



From the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Old City, Jerusalem, thought to be the site of Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection. Photo by Dave, 4 May 2008.

9 May 2008

Nazareth in Galilee

Dear Friends,

It's late at night, yet this ancient city still buzzes with song, drumming, occasional calls to prayer, even fireworks. In the old quarter, prayer is like the air the city breathes – ubiquitous, swirling, searching. My little hotel is here, in that old quarter, and it's yet another find in a week of surprising discovery.

I think of you all, often, and say my own prayers for you daily. I'm especially grateful for the ways you're caring for Heather, for Shannon, for their child. I thank God for the love which binds all the good work together, all the prophetic witness together, all the music we make together. As I move through this land of mystery

and grace, I pray for all of you and for your continued honoring of one another.

There's no possible way to capture this first week in the Holy Land in words. Maybe I'll do best to offer some snapshots, some loosely connected reflections; and I'll hope this gives a flavor of my pilgrimage so far.

This afternoon, I had the privilege of dining with Sheikh Abed el Salam, his son Sheikh Ghassan and their family here in Nazareth. As teachers in the Qadirite Peace Order of Sufism, these wonderful men serve a piece of the Muslim community here in Nazareth and (as it turns out) around the world. I'm humbled to have had such an opportunity as this!

Sheikh Abed el Salam talked about the love in his heart, the deep and evolving love for all peoples, for all Muslims, for all Jews and Christians, for all peoples everywhere. He said that the purpose of Sufism is to love the other for the other's amazing uniqueness, not to insist on conversion or a particular practice, not to fashion the other in accordance with our own wishes. "In the eyes of another, I can see into the heart and see the mysteries of God," he said.

Then he told me something out of the oral tradition of Islam: "The earth and sky cannot contain the love of God," so goes the proverb. "The only thing that can hold, within, the love of God is the human heart." How do you just continue eating dinner when

this kind of thing's being said?! "I am only strong, only a strong man, when I love,"



he said.

We talked of our experiences, within both Islam and Christianity, of fundamentalism, the hardened expressions of faith that seek only to judge and convert the other. We agreed that we could find deep fellowship without insisting on this kind of strange acquiescence. "I need you to be a great Christian," Sheikh Abed el Salam smiled. "And I need you to be a great Muslim," I replied. As I put my arm around him for the obligatory photo shoot after dinner, the Sufi sheikh looked me in the eye, then in the heart, and said: "My friend, you have a home now, a home here in Nazareth. Wherever you go, you know you are home here with me."

From there, Ghassan, whom I'd met at a UCSC event last fall, took me on a tour of Galilee. We visited the church in Cana marking the site where Jesus turned water to wine (John 2). We visited Mount Tabor, a beautiful basilica high on a peak where Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John. And we visited the

Sea of Galilee, walking down to the water's edge at the site where Jesus is said to have walked on water. I have to tell you, though, that most amazing of all was the kinship I felt with these two Muslim men, their loving faith. To see the great Christian sites with one of them, to watch him tenderly caring for his children, to explore his weariness and his hope as a colleague: these too were miracles of very significant sort. How remarkable that this Muslim family has sparked in me a fire I can only call Jesus, a love I can only call grace!

Earlier this week – speaking of miracles – I was invited to attend a two-day retreat for Palestinian and Israeli peacemakers, a retreat marking the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel. While across the country it was a celebration for Israeli Jews, Palestinian Arabs remember 1948 as a “nakba” or catastrophe. The two-day retreat was designed to encourage story-telling, dozens of activists sharing their experience of the anniversary and committing to courageous and loving attentiveness. Instead of going to a barbeque and setting off fireworks.

I was flabbergasted in being invited and even more astounded by the experience itself. As 180 gathered, the retreat opened with a sung prayer, in Arabic, that translates: “From my distress, I reach out to you for my redemption.” Hearing the prayer, praying the prayer, and seeing Palestinian and Jew aching together, gathering together, I was as moved, as affected, as challenged as I’ve ever been in prayer.

“From my distress, I reach out to you for my redemption.” In this land of occupation and violence, in this land of hope and song, in this land of mystery and history. “I reach out to you.”

That night, the gathered participated in a ritual rather like rituals we create at FCC. Folks were invited to light a candle in remembrance of someone who had suffered through all the conflict and violence of the past century. As a lovely clarinetist prayed in his language, we watched and prayed and wept: One lit a candle for a Palestinian mother and children, killed in Gaza last week by Israeli



soldiers.

Another lit a candle for a great-grandmother killed in a German gas chamber during the Holocaust. Still another lit a candle for an entire Palestinian village devastated and ripped from its land during the war of 1948. And

another lit a candle for a young Israeli teenager killed while having a pizza by a suicide attack. It was unbelievably painful, and yet something else happened as well.

When that altar had been set, we were invited into a huge circle around it. An Israeli woman led us in a lovely ‘spiral’ dance – eventually pulling one end of the line and leading that end into the spiral itself. Deeper and deeper we danced: into the center, toward the altar of pain and remembrance, toward one another. Palestinian and Israeli, Jew and Muslim and Christian, some internationals like myself. All the while, we sang this simple prayer: “Ancient Mother, I hear you calling. Ancient Mother, I hear your song.” On and on, on and on, closer and closer we danced, gently, reverently: into the pain, into community, into hope. It must have lasted for 20 minutes or more.

A day later, my 46<sup>th</sup> birthday, I was asked by a German nun what the two-day experience had meant to me. I have a whole notebook full of reflections, thoughts, ideas. But all I could say was: “I am humbled and grateful, more grateful than words can say.” What a gift, at this moment in human history, to observe these two peoples, two wounded peoples, reaching for one another, reaching for redemption, reaching for a different future than the one offered by politicians and powerbrokers! I was indeed so, so grateful. On my 46<sup>th</sup> birthday! One I’ll never forget.

That'll do for now, an awfully long letter from your friend, a pilgrim in a holy and lovely and broken land. I know that you continue to pray for me, and for my travels; I feel that prayer and your love in my heart.

I'll close with these stirring and evocative words, from the book of words we call home:

“I will rejoice in Jerusalem,  
And delight in my people;  
No more shall the sound of weeping  
Be heard in it, or the cry of distress.  
No more shall there be in it  
An infant that lives but a few days,  
Or an old person who does not  
Live out a lifetime...  
They shall not labor in vain,  
Or bear children for calamity...  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
On all my holy mountain, says the Lord!” (Isaiah 65)

God says it is so. So let it be so. In East Jerusalem and West Jerusalem. In Nazareth and Galilee. In Santa Cruz and Washington, DC. Let it be so.

Yours, gratefully, in that faith and that hope,  
Dave Grishaw-Jones