I made the mistake of answering, "Well, I'm Presbyterian". To which she responded, "I don't care who or what you are! I just want to give you a present." The next thing that happened is that she gave me a "Free Pass" to the Air Canada Platinum Club here in the airport...fancy-shmancy!!! She was going to India as a missionary and was not going to be able to use it so she picked out the poorest looking slob she could find and gave the pass to me. Really...I'm not complaining...but with my denim shirt over my clerical collar and my ugly fishing pants on (they're really, really comfortable...even if they are not all that cute)...I must have looked like a really needy case!

Anyway, I am typing this entry into my SABBATICAL BLOG on one of the "Platinum" computers in the Air Canada club. Loddy-Da (as my dad used to say).

Back to reality, all is going well so far. I think that I am over the initial emotional stress of leaving my family and my church family....**THAT IS ALWAYS THE WORST...**and, yes, I do cry when I leave my dear Genny, Ben, and Sam! But, I love them so very, very much.

Another thing happened...I bought a book that I had already read! Has that ever happened to anyone? So, guess what? I went into the store...after beginning it...and traded it in for "Deliver Us From Evil"...at no extra cost!!! David Baldacci is one of my favorite writers.

The Platinum Club is a really nice place. Free food and drinks. All the newspapers that one could want to read. I just got through reading the London Times!

I'm drinking a lot of orange juice for the vitamin C and loading up on water to avoid dehydration.

My plane will be leaving in about 40 minutes...so I have to go.

One more thing...I called my sons, who are staying at our house with "Aunt Susie Ennis"...while Genny is away at the same time that I am away (she is in Washington state). And, I told them that I was in the "Platinum Club" in the Toronto Airport. They responded in unison, "So what, dad? So what? Kids are so humbling some times. I love them both.

Well, I have to go now and catch my plane to Frankfurt, Germany.

If there are any misspelled words in this, I don't have my glasses on and I'm trying to type a little too fast for my comfort.

Wednesday, February 16, 2011 at 7:10am

This morning, I woke up at 4:00 AM Israel time...that's 9:00 PM Vienna, Virginia time! I didn't quite know where I was for a second...new bed...different room...no Genny. Once I figured out that I had awakened from a deep, deep sleep and actually was in Jerusalem, Israel, I got up and tried to SKYPE my sons, Ben and Sam. I figured that if it was about 9:00 PM back home, they might answer. Well, either I don't know what I'm doing with SKYPE (which is a very real possibility)...was sleep-facebooking...or they weren't on the computer (which would be a miracle)...I don't know. I tried to "call" them about 30 times...no answer.

I went back to bed.

I got up at about 7:15 AM, showered...boy did that feel good. It was not as good as the warm shower that I took in the Congo after trekking through the jungle for 5 days to get to Lubondai. But, it did feel good.

I went to breakfast and met the other 14 participants who are here. Most of them are Jesuit priests! There are no other Presbyterians. There's a Baptist theologian/professor. And, a married couple from England. I figure that I'm going to have to stand up and be strong for the Protestant Reformation! Actually, here at Tantor, denomination really doesn't matter much. The scholarship is so high that what we learn is really above any of the trivial things that separates Christians into denominations. Not that denominations are bad, but they are more like "different languages" that one huge group of human beings speak to related to each other. Over here there are the Russians...over there, the Germans...over there, the

Americans...over there, the Australians.....THEN over here, the Presbyterians...over there, the Baptists...over there, the Roman Catholics....over there the Orthodox...IT'S ALL THE SAME THING. Understanding Denominations of the Christian Church is really a simple as understanding that the ONE world is divided up into many DIFFERENT countries, where people speak different languages.

Anyway, I went on a walk up to Bethlehem...yes it's only a short walk to Bethlehem. Came to the checkpoint (and the wall that separates Israel from the Pal. territory. This is much, much different than when I was here 25 years ago. Then, there was no wall. There was a checkpoint. But, no wall.

Also, it is absolutely amazing how many new settlements have gone up since I was here 25 years ago. Wow! New buildings...a lot less countryside...the fig and olive trees that I remember across the road from Tantur are all gone now. In their place, a huge mountain of apartments!

We toured Tantur and learned where everything is at. The three story library, chapel, study rooms, lecture rooms, etc. It's pretty much like it was when I was here 25 years ago...huge...with an absolutely beautiful view of Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

Well, I'm going to take a short nap now before our lecture this afternoon.

I love you all!

Friday, February 18, 2011 at 7:29am

Yesterday, we walked up to St. Elijah's Greek Orthodox Church. It was about 1/2 a mile walk on a nice day...around 57 degrees or so. Once there, Father Tim (our Rector at Tantur Ecumenical Institute and a married Russian Orthodox Priest from Connecticut in the US...go figure...his lovely wife's name is Lisa) gave us a great lecture on Icons within the church. He also talked about ecclesiastical architecture. It was a very informative lecture and I took a lot of notes...which I will not share with you now since it would be much too long for a blog!

After leaving there and having lunch, we went for a bus ride to the Herodion, a human-made mount upon which Herod built one of his palaces between 23 and 20 BCE. It resembles a smaller version of Masada, which I visited 25 years ago and will return to again on this trip. The cisterns are amazing...like Masada's, only smaller. The day was beautiful and the view was spectacular. We could see all the way to the Dead Sea from up there. We went up the mountain using the outside path. We went down the Herodian through a maze of steps and tunnels inside the human-made mount. Wow, was that interesting. I got lost...but I made it out in the end...I was the last one out. Sister Brigitte was not very happy with me...she is the Vice Rector of Tantur. After she rapped me on the hand with a ruler....man that hurt...(just kidding). She was lovely and told me not to get lost again. Obviously, she doesn't know me!

Then it was off to the Church of the Nativity. We saw the place where ancient scholars believe that Jesus was born. It looks like a fireplace with a silver star. Inside the silver star, which is inlaid into marble, is a circle. There is a hole there where you can reach down and touch it or kiss it. I chose to touch it. When I was here 25 years ago, the hole was much deeper...about 7 inches. Now the hole is only about 1 inch deep. It left me with a really good feeling to be so near to where Jesus was born. Across from the silver star area (which is surrounded by candles) is an ancient cave area. Caves like that were often what the Bible calls "stables". Though it is not large, there would be room in there for the Holy Family and some animals outside in the "anteroom" of the cave. Scholars are telling us that Jesus was probably born in one of these "stable caves". If this site is where Jesus was born, then the Holy Family would have been shielded well from wind, cold, and the outside elements. There are two entrances from the side and the natural cooling of caves in the winter and warming of caves in the summer would have been (and were often used beneficially by families in that day...usually lower class families and shepherds...probably the lowest class of human at the time).

Then, we went to the Shepherd's Fields. Beautiful grass and caves where shepherds would shelter themselves. A place like this would have been the place where the angels would have announced the birth to the shepherds. It really was a beautiful place. Unfortunately, after climbing all through the caves, I had to go to the bathroom. And, while I was in the bathroom the attendant locked the doors. So, after I emerged from the stall and washed my hands, I proceeded to go out the door...it wouldn't open! Someone had locked me in. So, there I was yelling for help out a very small window in a very small bathroom. Apparently, everyone had left and I had to shout for about 5 minutes until some young man came and unlocked the door. He said, "What were you doing in here?" I responded, "What do you think? You locked me in when I was on the toilet! Why did you do that?" "O," he said, "that wasn't me." And, with that, he turned and walked away. So, I got lost in the Herodion and was locked in a bathroom at the Shepherd's Fields all in one day. And, you guessed it...I was late back at the bus. Another rap on the knuckles with a ruler from Sister Brigitte!!!

Then, we came back through the "checkpoint" from the West Bank to the border area upon which the Tantur Ecumenical Institute for Advance Learning sits. It's a huge facility owned by Rome and leased to the University of Notre Dame. The staff here is pretty autonomous and seeks to teach from a purely ecumenical and factual viewpoint. So far, I think that they are doing a fabulous job!

In our group there are 7 RC priests, 3 RC nuns, 1 RC School Principle, and me (the lone Protestant). To say the least, I have been taking a ribbing since the first day! But, I'm starting to jab back. Really all of the participants are fantastic. O, I forgot about the Episcopalian married couple.

Now, where was I? We got back to Tantur for Evening Prayer Services and then Dinner. After dinner, I walked down to the Checkpoint between "Israel" and "the Palestinian Territories". 25 years ago, I wouldn't have walked down here if you paid me a million bucks. But, the sense of peace and cooperation between the Israelis and the Palestinian security forces and people is shocking (positively so). As it has been explained to me, both sides (the Israelis and Palestinians) are sick and tired of fighting for now. When I was here 25 years ago, the First Intifada was going strong...fires, gunfire, fighting, throwing rocks, closing of shops, etc. Although I stayed at Tantur then (and am doing so now), the two examples are like night and day.

We have talked to a number of Israelis and Palestinians and they are grateful for the peace that exists here and for the increased prosperity that exists as well. The Palestinian Territories don't look one bit like they did 25 years ago. There are new buildings, more shops, even Starbucks Coffee shops (as though they need a substitute for the fantastic Turkish and other coffees that they have here). But, really, Palestine looks like a new country. And, it's safe. I've just walked down to the check point, shown them my passport, and walked across....past the "wall" to emerge facing a sea of taxis waiting to take me to anywhere I want to go! Magnificent. I am so happy for the Palestinian people. Their existence on the West Bank is 1,000,000 percent better than what I saw some 25 years ago. Praise God...because what I saw 25 years ago was bad...really bad!

When I got back, I was tired from all the walking. So I went to bed.

February 18th, later

Well, today has been devoted to a scholarly study of Matthew. Father Tim is really giving us some very good exegesis based on his excellent knowledge of ancient and modern-day Hebrew and Greek...he's a very smart guy! Basically, he has presented a "platform" upon which St. Matthew wrote his gospel. The platform is what is found in Genesis 1 through 2nd Kings. It also includes Ezekiel 16, which is one of the most descriptive indictment of the human condition, particularly ancient Israel's, that has ever been written.

Basically, the message upon which Matthew is basing his gospel is that the Israel that was formed as a result of genealogy (DNA) was a long list of people who were someone only by God's Grace. Israel's failures in the Old Testament represent the repetitive human condition whereby we start at a certain place in our lives and we move up. Nations start, build up, become extremely powerful, and eventually are crushed. We live and then sin and we're crushed. The only saving or redeeming value that exists in all of creation (especially on earth and with human beings) is God. The Kingdom of God is compared to the Kingdom of Earth/World. And, for Matthew, the Kingdom of the World has absolutely no redeeming value without being "saved" by the grace of God. It doesn't matter if one is a Jew or a Gentile. For Matthew, we are nothing without God.

I'll have more to say about this in better detail when I get home. I've just had lunch and need to go to my afternoon lecture. It's hard...because the day is absolutely beautiful. Not a cloud in the sky and sunny. Warm too...about 69 degrees. And, I have to be inside!!! Ugh! O well.

I love you all, my friends.

Time to go to bed

February 18, 2011: It's about 10:30 pm here and I just got back from a walk down to the large fence that separates Israel with the Palestinian territories. I walked through the checkpoint and got a little lost. The guards from the Jewish Security and Palestinian Authority were very, very kind and quickly waved me through at every turn. Unfortunately, I thought that I was supposed to go through the same entrance/exit in the wall that cars also used. **WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T TRY THAT!** As I walked toward that gate a woman soldier yelled at me to stop. I told her that I was lost and needed to know how I was supposed to get through the last part of the crossing. She didn't care what I said. She raised her weapon slightly and the guy behind her started to laugh! He could see that I was a dumb American and he told her (in Hebrew) that that's exactly what I was! Then, she started to laugh. So, I started to laugh. And, she finally stopped laughing and said that I needed to go through a door (that I hadn't seen) instead of trying to cross at the automobile gate. Then she shouted out, "I almost shot you!" To which I responded, "No you didn't!" Then she said, "You're right! Now get out of here!" We both laughed as I went toward the "right" door to enter Palestine.

Once I got over there, I felt a strong urge for Pistachios. So, I tried to go to the same store that I had gone to 25 years ago...there on the outskirts of Bethlehem...and what do you know. It was open. And, the same brand of pistachios that I had loved 25 years ago were on the shelf. I bought two bags and some gummi bears! So much for my diet! Then, I had a good 1 hour talk with the shop owner who spoke excellent English.

He told me that the Palestinian standard of living had increased, but times were still tough. He told me that Israel "has all the power" and so they do. But, his Christian faith was still strong. We both prayed together for peace and I left.

I walked home through the wall. I met up with a very large American/Palestinian African American fellow named Feres. Wow, was he cool. His mom lived in Charlotte, North Carolina and his father lived in Bethlehem. He was visiting for a year and was going to work the "night shift" in Jerusalem. We walked through the security checkpoint, where one of the guards was asleep! Apparently, the security level is at it's lowest right now. Thank God for peace.

He got a ride...a taxi was waiting for him. And, I just walked back up the hill toward Tantur eating my pistachios!

Let's see, I left Tantur at about 8:30 and got back at 10:30. I think that I walked a good 4 miles or so. It was a good walk on a starlit night. Not a cloud in the sky.

So now, I am ready for bed. Time to go to sleep and dream about my wife, Genny, and sons, Ben and Sam. I do miss them so. And, I miss all of my friends at the church.

But, I am having a great time so far.

My underwear blew away in a wicked desert storm! Sunday, February 20, 2011 at 8:30am

Well, I woke up this morning to a very wicked storm rolled into our area. The palm and olive trees were bending and moving from side to side like they were toothpicks. The rain had not started, so I went out to check my laundry on the line out on my patio. It was basically my socks, undershirts, and underwear. Well, all but one pair of underwear stayed attached to the line. But, one of my pair of underwear must have blown away! I looked on the patio, down below (I'm on the second floor), and even went outside to look for them. Nowhere to be found!

The guys in my group had a field day kidding me about my lost pair of underwear. Fellow doctors and reverends of the faith...joking with me that it (my underwear) probably blew all the way to Bethlehem and was being used by a tour operator/leader to put on a stick, where it would be clearly visible by all the people in the "tour group" and would keep them together.

I told them if that were the case and I saw them flying up on some tour guide's stick, I would demand them back!!!

Anyway, enough of the kidding around.

Yesterday (Saturday, Feb. 19) was a very, very big day. We went to the Mount of Olives and saw so many wonderful things. As we visited all the sites, we read the passages in the Bible (at each place) about Jesus' trials on the Mount of Olives as He descended the Kidron Valley and up to Jerusalem (and his eventual crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection).

The Mount of Olives is the most coveted place to be buried in Israel. The ancient Jews believed that the Mount of Olives was the exact place that the Messiah would return (apparently not Jesus...to them). So, it is the most coveted place to be buried because (so they say) those who are buried where Jesus appears first (His second coming) will ascend to heaven first and enjoy eternal life before others. The site where I am buried is probably going to be quite some way from here on the Mount of Olives. I guess I'll just have to wait in line!

As one goes down, one sees various places where Jesus prayed, where He ascended to heaven, and the Garden of Gethsemane, where He prayed, "Abba ('Daddy') Father, please take this cup away from me. But, not My will, but Your will be done." The Church of All Nations is there and is a very beautiful place that was built by money donated from all over the world. It is a meditative church...which means that it is a place where silence is strictly enforced. It is so peaceful in there. And, under the front of the church is an exposed rock which is supposed to be the very place from which Jesus prayed to God that "His cup be taken from Him". It is very nice and peaceful to sit there and kneel...placing one's hands on the rock and knowing that you are at (or are very, very near) the REAL spot where Jesus walked, prayed, cried, mourned, grieved, and eventually surrendered to the Roman Soldiers.

We have also learned about Biblical Geology and Archaeology in some of our classes. One of the most important lessons is that the most important thing to look for is "Tels" or "Tells". Tels are mounds, which have layers of former cities that have been destructed and built up then destructed and built up and destructed and then built up over and over again. Jerusalem is one of the biggest examples of a "Tel". The

city has been destroyed and rebuilt over and over through the years. And, so we went to Ecce Homo Convent to study this phenomenon. Under this convent is a brilliant excavation, where one can see and actual Roman road, a huge Roman cistern built by Herod (like the Herodian and Masada), carved Roman games in the street rocks, springs, and other examples of what Jerusalem looked like at the time Jesus was born.

We had lunch up on the roof of the Ecce Homo Convent (run by The Sisters of Notre Dame de Sion). It was fantastic. It was just inside the St. Stephen's Gate. And, what's even more important (and beautiful) is that is directly beside the Dome on the Rock, which we saw first from a distance from the Mount of Olives. But, from Ecce Homo, we were directly next to it! We got some amazing pictures. And, we could see the whole ancient city (Old Walled City) of Jerusalem.

While we were at Ecce Homo, the weather was perfect!!! As a matter of fact, the whole day was perfect...blue skies, sunshine, and 74 degrees. Just to give you an idea of how wonderful that was, today is about 48 degrees, windy, rainy, and darkly overcast.

Then, we left Ecce Homo and walked up to the Via Dolorosa up to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Since I was here 25 years ago, I just walked around and didn't stand in line to get into Jesus' tomb. I went up the stairs to Golgotha and saw the site where Jesus is said to have been crucified. The place is a real madhouse. I mean that in the nicest terms. Priests and nuns from different denominations of the Christian Church are everywhere...and they argue about the smallest things. And, whoever has the "right" according to a document called the "Status Quo" written in Switzerland in the early 1970's to be at a certain place at a certain time is always a matter of dispute...thus it causes arguments...which just happened to be occurring at the what is said to be the stone on which Jesus body was laid after He was crucified. I don't know what the two priests (from two different Orders...different robes and head adornments) were arguing about, but that's normal for the Church of the Holy Sepulchre! It is anything but a peaceful place. Surrounded by shops with people bartering for anything and everything. But, it is surprisingly human. Every emotion and expression of that emotion known to humanity can be seen in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is said to house the places on which Jesus was crucified, laid, and buried! Crying, shouting out in grief, anger, annoyance, contempt, disgust, irritation, anxiety, embarrassment, fear, helplessness, worry, powerlessness, power, disgust, worry, doubt, envy, frustration, guilt, shame, boredom, despair, disappointment, hurt, sadness, stress, shock, tension, amusement, delight, elation, excitement, joy, pleasure, caring, affectgion, empathy, friendliness, love, courage, hope, pride, satisfaction, trust, calm, contentment, relaxed, relief, serenity, interest, politeness, surprise...you name it, it's there.

People bring the clothes of their loved ones who have died or who are very sick or who have been told that they are terminal...and they rub those clothes hewn rock in Jesus' tomb, on the rock on which His body was laid, and on the rock where He was crucified. The weeping and sense of satisfaction from being there draw me in as I watch the people. First they weep and then a peace comes over them that is much more powerful and unique than any kind of "satisfaction" that one can see anywhere in the world. It is here that people feel the closest to our Lord and Savior, Jesus. And, really...where else would one go...unless one believed that one was in His presence through prayer and meditation...while in church...or anywhere else...like I do. Still, this place is powerful...very powerful...and that's why it is singly able to be the source of the greatest joy and love AND the greatest anger and hatred ALL AT THE SAME TIME!

After being at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, we caught a bus back to Tantur. It was a long, long day! I was tired. I went to bed and slept right through dinner all the way to the morning!

This morning, we caught the bus down to Emmaus to worship at the Saint Mary of the Resurrection Church. We witnessed the priests and nuns lead us in worship. The liturgy was in both French and Latin. It

was very beautiful. The church itself is from the 1100's. It is a crusade era church. The icons on the wall are almost all gone...with their faces rubbed off. The various conquerors who came through here representing whatever religions, cultures, and nations really did a number on this church. But, it remains beautiful in its simplicity.

We had the Eucharist and heard a good sermon in French. I only understood some of it. A young priest with the most beautiful singing voice. When he sung, he was fearless. When he preached, he was petrified!!!

By the way, there was not one single priest or nun there who couldn't sing. As a matter of fact, they all sang beautifully. Boy, would I hate to be a priest with no ability to sing in that church! Maybe that's one of the qualifications for being a priest and nun there...be able to sing beautifully...which all of them did! And, the acoustics in these old churches is incredible.

Well, I have to take a nap now. Am tired and we have a big week of travelling and studying this coming week. We just had a group of 31 college students come in yesterday to take over the place. They got stranded in Egypt during the uprising. They were quickly shipped out and brought here. They are great kids and I love talking to them about what it was like to be in Egypt when Mubarak stepped down and the large crowds were in the streets. O, to be young again.

Well, please take care of yourselves. I miss all of you and love you very much.

Tuesday, February 22, 2011

Well, it's almost been a week since I arrived in Israel. And, while I have been here at Tantur, I have had the pleasure and honor of attending a number of excellent lectures on Biblical Geology and Exegesis of Scripture. We have gone to the Old City (Jerusalem), Mount of Olives, the Herodian, The Church of the Nativity, The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, various monasteries to worship and pray and have Holy Communion.

Which brings me to a point that has surprised me. Although Tantur is called an Ecumenical Center/Institute, it is run by the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. They have leased it from the Vatican who owns the land. Which means that most, but certainly not all, people who come here are either Orthodox or Roman Catholic...the current Rector is Russian Orthodox...American with a wife and 6 children. He is great.

Last night, we all sat down and discussed the role of worship here at Tantur. The first thing that was explained to us was that during the Prayer Meetings, NO ONE was allowed to celebrate the Eucharist. Why? Because as ecumenical as this place is, certain denominations (like most, but not all, Roman Catholics and all Eastern Orthodox Denominations) have what is called "Closed Communion" or "Closed Eucharist" or "A Closed Lord's Supper". This means that if you are a Roman Catholic priest, you are supposed to only give the Eucharist (bread and wine) to those who are "members" of the Roman Catholic denomination of the Christian Church. If you are an Eastern Orthodox, you are supposed to give the Eucharist (consecrated bread and wine) only to those who are members of the Eastern Orthodox denominations of the Christian Church. Where does that leave the ONLY Presbyterian in this whole bunch of scholars and pastors (priests)...to say the least, I am on the outside looking inward. And, as far as celebrating the Holy Eucharist with the other members of this group to rejoice in our Christian unity, well, that's just not going to happen.

As many of you who read this will know, I come from the Presbyterian Church (USA) denomination of the Christian Church. We generally practice what is called "Open Eucharist" or "Open Table Lord's Supper". This means that we welcome all Christians to the Lord's Table for Holy Communion. We don't care if one is from the Orthodox or Roman Catholic or Baptist or Lutheran denomination of the Christian Church. If you are a Baptized Christian from any denomination, you are welcome to receive the consecrated bread and wine in a Presbyterian Church.

So, the other night, Father Tim (orthodox) and Sister Bridget (Roman Catholic) told all of us that there had been too many fights (some physical) between priests and pastors and members of the various denominations of the Christian Church over the issue of the Holy Eucharist, so they no longer allowed the Holy Eucharist to be performed here at Tantur...with some exceptions.

Now to be fair, I think that having fights (especially fist fights) over Communion in the Christian Church is ridiculous. But, for those who have "closed Communion", it is a very real reality. And, that is why Tantur (being an Ecumenical Institute) strictly forbids Holy Communion Services of any kind AND does not have Sunday worship on Sunday mornings either. Basically, this rule helps EVERYONE to go out of the institute and experience the rich traditions that are so plentiful here in the Holy Land. If there is something that there is no shortage of in the Holy Land, its churches!!

Another question that I have been asked by every single one of the priests who are here is: What person has authority over you in your ministry? Who is your bishop? I try to tell them that Presbyterians have Corporate Bishoprics...in the form of a Presbytery. And, they look like they are going to short-circuit or something. I explain that we have committees of the Presbytery made up of ordained elders and pastors who handle the work and oversight of the Presbytery. And, then they begin to understand how our church works...much differently than theirs. In the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox denominations of the Christian Church, they have single bishops who are individually in charge of a certain area and the priests must do what that Bishop tells them to do. As it has been explained to me, bishops have committees of people who report to him/her and they give good information to the bishop that helps him/her make good and informed decisions.

The bottom line is that none of the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox priests or nuns really knows much about Presbyterians. It is rather simplistic, yet accurate, to say that I, as a Presbyterian pastor I know much more about them than they do about me. I say this (and every other thing that I have written) not to criticize anyone or any denomination of the Christian Church (including my own). I say this merely to show that we are all different, in so far as there are many denominations of the One Christian Church, much like there are many different nationalities of people in the world, yet they all belong to the One Human Race.

At a discussion last Friday, I was asked about my beliefs about Holy Communion and Baptism and any other "special form of theology that was specifically Presbyterian". I made some statements that I thought that no human being had the right to keep the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ from any other human being...and that I believed that the Table of the Lord was and should be open to everyone. Well, I (and the two Anglicans who are not ordained priests and are married, man and wife) found ourselves in a bit of a pickle. It was explained to us that their communion was not exclusive or closed. Rather, it was representative of the difference in theological beliefs between their denomination and others. One must remember that the Roman Catholics will not celebrate or allow the Orthodox to partake of "their" consecrated elements of bread and wine AND the Orthodox will not share "their" consecrated elements of bread and wine with Roman Catholics. I was not the only one that was being excluded. Still, it seemed a shame that we, as Christians, could not celebrate the sharing of Christ's Body and Blood together. Perhaps one day....

As I am not that good at sensing how others think about me, I can only say that my being a Presbyterian here is looked at a bit like I am the odd one out. Sometimes I think that the Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians here think I might just start railing about how the Pope is the antichrist or that bishops are a form of idolatry. Nothing could be further from the truth. However, I do have to thank (ugh) many protest-ants who have gone before me for giving the Roman Catholics and Orthodox the feeling and reason to believe that I might just do that. As a matter of fact, I did say at the meeting the other night that I wished that the Roman Catholics and Orthodox Priests could "share" the elements of the Eucharist with me, as a fellow Christian. And, I think that I made the comment (i.e. mistake) of saying that I believed that having "closed communion" was "Exclusion", not "Communion". And, that it seemed to me that having "closed communion" was like they were saying that they had "God in a box", which "they and they could only access." They didn't like that. And, I apologized.

But, after I apologized, they thanked me for sharing my opinion with them. They thanked me for giving them a glimpse of what it is like to be a Presbyterian. Personally, I thought to myself that if they are going to use me as an example of the typical "Presbyterian", they are making a terrible mistake. But, since none of them seemed to know any Presbyterians or much about Presbyterian (Reformed) Theology, I guess it was good that I shared my views with them.

Anyway, for Sunday services, all of us did go to a Roman Catholic Church (French Benedictine) where Presbyterians were allowed to partake of Eucharist. It was one of the most beautiful services that I have ever attended. It was sung in French and Latin. It was celebrated in a church built in 1153...a Crusader Church. They were very ecumenical...more so than Tantur. And, they were very insistent that any Christian come forward. I did so and felt the real presence of the Lord with me and with all who were present. It was beautiful. I wish all church denominations had churches in them that did that. I believe that sharing the Body and Blood of Christ is such a beautiful thing that should unite Christians, not keep them apart. But, that view point is apparently one that is in the minority...at least here.

Tonight, we had a fantastic lecture on Biblical Geography and Archaeology. We are learning about how the land here in Israel/Palestine shapes the words of Scripture, especially in the Old Testament. Not that the words themselves "come from the land", of course they were written by people who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. However, one needs to understand what it was like during the various times when Scripture was being written. And, studying the geography opens up opportunities for interpretation that I have never seen before. We have a brilliant Hebrew University Professor and various other scholars who are opening our minds and helping us to learn many wonderful things.

I am well and getting a lot of rest.

Yesterday afternoon, I joined two of the other members of our group for a walk from Eastern Jerusalem (Tantur) through the checkpoint over to the Old City of Bethlehem...a five mile walk (a total walk of some 10 miles). It was great. We met many people, took a lot of pictures, and saw the Church of the Nativity once again. We went into one of the mosques and had a moment of silence. We sat in the Nativity Square and listened to the bells ring at the Church of the Nativity and then hear the loud Arabic Muslim calls to prayer through loudspeakers on the tall minaret above the mosque. Then, we walked back.

I have not totally gotten a handle on the political situation over here, but will write to you what I have learned in my next entry into my blog.

Visited the Old City of Jerusalem and went to the Synagogue for Shabbat!
Friday, February 25, 2011

Today is the Sabbath ("Shabbat" in Hebrew). But first, let's consider yesterday's events.

On Thursday, our group went on a marathon visit to the Old City of Jerusalem. Wow! It was so different from when I was last here 25 years ago. There were excavations that had removed over 35 feet of soil from places on which I stood and walked in 1985! And, the results of all this careful excavation? Incredible.

For one thing, a huge part of the Western Wall has been unearthed. The Western Wall is where the "Wailing Wall" is located. First we went there and I prayed for my dear friend, Stuart Zimmerman, who recently had brain surgery. He is doing very well and is 100% again. I also prayed for my blessed congregation, FPCA, FKPCV, and the UHCF. I wrote my prayers on a little piece of paper and placed it in the wall. I prayed and left in silence.

Then, we went to the Old, Old City...in other words, where the city of Jerusalem was when David was king. It is actually outside the present "Old City Walls" of Jerusalem, just south. Here, they have uncovered so much that has changed many of the previously held views about the overall history of Jerusalem. For example, they have uncovered the foundation of David's Palace, have completely changed their view of Hezekiah's Tunnel, and the Springs of Gihon, and the Pool of Siloam. The careful archaeological expeditions have unearthed so much in the past 25 years.

Also unearthed, is the major portion of the Western Wall (i.e. the other side of the retaining wall upon which King Herod had built the Temple...rebuilding it from its previous destructions by the hands of the many kingdoms that conquered and destroyed Jerusalem through history...going back some 3500 years).

Anyway, the unearthed portion of the Western Wall reveals the actual stones that were cut and laid by King Herod at the time of Jesus Christ. They are the stones with the "border" around them. Some of them are 20 feet long and 7 feet wide!! They are mixed with the stones that earlier kings have used to build a retaining wall for the Great Temple...Solomon...etc.

On that newly excavated site one can see stones from the top of the wall that were thrown down by the Romans who destroyed Rome in 70 AD. Also, there is evidence of a huge arch with steps that led into the Western Wall on the very front of the Wall. When the Romans invaded Jerusalem, they destroyed this huge and beautiful stairway and it collapsed down to the street below. The excavation has revealed the area where the huge stones fell. It is utterly amazing.

Anyway, we spent 7 hours walking from place to place and only 30 minutes on a "tour" bus. It was like a marathon. The weather was fantastic, but cool. That is better than blazing heat! But, I have a blister on my foot that shouts at me because of yesterday! Really, it was amazing and wonderful!

Today, we had a class on TIME AND SPACE IN THE JUDAIC TRADITION. We learned a great deal about the Jewish calendar, festivals, and such. Then, we went to "Shabbat" or Sabbath Worship services at a Conservative Jewish Synagogue. My Hebrew is terrible, but I knew a lot more than my many Roman Catholic clergymen...they never had to take Hebrew! They were amazing that I was singing along...albeit slowly with the Cantor and the Rabbi. I made a lot of mistakes, but was singing quietly...at least as quietly as I can!

Hearing the Shabbat sung is truly amazing. The sounds and music is unmistakable. And, to understand every third word and phonetically sing every word was fantastic. There is a rhythm that goes with celebrating the Shabbat. It is as beautiful as it is meaningful. It shakes one's heart gently and reminds

one that even God rested from His labors when He created the heavens and the earth. It focuses totally on God and the special holiness of Jerusalem. It contains verses from the Torah about sadness, grief, joy, celebration, disobedience, faithfulness, and mostly about "Baruch Adonai" ("Praising or lifting up the Lord God").

Wow!

Well, it's getting late now and I have to go to sleep. Tomorrow we have to get up at 6:00 am so that we can get to the Dome on the Rock and visit it with our special guide. Since non-Muslims are no longer allowed in that mosque (don't ask...it's too complicated), our being able to get in is truly unique. 25 years ago, there was no problem with non-Muslims going into the mosque here. But, now things have changed. Things are always changing here and everywhere.

Well, I am going to go to sleep and dream about how truly blessed I am to be here and to have you all as my friends in Christ.

Shalom Shabbat !

Tuesday, March 1, 2011.

Well, I had a wonderfully restful day today. I slept in and caught up on my reading. In the afternoon, I reflected until 2:30 pm, when we had a class on Palestinian Christianity with a local Roman Catholic priest from Bethlehem University.

While I was "reflecting" on the flat observation rooftop of Tantur, a poem came to me. I'll share it with you:

Someone once said, "Good fences make good neighbors."

But if one of the "neighbors" is allowed to cross the fence

And the other is not,

How can the "fence" be good?

The guns are pointed outward,

Others are carried on the hip.

"Kidnap me!"

"Throw stones at me!"

"Shoot at me!"

"I dare you!"

My response will be like a plague of wild locusts destroying your entire crop.

Waves and waves of my family will descend upon you and all your people.

I am strong and you are weak.

I have "the bomb" and you have only stones to throw.

I am superior to you and you are nothing but bothersome pests.

*Someone once said, "Good fences make good neighbors."

The gates to the fence between us can only be opened and closed by you.

You have the key and without it, I am imprisoned just like you were in Egypt.

Just like you were in Babylon.

Just like you were in the German concentration camps.

What are you doing to me?
What was done to you?
Monkey see, monkey do?

*Someone once said, "Good fences make good neighbors."
But, there really is no such thing as a "good fence."

I'm not sure where that all came from, but sometimes I just write poems that well up inside of me. The group thought the poem was excellent and many of them wanted copies of it. I shared it with an author whose name is Mary. I didn't learn her last name, but will. She is visiting here from London, where she is a professor at Oxford. Anyway, she's a feminist theologian, pacifist, and author of over 20 books. She loved the poem and wanted a copy of it. Then, she started to ask about America and my lifestyle. Once I started to talk to her about hunting, I lost her big time! Woops! She detests guns and hunting. O well, ya' win some and you lose some.

We parted as friends and she wants me to keep writing Poetic Commentary, as she called it.

The lecture on Palestinian Christians was very interesting and challenged most of what we have "learned" (if you want to call it that) from television in the States. He said that in Palestine (i.e. the West Bank or Occupied Territories), there is no mass discrimination against Christians by Muslims, that there is intermarriage between Christians from different denominations of the One Church, and even some intermarriage between Christians and Muslims. He said that Palestinians have been here so long that their identities as Palestinians trump their identities as Christians and/or Muslims. As he said it, when one is concentrating so much on being occupied by a foreign nation (i.e. Israel), it is very hard to fight among yourselves. Thus, the theme of his talk was that the main problem with the Palestinian Territories is the occupation by Israeli troops and the continuance of Settlements by Jews who wish to reclaim and/or "redeem" the land.

Now, needs to take what this man said with a grain of salt. However, as I have travelled over to the West Bank and Palestinian Territories, I can see evidence that most of what he said was and is true.

On the other hand, he made a very good point about the Israelis. His view is that they hold on so strongly to their land and occupy the land set aside to be Palestine because they are scared of another Holocaust. In short, they have had enough of the attempts over the centuries to exterminate the Jews from the face of the earth. He said that this was a good point. And, there was no argument whatsoever about the truth of the many, many attempts by nation after nation to exterminate the Jews from the face of the earth.

Thus, it was his conclusion that the answer to the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict would be to have one state of Israel with both Jews and Palestinians in it...sort of a United States of Israel/Palestine. Each area would work toward the common good of all of its people through dialogue, industry, trade, production, etc, while the "federal" government would oversee and handle problems that would be too big for the "states". Does that sound familiar?

I think that it could work. But, a lot of work would have to be done to get there.

The priest's final words to us were concerning a recent (2009) document put together by all of the representatives of the Christian churches in the Palestinian territories. It is called Kairos Palestine and the website for this is: www.kairospalestine.ps. I think that the content of their "paper" is very good.

Tonight, we watched "THE LEMON TREE", a fantastic movie made about the conflict between Israel and Palestine. No matter what side one is on...the Palestinians or the Israelis....or both...it is a very, very good movie.

Well, it's late and I have to go to bed.

Friday, March 4, 2011.

Well, the last few days have been very good. We went to a place called Zebabdaya in the West Bank. Father Firas, who is a Greek Catholic (in other words, a "Melkite Catholic") Priest, was our host. He is an Arab-Speaking priest who is not under the authority of the Bishop of Rome, but under the Patriarch of Antioch in Syria. It's complicated. Basically, these are Christians who are in communion with the Roman Catholic Denomination, but who practice a uniquely Arab form of liturgy and speak Arabic. Just for some reference, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is not in communion with the Roman Catholic Denomination of the Church.

The city of Zebabdaya has one of the highest number of Melkite Christians, and that number totals only some 2000. These are some of the most beautiful and hospitable people in the world, just like most Israelis and Palestinians.

Father Firas is a person whom I would like to help. His Christian witness is powerful and very loving. He works with the Muslims here and strives to bridge the gap that exists with Israel. He is a simple man, yet his energy seems to be without limit. And, he needs solar power. I promised him that I would look into solar panels. He and I agreed that installing one set of solar panels on his little church would be a source of hope for his people. It would harness the sun (which shines brightly 10 months out of the year) and cut down on energy costs, which are artificially high (and for many, unaffordable) for many in the West Bank/Palestine.

It would be my hope and prayer that those with whom I worship and serve the Lord in Annandale could attempt to provide the first solar power units in Zebabdaya. But, I'll leave that up to the Holy Spirit and my blessed brothers and sisters in Christ back home. The whole kit would cost about \$15,000 to buy, ship, and set up here. On the one hand, helping a very needy Palestinian Christian Village Church would be something worthy of considering prayerfully. On the other hand, the implications of helping Palestinians may be uncomfortable for those who may feel that by helping Palestine, we are somehow making a subtle claim of support of Palestine over Israel! I am not interested in supporting Israel over Palestine or Palestine over Israel. I am only interested in helping people better their lives...especially those who are struggling and suffering...as are the people of Zebabdaya.

I'll leave a political analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian Situation for another entry in my "blog" here on Facebook.

I do have to say that on Wednesday, I experienced the most amazing feeling of inner joy and peace at Jacob's Well in Nablus. Among the many "holy sites" that exist in Israel/Palestine, this is one of the sites that is almost 100% real...that is to say that it is located exactly where it is described in the Bible and it has been "known" and celebrated as the place where Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well since the 2nd century A.D. (John 4: 3-42). I never came to this place during my last visit in 1987. The West Bank/Palestine was mostly closed because of the 1st Intifada ("uprising") back then. I did come over to the West Bank with the help of Israeli security guards, but did not get very far. Now, I am at Tantur and can walk right up to the Wall separating Bethlehem (Palestine) and Jerusalem (Israel) and walk right through (with my passport and a brief search).

Unfortunately, the Palestinians cannot come from the West Bank to Israel. There are still very strong restrictions. Most of the Palestinians have not seen the Mediterranean Sea in 10 years! Many of the younger Palestinians have never been to Jerusalem. Passes for the Palestinians (to come into Israel) are very hard to get. It's sad. It's really sad.

But, the Israelis are very scared of the outside world. And, they are very protective of the land that they feel God had given them long ago and they have been given by the world today. They are very protective...and they should be. Think of how many times societies and nations have tried to exterminate the Jews over the past 3000 years!

It wasn't just the Holocaust during WWII. As we are studying here, the Jews have been discriminated against for thousands of years. But, I digress...

As all of my lecturers have stated, "It's complicated". Yes, it certainly is!

Well, it's getting late and I wrote another poem today. I don't know where these poems are coming from...I haven't written poetry in years. However, it just seems to bubble up inside of me and I just have to write it down. I'll leave it to all of you to determine whether or not it is "good" or not. Really, I'm not trying to be a "good" poet. I'm just writing down words that come to me so that you can share not only what I have seen, but get a sense of what I am feeling while I am over here.

* * * * *

I am here because I do not have anywhere else to go.

Here, I feel safe.

I am walling myself in to a land that I was given long ago.

"By whom?" you may ask.

"By God", I answer.

I am here because I do not have anywhere else to go.

Everywhere else, I have been hated and hunted,

Many have tried to exterminate my people,

But, none have succeeded.

I have tried to be accepted and helpful in all lands.

Yet, wherever I have gone I have been despised.

Here, I cherish my neighbors who have suffered as I have,

Who, like me, have been hunted like prey.

I am here because I do not have anywhere else to go.

Here in Israel I shall live and enjoy.

I shall celebrate the Shabbat and Passover.

I will wave my flag on Independence Day.

And, if the day shall come when this sacred land of mine is threatened

With annihilation and destruction,

Just as all of the places where I have lived,

Then, here I shall make my final stand,

Using every resource I have at my disposal.

I am here because I do not have anywhere else to go.

Please leave me be.

Do not make us fight because fight I will.

Do not make me doubt your willingness to let me live free on this land,

We have never been free until now.

Look at the wall.

Look at the jet fighters.

Look at our guns.

Look at our bombs.

You have much to fear.

So, please leave us be.

I am here because I do not have anywhere else to go.

P.S. Some of you may remember a wonderful man and his wife who visited us at the First Presbyterian Church of Annandale about two years ago. His name is Daoud Nassar and his farm is called the TENT OF NATIONS. It is a place where children and women meet together, Jewish/Christian/Muslim/whatever, to learn skills, plant trees, and work for peace. The Israel Military has tried to close his farm for 19 years and Daoud and his family have taken his case all the way to the Supreme Court of Israel. I am going to meet him tomorrow to say hello and get an update on the situation there. Pray for me as I go there...the directions are not very clear, but I think that I can get there by bus and some good walking!

March 12, 2011:

Well, it's been a long time since I wrote a note on my FACEBOOK account. For the record, I have been studying and traveling. Right now, we are in Galilee, Northern Israel. We are in the city of Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee. We will be here for three nights. While here, we will be seeing many of the places where Jesus ministered and taught. Yesterday and today, for example, we went to Bethsaida, where Jesus healed the blind man and fed the 4000/5000, whichever Gospel account you cite. It is said that Peter, Andrew, and Phillip were from Bethsaida, 1/4 of the 12 disciples!

We went to Zippori. This is a site that provides a great deal of corroboration for historical details mentioned in Biblical times. It is also a place that has been destroyed and rebuilt many times, making clearly discernable "tels" or layers that show how old a certain city is and how many times it has been destroyed and rebuilt. For example, Jerusalem has been destroyed and rebuilt countless times. The current city is sitting about 38 feet above where the city was "sitting" when Jesus was alive! Amazing!

We've gone to many other places, like Nazareth, Jericho, and other places mentioned in the Bible. Many of them, I have seen before...except now, 24 years later, they are all "built up" with tourist centers, parking lots, etc.

We went to the Jordan River. I'm going to try to bring back original (I got it with my own hands in a water bottle) water from the Jordan for baptisms. Now, we need to start getting busy on the babies so I can use it!!! I'm going to purify it and pour it in 3 ounce bottles that I am getting from my friend at the Pharmacy in Bethlehem, Marouk. He's cool and very nice to me. His brother, Äl, sells the best pistachios I have ever tasted! Mmmmm Good.

We also went to the Med. Sea to see the Aqueducts. Wow, that was really something. I even dipped my feet in the chilly waters of the Mediterranean.

By far, the most meaningful and spiritual place for me was the Well in Jericho where Jesus met the Samaritan woman. Wow, was that a powerful experience to be there. There is very little debate, if any, whether or not it's the real thing. It is. And, to drink from it and sit on its edge and pray.... Wow!

Well, I am on the hotel's computer and there is someone waiting.

Have to go.

March 13, 2011:

Today was a glorious day. The weather was perfect...sunny, in the high 60's, blue skies, light wind. Definitely a day that should make anyone believe in a God.

We got up early this morning to go to "mass". After several arguments by the seven priests that protestants shouldn't be allowed to have Eucharist with those who are NOT "in the one, true church", that would be me and the two Anglicans!, I kindly and politely suggested that if we couldn't all share the Body and Blood of Christ in unity by the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus picked his first disciples, gave the Sermon on the Mount, healed the sick, walked on water...you get the idea...THEN WE MIGHT AS WELL NOT HAVE A WORSHIP SERVICE AT ALL.

That seemed to do the trick. We all shared the Lord's Supper and the "coolest" priest, Father Jim, humorously announced that he had received an email from the Pope allowing "open Communion" at this special service. That got a laugh and we had one of the most beautiful worship services that I have ever had the privilege to attend and in which I have participated. It was beautiful. Craig, a lay Roman Catholic, gave a wonderful sermon that spoke directly to the Scripture passages and to his experiences as a Principal of a school for severely handicapped children in Australia. Wow!

After that, we went up to the Banyas (also spelled "banias"). This is the 33 meter waterfall that a Druze gentleman challenged me to jump off of 24 years ago when I was here. After he did a perfect swan dive, I climbed up and could only manage a jump that would have gotten me a negative 9.0 score at the Olympics. However, after I came up out of the water, he was clapping. He then led me up to his village, Majdal Shams, and I stayed with his family for the next two days. Wow, was that an experience to remember.

Today, the water was coming down from Mt. Hermon at a feverish pace...it's Spring over here. All the snow on Mt. Hermon is melting and the rains have fallen heavily in the past week. At the Banyas waterfall, the water was rushing over the falls in such a way that I don't think Tarzan himself could have jumped off that ledge and lived!!! Anyway, doing such a thing is strictly forbidden now.

Then, we went to the Golan Heights. If you know the history of the Golan, then you would know that Syria and Israel fought battles over it a few times and Israel won big-time! They lost a lot of land to Israel and Israel is going to keep it...forever...just ask them!

We looked out over the Golan Valley and could see Syria. The Syrian flag was flying within sight. We could see cars and buses...all that close. The U.N. Village was there and that was the only way that ANYONE could get across the border. Everywhere else, there are hundreds of mines planted in the ground and large tank battalions, towers, and hundreds of soldiers.

After going up to the Golan, we went to Nimrod and then back to our comfortable hotel in Tiberius. There is someone waiting for the computer, so I have to go.

It was a glorious day!

March 15, 2011:

Today is rest day after the big Galilee trip. We had a wonderful time up there seeing where Jesus performed miracles, delivered the Sermon on the Mount, picked his disciples...went to the "upper Jordan River" which is above the Sea of Galilee. It was beautiful. Up there is the Banyas, which is 33 meter waterfall that I jumped off of 24 years ago when I was here then. I did it on a dare from a Druzim young man who did beautiful swan dives off of it. Well, to say the least from the bottom it looked like "no problem!" From the top, it looked like death! I was so scared when I got up there, I said 5 Hail Marys and I'm not even Roman Catholic!!! Yes, I did jump and when I came up from the water, the young man, Abram, was standing on the rock in the middle of the pool at the bottom clapping. After that, he told me in very broken English that no one had ever accepted his challenge before. So, he took me up to Majdal Shams to his house and I stayed with him and his family for the next two days! It was an amazing event...but, that was 24 years ago.

Today, you couldn't give me \$1,000,000.00 to jump or dive off of that cliff!!! I don't know what I must have been thinking! But, it was good to see the spot of one of the most idiotic stunts of my lifetime! And, it was very, very beautiful.

We went on a boat out on the Sea of Galilee and then came back to Tantur Ecumenical Institute.

My back is bothering me. But, I hope that it won't slow me down too much.

I am debating about whether or not to go to Egypt...to Mount Sinai. I did that 24 years ago and it was BEAUTIFUL!!! We started out climb up the 7600 foot mountain at 2:00 am and got there for the sunrise. It was a once in a lifetime experience...and I feel that it may remain that way for me. None of the other people at Tantur have done this before. I have. There is the option of taking a camel or donkey up the mountain. I've thought of that, but I don't think so. Either way, it's a 3 to 3.5 hour climb...but it's worth it if you have never seen it. Absolutely beautiful!

I have to make my decision about going or not by tomorrow...Wednesday. We'll see.

Well, that's about all on this beautiful Tuesday afternoon in Jerusalem/Bethlehem, Israel. I touch base with all of you soon...I hope.

March 18, 2011:

Well, last night was the big St. Patrick's Day Party at the rector's apartment. We all assembled and had drinks and snacks. There was recorded Irish music playing and I mentioned to everyone that I used to sing at Bow Belles Pub in Northern Ireland for my lunches and suppers! Well, in about 3 minutes a guitar appeared and was thrust into my lap. It was out of tune, but I took care of that quickly. Now, what would I/we sing? Well, in this day and age of computers and what not, I decided to go and get my laptop and get on the web, where I found every single Irish song I knew and had played in Northern Ireland 24 years ago! Well, I was very rusty at the beginning, but after about two songs, the people hooked up a projector to my laptop and suddenly the words to every song I was singing were shown beautifully up on the wall of the rector's (Father Tim) apartment. That was a relief because I so often forget words and/or chords because I can't chew gum and walk at the same time. Now, all I had to do was worry about the guitar playing.

Sister Brigit, who is from County Clare in the Republic of Ireland got out her "spoons" (literally two spoons put back to back and 'played' as a percussion instrument...it's really cool) and off we went. Two and one-half hours later my fingers were about ready to come off my hand and I/we were all as hoarse as can be. But, we were happy...really happy! We sang the Wild Rover, Danny Boy, Spencil Hill...you name it. We

sang our hearts out and no one was happier than Sister Brigit, our Irish nun and Vice Rector. Boy, I'm going to miss her. She has been the brightest part of this whole trip. She is the nun that I never had, but probably needed!

Enough about that already!

We're getting ready for the Egypt portion of our trip...to Mt. Sinai. The plan is to drive over there (8 hours on a bus), arrive, sleep for a bit, get up at 2:00 am, go out to the meeting place, get up on camels (for those who are going to ride camels up the mountain), or start walking. Our goal is to get up to the top by 5:40 am for the 5:50 am sunrise. Last week, I was having such back spasms that I thought I was going to have to cancel on this trip. But, due to a lot of rest and inactivity (believe it or not...I had no choice...I was really in pain), I am feeling much better and am ready for the next challenge: Mt. Sinai. I don't know whether I am going to walk up the mountain or ride the camel. Think I'll walk. I've ridden camels and they are not all that comfortable to ride. O well...we'll see.

Once we see the sunrise at the top of Mt. Sinai, we're going to have a worship service. And, yes, we have gotten another dispensation from the Pope to have "open" communion...in other words, I have complained about having "closed" communion or Lord's Supper, the Roman Catholic Priests can't take it anymore...I've worn them down...they'll let all the Protestants participate if I shut up about it! No "God in a box" on this trip!

There is one Roman Catholic priest here who does not like it when I tell him and everyone else that I am proud to be a Presbyterian Catholic. He divides all of the denominations into categories and has figured out who will get into heaven and who will not. Apparently, I'm not going to make it! He points out to me regularly that I am not in "communion" with the Pope...whatever that means. I always respond this way: Is the pope a Christian? That's a question he doesn't like. "Of course, the Pope is a Christian!" he barks back. And, then I say, "Well, then he and I are in communion through Jesus Christ." Apparently, he has some strict rules guiding who is in the "One True Church" and who is not. And, I don't think that there is one other priest who agrees with him on this. He wanted to have me not participate in Holy Communion (as well as the other three heretics, two from the Anglican Church and one Lutheran minister). But, the other priests out-voted him and all was well. He stood up for his principles and his version of the "One True Church". I and the other priests and Protestants stood up for a much greater and more important principle, "The One True Lord, Jesus Christ". The way we think about it, Jesus trumps the Church every time! Maybe he'll come around some day. Maybe not. Maybe he shouldn't. Who knows.

I just thought that people were so much more open-minded in today's world. Maybe not.

Speaking of open-minded. We had an Islamic lecturer who presented to us Islam as a philosophy, rather than a religion. He was obviously not a typical Muslim, but what he said was really very interesting. We have also had lectures from Muslims who teach that Islam is a religion and not a philosophy. I really don't want to get into this now. I'll wait to include some of this material in my Sunday School Classes and Sermons when I get back...that is if it pertains to the Scripture passages that are in the lectionary.

Well, I'm late for lunch. Have to go now.

March 24, 2011:

We just got back from Egypt (the Sinai Peninsula). It took us about 9 hours to drive from Jerusalem to Mount Sinai. At the border, we had to change buses. It was all arranged, but wow...9 hours on a bus!

When we got there, it was about 6:00 PM. We went up to the 6th century monastery, St. Catharine's. It is the second time that I have been there. The first time I was here was 25 years ago or so! Boy, how things have changed. Guest houses, new parking lots, lots of small street merchant shops, etc.

Well, we ate dinner and made a short visit to the monastery to say hello to the fathers who live there (about 25 or so). Our Team leader is an Orthodox Priest. And, that works to get us into all sorts of places where we would not otherwise.

Then, we all went to bed BECAUSE...we had to get up at 2:00 am to go to the "Camel Park". Well, we didn't have to, but all of us except one did. I was not going to go up Mount Sinai at all because my back had been hurting very badly in the previous week. But, after two days of bed rest, it was fine. It's really hard for me to stay motionless ANYWHERE, let alone in a bed allowing my back to heal!! I get bored so easily. But, I digress...

So, I did get up with all of the rest of the folks and lumbered up to the Camel Park. At this point, the camel handlers would grab us all from the back of the arm. Why? That is the way it is with the Bedouins. They can simply feel your arm and decide which camel will be best for you...in my case, a REALLY, REALLY BIG ONE!!!

So, they finally found a camel stupid enough for me to let me get on it and up I went.

Now, let me tell you about getting up in the "saddle" of a camel. First of all, you swing your leg over a round piece of wood that serves to keep you from moving back in the "saddle". Then, you position yourself in the "saddle" which has an equally hard round piece of wood on the front of the "seat" (if you want to call it that) and all at once your legs are "hugging" the camels large midsection and you are lodged securely in a very small V "saddle" that I can only say was/is designed for female leprechauns!!!

Now, I had been on a camel before in my earlier missionary days, but this trip was up Mt. Sinai for 2 1/2 hours!

Now, back to the technical description of mounting a camel. Once you are in the "saddle", the camel handler motions to you that the camel is going to get up (if you're lucky, he'll do this...if not, it will be a rude surprise). Anyway, the first part of a camel to rise is the backside (back legs). This part is about as weird a feeling that exists in all creation! And, for the men in the group, it is the most uncomfortable (I'll just leave it at that). When those back legs go up, your upper body becomes completely horizontal to the surface of the earth! What I mean by this is that the back end of the camel lunges you forward to the point where you are literally looking straight down at the ground and you MUST hold onto the "horn" (that would be the front round piece of wood...that is nothing like the "horns" that I held onto to mount a horse back in the days when I worked on a farm...but I digress!).

So, there you are thinking that you are going to just keep going right over the head of the camel...head over heels. And, then the camel starts to push up its front legs, which propels you backwards with the force of the take off of an F-15 fighter jet!!!!

Once you jerk backwards and then forward (and get over the whiplash) you're up!

Now, you have to ride it. Here's where there is a BIG difference between horses and camels...camels make up their own minds where to walk, trot, or run! Horses (at least those that are broken and trained)

take commands either from the rein or from the heels and feet of the rider. Thus, the one thing that one must remember when riding a camel is that the camel is in charge...you are not!

Now, once that's established, the camel handler does occasionally whip the camel in the but with a switch to get it to go whenever it decides to stop...which it does. Also, at the bottom of the mountain, there is one camel handler to one camel. In a matter of only 15 minutes up the trail, the ratio of camel handlers to camels diminishes to 1 to 3 or 4. In about 30 minutes, it's hard to even figure out where another "unmounted" human being is in relation to your camel. It's like you're in a line of camels that are going on autopilot!

One big problem is when you are on the last camel and it decides to stop! You may look around and see no one...as the rest of the camels in front of you just keep on going! First, I tried to coax it to move forward. "Come on, sweetie. Let's go!" "Giddy-up!" I even tried to shout out "Mush!", but apparently, my camel was not from Alaska and knew nothing about the Iditarod!!!

So, being a horse rider, this happened to me and I tried to kick the camel (gently at first). Nothing! I did it again and all I got was one of the ugliest and slobbery noises that I ever heard coming out of the camel's mouth. If you have never heard a camel slobber and grunt, you just haven't lived! Their lips just seem to go all different directions and spit comes out like Mount St. Helens! It's a mess. A big, wet, ugly mess!

So, what to do now that I've tried saying "let's go camel!" and kicked the camel? Well, I got the idea that if the camel handlers could whack the camel on the behind and get it moving...so could I! Well, that's what I did. I took off my Kafeya (the head wrap that keeps one cool in the hot weather and warm in the cold weather...I had the one that had the pattern of Yassir Arafat (it was made in China...but that's another story). I took that Kafeya and spun it up real tight...you know like one does when one "snaps" someone in the locker room...I guess I know that from my football days...but I (again) digress.

Anyway, I took that Kafeya...now a whip...and gave my camel a pat (not very hard). NOTHING! Then, I gave it a harder pat. NOTHING! Well, I figured out that "patting" a camel within the standards of PETA was not going to work here in Egypt...maybe in America...but, not in Egypt. So, I gave the camel the hardest whack I could! And, it worked. As a matter of fact, it worked much too well! It was like I was shot out of a canon! That camel ran like a mighty steed! And, at the same time, he was slobbering all over the place and grunting like he wanted to kill me. Because we were running, the slobber started to fly all over me and I freaked out! The whole mountain heard me shout out, "Whoa, Nelly! Whoa!" Again, horse talk and etiquette means nothing to Egyptian camels! He kept on running.

And, when I say "running" I don't mean it's a smooth ride like a Cadillac! I was bouncing all over the place. If it hadn't been for the fact that I was permanently wedged into that small saddle, I would have been thrown down Mt. Sinai!!!

Well, to make a long story shorter, I caught up to the rest of the camels and my camel decided to keep on going...not so much in a run...but in a sort of lumbering gate...sort of to say to the rest of the camels, "Get out of my way! I have this big American on my back and I want to get to the top as soon as possible!!!" At least, that's what it seemed like.

Well, eventually, my camel calmed down and started walking again. I could see other camels and a few camel handlers. So, I relaxed. I guess I relaxed a little too much because I think I fell asleep. The next thing I knew, we were at the top and the camel handler gave me a little whack on the leg (my leg), which hurt a bit, but woke me up!

And, then the camel started to get down. Now, the first things to go down were the front legs! This time I did come out of the "saddle" and swung my leg around behind me, bouncing off even before the back legs of the camel started down. I'm not sure that I did that because I was not quite awake or I just wanted to (unconsciously) get the heck off that camel! Well, anyway I landed perfectly straight, but my legs had "fallen asleep" and were numb. So, I just kept on going and fell down with my head and back banging into the camel that was next to mine (he was already sitting down). His side was soft, so it didn't hurt too much. But, the Bedouins who were there really laughed their heads off!

From there, we still had the famous 750 "steps" to the top. Well, I hung out on the ground with the side of the other camel serving as my pillow for about five minutes while my legs "woke up". Then, I got up and started up to the peak.

It was still dark and about 5:00 am in the morning. So, my climb to the top was pretty uneventful (using a flashlight). I got to the top and there were about 250 people there, including the members of my group (most had not gotten up there yet). Unfortunately, we "climbed" Mt. Sinai on one of the two days during any given year when rain and clouds make it impossible for anyone to see the sun rise (which is the whole idea of getting up at 2:30 am and hiking or camel-riding up the mountain).

It was really windy, rainy, and cold at the top. The last time I was there, it was beautiful. But, that was 25 years ago. This is now.

Well, after seeing all I could see and taking pictures (I have taken over 5000 pictures while over here...all digital). I walked down the 750 "steps" to the upper Camel Park. But, instead of going back down the path, I decided to walk down the 3000 steps (called the "Repentance Steps") because: 1) They were "installed" by one monk who had felt that he had sinned against God so badly that he needed to do something truly incredible in order to get forgiveness! It took him over 50 years to put the steps in the mountain!!!; and, 2) Every year, there are people who feel as though they have sinned so greatly (mostly Russian Orthodox) that they come over to Mt. Sinai and "walk" up those 3000 steps on their knees!!! The ones who can't do it on their knees, do it barefoot. Either way (especially on the knees), it is a bloody, bruising, painful trek that very few actually complete. But, every year there are those who actually make it to the top on their knees. Unfortunately, doing this makes it very hard for most of them to walk ever again without a limp for the rest of their lives. Wow!

Well, I went slowly down the 3000 steps with our guide Musa (which means "Moses") in English. I went really slowly because of what happened to me when I climbed Mount Olympus many years ago. Back then, I didn't know that it is harder on the body to go down a mountain than to go up one. I took my time (two days) to get up Mount Olympus and then turned around and virtually ran down it. I spent the next three days in bed!!! My legs would simply not work at all! One has to be very careful coming down mountains. So, I went slowly and did well.

At the bottom, we went into the Monastery and looked at copies of the Bible from as early as the 4th century. The oldest copy of the complete (with some exceptions) Bible in the world, the Codex Sinaiticus, which was taken from the Monastery and is now in England. It may have been written as early as the late 3rd century A.D., but probably was written in the early 4th century on goat skin.

We saw two pages of it that had been preserved and other manuscripts of ancient writings...one that dated from 285 A.D.!!! It was the Psalms. Amazing!

We reviewed the history of the Monastery and talked to the monks. We saw the "burning bush". It's big...about 20 feet wide and 6 feet tall. It's really not presented in anyway spectacular. But, the monks

say that "grafts" from the bush have been taken and attempts to make the grafts grow in other places and under the most fertile places, like the best greenhouses and it won't grow anywhere else! Who knows whether that's true. But, that's what they say. The chapel is magnificent...not big at all, but really old...from the 5th century A.D. The rest of the monastery is from later states...mostly from the 6th century A.D.

Well, that's enough about that.

It's been a good day to rest and write. Hope that you like my "blogs". I am sorry that I have not been more prolific on this trip. But, after all, the primary reason for this trip has been rest (as my wife has continually told me). So, I am doing that and learning a lot from our lecturers and about the Israeli/Palestinian situation.

When our course is finished next week, I have arranged to go back to Egypt (Dahab) and take some advanced Scuba Diving Courses. I am already certified as an Open Water Diver. I will be taking Advanced Open Water, Rescue, and Wreck Dive and Recovery Courses. Maybe some day, I'll be a Master Scuba Diver (the highest rating). I never thought I would ever be a Black Belt in Tai Kwan Do, but I did it with my wonderful boys, Ben and Sam. And, who knows if I'll ever be needed to help do some rescue scuba work in the Potomac or somewhere else (that is, if there is the extremely improbable case that there is no one else to do it!!). Right now, I just want to get better at my diving skills and learn more about the theory of diving. I'll be doing between 10 and 12 dives in the Red Sea. It should be fun.

Then, it will be back up to Tel Aviv to the airport. Rent a car and pick up my wonderful family for a fantastic Holy Week...Palm Sunday and Easter in Jerusalem. The rest of the time we'll be touring the country. Genny is in charge of that...I'll just do the driving and take them to where they want to go. It is going to be great to see them again. I miss them so...

But, that's another story altogether.

The **Codex Sinaiticus** came to the attention of scholars in the 19th century at the [Greek Orthodox Monastery of Mount Sinai](#), with further material discovered in the 20th and 21st centuries. Although parts of the [Codex](#) are scattered across four libraries around the world, most of the manuscript today resides within the [British Library](#) Since its discovery, study of the Codex Sinaiticus has proven to be extremely useful to scholars for the purposes of biblical translation.

Your Librarian, Marta Strada

April 4, 2011:

Well, today, I took my fourth test for the Advanced Open Water Diving Certification. It was a photography dive. I have no idea if the pictures I took will look good, but we didn't see anything that was really spectacular. I'll get the disk tomorrow.

Speaking of taking pictures. I have now taken 6000 pictures while here in Israel, Jordan, and Egypt. If I were using film instead of digital memory, I would be bankrupt!!!

Yesterday, I did a boat dive during which we saw some Napoleon Fish....huge! We also saw a Red Sea Green Turtle...very big. We've seen octopus, grouper, Lion Fish (very, very poisonous!) And, my favorite, the Surgeon Fish! Wow, is that cool looking. It's big and swims like a tank in the water! Lumbering along.

To recap on the past few days (and, I have a blog that I am going to try to retype and send to all of you that is stored in my iPhone), I finished my course at Tantur. It was a wonderful experience that really charged my battery for getting back into the pulpit, leading the congregation toward the future, and teaching new things that I learned from the excellent lecturers we had.

After we had the "going away" party, which was a Talent Show (the likes I have never seen or been a part of). The talent of the acts in the Talent Show were simply spectacular. One of the pastors (a Baptist) did the whole "To be or not to be..." sonnet from Shakespeare! He spoke from memory for about 13 straight minutes!!! It was amazing! Then, a Canadian Roman Catholic did a poem about "A Lady Named Mary" from the 1800's. It was about 9 minutes long...and all from memory!!!! I sang a few songs with the guitar and accompanied a few singers (who were GREAT!).

But, the best part of the whole show was the MC, a Roman Catholic priest from England! I told him after the show that I would nominate him to be the MC of the Oscars. He was hilarious, creative, cunning, and included bits on everyone in the group (i.e. inclusive). Wow! It was something that I will never, ever forget. I had to leave the room several times because my belly hurt from laughing!!! I don't think that I have laughed like that in a long, long time.

Once we were done saying goodbye to everyone (everybody left at different times) during the next day (whoever was remaining served as the Farewell Team), I took a quick flight down to Elat, Israel. I then, took a taxi down to Dahab, Egypt, where I am now.

By the way, I am in a little internet cafe called Seven Heaven. I am typing on a circa 1998 Samsung computer with a keyboard that has BIG Arabic letters on it and little eetsy weeny English letters on them. So, I am typing by feel and memory and definitely not by sight. If I make too many mistakes, please blame Arabic keyboard, not me!!!

I have made a number of dives in Dahab. The coral is beautiful and the marine life is fantastic. I am really glad that I came here because, as you may know, most of the known coral reefs in the world are dying. Even the Great Barrier Reef (where I had a few dives last year when our family was there) is mostly "bleached" and colorless. And now, after the cyclone, who knows what shape it is in. It is all a shame how we treat the blessed earth which God entrusted to us. We pollute it to no end and then are surprised when the beautiful things in it start to become ugly and/or disappear!

Tonight, I am meeting a Bedouin family who wants to play some Bedouin music for me and with me. Yes, they are bringing a six-string guitar along for me to strum while they play traditional Bedouin instruments. I'm not sure how much I'm going to be able to bring to the table at this "party", but we'll see. It should be fun.

Tomorrow morning, I am going to go diving again at 8:30 AM.

Speaking of diving... Yesterday on the boat dive, there was this Swiss diver who could not keep his hands off of me. He would pull on my fins, bump into me when trying to get pictures with his fancy-shmancy camera, and push me forward. The Divemaster scolded him three times for harassing me and all I wanted to do was get out of the water. I told them that I never want to go diving with that wild man again. And, they agreed. That was really my only bad dive. All the others have been GREAT. With nice people and no one else bumping into me or grabbing my fins!!!!

Well, I have to go now. I will hopefully be in touch shortly.

April 16, 2011: Today was one of the happiest days of my life! After being away from my family for 2 months, I returned from Dahab, Egypt, to Tel Aviv, Israel. There, I picked them up at Ben Gurion International Airport.

I must say that when I was waiting for them, I really felt totally normal and "cool". I was thinking to myself, "Did I really miss Genny, Ben, and Sam? Why am I not more emotional and excited?" For the record, I arrived at the airport to pick them up 5 hours early! That should tell you something.

Anyway, when I saw them come through the International Arrival doors at the airport, my heart jumped in a way that I had rarely felt before. I have never been away from my family more than one month...when I was in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But, two months...wow!

Anyway, there was a line over which I was not to cross. It said in Hebrew, "Do not cross this line!" Well, my feet had a mind of their own and I burst over that line and embraced my family with hugs and kisses that were extremely comforting to me...but truly embarrassing to Ben and Sam. Genny didn't mind all the attention, even though she (and the boys) were exhausted.

I took all of their luggage and loaded it on a cart and escorted them to the rental car. They wanted to see "a little bit of the Old City" in Jerusalem...so I drove them directly to it. We drove around the Old City and I pointed out some things. But, my ultimate goal was to get them to Tantur (where we are staying for two days, while they rest up) so that they could sleep off some, if not all, of their jet lag.

You know, there are times in one's life when emotions simply take over. I remember when I said "I do" at our wedding...I choked and almost could not get the words to come out of my mouth....not because I didn't want Genny to marry me...but because I couldn't believe such an amazing and wonderful woman like Genny WOULD marry me!!! It was a dream come true.

Or, when Ben and Sam were born. What a miracle! You know, I don't know how any woman or man can have a baby or witness their wife having a baby and not believe in God!!! When Ben and Sam arrived into the world, I was speechless...yes, I know those of you who know me will not believe that there is anything that could make me speechless...but those two occasions really left me breathless in the awe and wonder of life and the miraculous and truly loving way that God blesses us with the ability and honor of producing future generations of children (not only OUR children, but God's children).

Well, now Genny, Ben, and Sammy are in bed sleeping off some or all of their jet lag and I am sitting at this computer as happy as a clam knowing that my family is with me and that we are together.

There's a thought...togetherness. I know that I was never created to be alone. For that matter, everyone who has ever known me knows that if I am alone for more than 15 seconds, I'll find a new friend...no matter who it is. I love people. I love the members of my congregation. To me, they are my spiritual and Christian family. I love "togetherness". And, I think that no matter whether one is an introvert or extrovert, we, as human beings, have a deep seated and God-given instinct/desire to be with others...to be in community with God's other children.

That's what I was doing in Dahab, Egypt. (By the way, Egypt says "Hi" to Samia!!!). I made so many friends there. It is a small place and there are people there who are so special. Like the Beduin family who invited me to come to their two-year-old daughter's birthday party in "the mountains". If you want to know about Beduin parties, they don't begin before 9:00 pm!!! This is a party for a 2 year-old...and it began at 9:30 pm. Not only that, we drove for about 30 kilometers to get to the site where the party was being held. I still don't know where we ended up because it was night time and we were so far up into the Sinai mountain range that I just gave up trying to figure out where I was.

I played the guitar (which they provided) and sang some funny American songs. Sameh, the father, played the lute and sang some beautiful Arabic melodies. The nephews, Achmad and Mohammad, played the "tabla" (the Egyptian drums). And, there was a German man there (who was 68 years old) with his wife (who was a sweet nurse). I have no idea what he was thinking, but for about 1 hour of the 4 or 5 hours I was out there in the Sinai mountains under the stars, he told me dirty jokes in mostly English (with some German thrown in). I have no idea what it was about me that made him think that I would like dirty jokes, but I couldn't stop him. The only thing I could do was make sure that the children who were there were out of ear shot. That was my concern as a father. Do I look like someone who would like dirty jokes? If I do, then I need to change something!!!!

Life is funny, isn't it!

Well, that's about all for now. I do want all of you to know that I did earn my Rescue Diving Certification down at Dahab. Now, if someone is in trouble in the Potomac and there are no other Rescue Divers available, the mayor of Vienna, Virginia, can send me...yeah, fat chance. Really, I truly enjoyed learning the advanced skills that I was taught by truly skilled professionals. And, I hope to earn my Dive Master Certification in the next year or two...which is all the higher I want to go in terms of scuba diving. It would be (for me) like getting a Black Belt in Tai Kwon Do (which I was fortunate enough to earn when I was 46 years old). Now, it's "Dive Master BEFORE I am 50!!!!" Who knows!

Well, as always...my love to you all.

In Christ's Precious Love,

Your Friend and Pastor,

Chris Looker