



THE PALMER

A WEEKLY E-NEWSLETTER FROM PALMER MEMORIAL EPISCOPAL CHURCH

I AM PALMER

I am Palmer is a series of articles written by parishioners at Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church about their experiences in the time of COVID-19. In this series, we are hearing from medical professionals, educators, students, public health experts, parents of school-age children and others who are finding ways to cope and thrive in our challenging times.



PALMER PILGRIMAGE 2016 – THE HOLY LAND CAME ALIVE

by Betty and Jim Key

We are Betty and Jim Key, longtime Palmer parishioners and pilgrims to the Holy Land. Jerusalem, Galilee, Golgotha, Gethsemane—these and other familiar names came alive for us in the fall of 2016 when we went there on a pilgrimage with Jerusalem Peacebuilders.

Parishioner Stuart Kensinger had spoken often of his desire to take Palmers to the Holy Land, a place visited for centuries by people who longed to experience its holy sites and perhaps learn more about themselves. This would not be a tourist experience, he cautioned, but a pilgrimage, a holy journey to a sacred place.

In preparation, we embarked on a study of “Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel-Palestine,” by Sami Adwan, a book that explores the dual narratives of Israeli and Palestinian history. Every Great Wednesday we joined with others, some who like us were readying themselves for pilgrimage, others who were simply interested in the subject, to learn from guest rabbis and imams. They were wonderful teachers, but nothing could have prepared us for actually experiencing the sights, sounds, smells, and contradictions of the Holy Land.

Our tour leaders were Stuart and The Rev. Nicholas Porter, who had been friends in high school and who together co-founded Jerusalem Peacebuilders. Our guide was Daoud, a Palestinian man with a Master’s degree in Biblical Archeology, and always a fount of knowledge. Jerusalem was our base, and our hotel was within walking distance of St. George’s, the Anglican Cathedral. On our first night, we went there for Evening Prayer.

Each day we visited sites in and around Jerusalem, and in the evening we were joined by guests who shared their experiences in trying to build peace in the region. This was not a typical tourist itinerary. We visited the sites but we also had special encounters with people who lived there, such as tea with the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem and afternoon desserts with an Armenian family on a rooftop patio. At one point, we traveled for an overnight in Galilee.

Centuries of history surrounded us—Jewish, Roman, Crusader, Byzantine. Places, such as the Jerusalem Wall, displayed evidence of several architectural periods. As Father Nicholas stated often: “Never throw away a good stone.” When we saw the fourth site of John the Baptist’s head, he repeated one of his mantras that “holy places move.”

Scripture came alive for us. To this day, when a place we visited is named, we visualize it. When we say the Nicene Creed each week, we picture the Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which covers Golgotha and Jesus’s tomb. The morning we awakened in Galilee we looked out our window to see fishermen working on the very sea on which Jesus had sailed and on which we sailed later that day. Good Friday will never be the same for us since we took turns carrying a cross along the Via Dolorosa, stopping at the Stations of the Cross.

The complicated political situation in the region was laid bare as we drove across check points, witnessing Palestinians at the side of the road while Israeli police combed their cars. We visited the Dome of the Rock, a sacred site for both Muslims and Jews. We learned that the Palestinian people are composed of both Muslim and Christian denominations and we discovered that the Archbishop was not permitted to visit his flock in Syria because he was a Palestinian. We were continually encouraged to keep our minds open.

At one point in our exploration Father Nicholas was able to get us into an ancient chapel in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher which had not been discovered until the 1970s. On a large stone was carved a pilgrim’s boat of a type which pre-dates Constantine and the words: “Lord, we have arrived.”

And like the pilgrims who for many centuries before us had come to the Holy Land and its sacred sites, we could now join in the acclamation, “We have arrived!”