



A Pilgrimage in the Holy Land: A Lenten Study Program

by The Rev. Sharyn Hall, St. Luke's, Burlington

Implementation Notes by The Rev. Nissa Basbaum, Church of the Transfiguration, St. Catharines

This study program is designed to take us on a pilgrimage in our imaginations to the Holy Land. A pilgrimage is a time for reflection and learning. The Bible tells us a great deal about the places of the stories in the Old and New Testaments. By investigating the places, we may be able to bring the stories to life as dramatic events unfolding before our eyes.

People seem to live very busy lives, even in the time of Lent, so it is difficult to hold study programs in the church over several weeks. A booklet of this program may be made from the *Ground-swell* sheets and made available for home study if someone is unable to attend the group meetings. Each unit of study is independent, so people can miss a meeting without losing the benefit of the program. Copies of maps of the terrain and the city of Jerusalem may be added to the booklet or offered for group discussion. Many bibles have maps in the appendices. A bible atlas has detailed maps of the ancient world. Additional information about the places can be found in any bible dictionary. Travel bureaus will provide brochures about the Holy Land as it is today.

BETHLEHEM

We begin our pilgrimage at Bethlehem where Jesus was born. This was not the home of Joseph and Mary, but because of taxation laws they were required to travel from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem. It was a fair distance (about 150 km) from the green hills of Galilee to the more mountainous region near the great city of Jerusalem.

We are not told how many days they travelled, but the pace was slow with Joseph on foot and Mary on a donkey. Bethlehem is 9 km to the south of Jerusalem, very near the major trade route linking Jerusalem with Hebron to the south. The town is perched high (2,500 ft.) above sea level with a view westward to cultivated slopes and eastward to the wilderness of Judah.

Bethlehem is a very old town, dating at least to the fourteenth century before Jesus. It is revered as the ancestral home of David. David's great grandmother, Ruth, settled here with her mother-in-law, Naomi, when they returned without a husband or son. And here Ruth married Boaz, bearing a son who became the grandfather of David. David, as the youngest son of Jesse, tended the sheep in the hills around Bethlehem. The prophet Samuel went to Bethlehem and anointed David the one

chosen by God to become the king of Israel. (1 Samuel 16:1-13) Generations later when the Jews were conquered and dispersed, the prophet Micah declares that the birthplace of the next great ruler of Israel will be Bethlehem. (Micah 5:2)

As a descendent of King David, Joseph must journey to Bethlehem for the census and Roman taxation. Other people have also come, making the small town busy with travellers and Roman officials. Any lodging is difficult to find and Mary's baby is born in humble surroundings. (Matthew 2:1-16; Lk 2:4-15)

The Bible tells us a great deal about the places of the stories in the Old and New Testaments.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION OR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

- A. The gospel of Matthew begins with a long genealogy tracing the lineage of Jesus back to King David. Read 2 Samuel 5-8 about King David. What expectations did the Hebrew people have about Jesus if he was to be a great king like David?
- B. Read the story of Ruth. (Ruth 1-4) Compare the stories of Ruth and Mary, the mother of Jesus. They both make journeys to Bethlehem. They both are loyal and obedient.
- C. St. Luke describes the location of the birth of Jesus, and the angels appearing to the shepherds. (Luke 2:1-20) How do you picture these scenes from the Christmas story in their setting?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

What is our image of Bethlehem today? Compare the words of the hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem, with the modern town of Bethlehem. Travel brochures and guide books describe the town and places of interest.

NAZARETH

When Herod was dead and it was safe to return from Egypt, Mary and Joseph went back to their home in Nazareth. Again it was a long arduous journey, up from Egypt which is far to the south, past Bethlehem and Jerusalem, through Samaria and the Esdraelon Plain, to the hills of Galilee. Just five kilometres into the hills is the town of Nazareth.

The whole area of Galilee is about 50 to 65 km from north to south, and about 30 to 40 km from east to west. Southern Galilee, where Nazareth is located, has rolling hills which provide drainage for fertile valleys. The towns of the region are located on the hillsides where the flocks graze freely, and the farming is down in the valleys. The setting provided Jesus with images for several of his parables; for example, the sower and the seed which falls on various types of ground (Mark 4:1-9), the shepherd who searches for the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7), and the mustard seed like the kingdom of God. (Matthew 13:31-32)

For several centuries before Jesus, the area of Galilee was dominated by Assyrians and other Gentiles.

For several centuries before Jesus, the area of Galilee was dominated by Assyrians and other Gentiles. (Isaiah 9:1-2) Even in the time of Jesus when the region was under Roman control, the Jews of Galilee were treated with disdain by the 'pure Jews' of Judea. (John 7:52) For this reason, Jesus was dismissed by the Jews of Jerusalem; no prophet or messiah could come from Galilee.

The town of Nazareth was where Jesus grew from boy to man and learned Joseph's trade as a carpenter. But the people of Nazareth were not willing to accept him as the true Messiah. (Luke 4:16-30) Most of his teaching was done at Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION OR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

- A. One of our important images of Jesus is as the Good Shepherd. This image was familiar to the people of his time. Find several references to shepherds in his teaching. How can we relate to the 'shepherd' image?
- B. Read Mark 4:1-20. This is the parable of the sower. Can you picture the terrain that this parable describes? Does the parable have less impact on us because we are not an agricultural community? How fertile is the soil of our parish?
- C. Very ancient Hebrew law commanded that every boy learn a trade. Artisans or people skilled in handicrafts were important in the normal community depicted in the Bible. How many trades or artisans can you find in the scriptures? How do we value artisans today?



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Rent a video of the movie, "Jesus of Montreal". After viewing the film, draw parallels between events in the movie and events in the life of Jesus. Does the change of place affect your understanding of each event?

RIVER JORDAN

For about 30 years Jesus stayed in Nazareth with his family, but then he went to find his cousin John who had a reputation as a holy man (or religious fanatic, depending on one's point of view). John dressed in animal skins and lived in the wilderness along the southern part of the River Jordan.

The River Jordan is an important geographical feature of Palestine. It is formed from the waters of four streams which converge in the plain above Lake Huleh in the north. The river expands into Lake Huleh and then flows through a narrow gorge into the Sea of Galilee. The name 'Jordan' means 'strongly descending', and because the waters are always descending, they flow swiftly. Lake Huleh is 200 feet above sea level; the Sea of Galilee is 675 feet below sea level. Emerging from the south of the Sea of Galilee, the river meanders for 320 kilometres before entering the Dead Sea (which is really 100 kilometres directly south). The Dead Sea is 1300 feet below sea level and the lowest point on the earth's surface.

The place where many believe Joshua led the Hebrew people across the Jordan into the promised land is not far from Jericho. (Joshua 3:7-17) There the river is only 60 to 80 feet wide, but farther south near the Dead Sea, the land opens into a valley about a mile wide. This area is a wilderness of thick growth that presents dangers from wild animals and bandits. Here Jesus found his cousin John and was baptized in the River Jordan. (Matthew 3)

SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION OR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

- A. The River Jordan has been a boundary between peoples and nations for centuries. Read the story of the Hebrew people entering the promised land (Joshua 3). What has happened in the twentieth century that is similar to this Bible story?



- B. John lived in the wilderness. After Jesus was baptized, he was "led by the Spirit into the wilderness." This is the wilderness of the Jordan valley near the Dead Sea. But 'wilderness' can be a metaphor for many things in a person's life; for example, loneliness, exclusion, despair, grief. Discuss the many ways that 'wilderness' can affect our lives and how we can deal with it.

The name 'Jordan' means 'strongly descending', and because the waters are always descending, they flow swiftly.

- C. The baptism of Jesus by John (Matthew 3) became the prototype for initiation into the Christian faith. Read carefully the baptismal rite in the Book of Alternative Services. How does our baptism as Christians relate to the baptism of Jesus?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Who now occupies the land around the River Jordan from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea?

SEA OF GALILEE

After his baptism in the River Jordan, Jesus returned to the area of Galilee where most of his ministry and teaching took place. The Sea of Galilee and the River Jordan form the eastern boundary of the district of Galilee. In about the eleventh century BC, this body of water was called the Sea of Chinnereth in Hebrew, which means 'harp', and there was a town by the same name beside the sea. The names of the town and the sea were changed to Gennesaret when Israel was under Persian rule four centuries before Christ. The sea is sometimes called Gennesaret in the New Testament; for example, when Jesus calls Simon, James, and John to follow him and "catch people". (Luke 5:1) In the gospel of Luke, the

body of water is called a lake, but in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, it is named a sea. In comparison to the Dead Sea it is small, 20 kilometres long and 11 kilometres wide. Another name given to the sea is Tiberias, from the name of the town built on the western shore by Herod Antipas in the first century. (John 6:1)

There are high winds on the Sea of Galilee and sudden storms are not uncommon, but the area around the Sea was one of the most beautiful regions of Palestine, and many people travelled there for commerce or pleasure. Jesus prayed by the sea, preached by the sea, and sometimes moved off shore to find some rest from the crowds following him. The town of Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea is frequently mentioned in the gospels as a central place for his ministry.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION OR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

- A. Fish and fishing were important to the people of the ancient world for food and commerce. Fish and fishing also could have symbolic meaning. Find references to fish, fishing and fishermen in the Old and New Testaments.
- B. Read the stories about Jesus and storms on the Sea of Galilee. (Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 4:35-44) His control over nature amazed the disciples and convinced them he was the Son of God. How did the ancient Hebrews view the relationship of God with the natural world? What other stories of the Bible relate God to nature?
- C. The Sea of Galilee has a special significance for Christians because many stories about Jesus take place in the area around the Sea. How many stories that took place on or around the Sea of Galilee can you identify?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Archeology has helped us to understand a great deal about the Holy Land in Biblical time. Capernaum is one town that we have re-discovered through archeology. Investigate the science of archeology and its importance in the Holy Land.



BETHANY

When Jesus went to the temple in Jerusalem on holy days, he stayed with his friends in the village of Bethany. Bethany is about 3 km from Jerusalem on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. It was a village long before the time of Jesus and its Hebrew name was 'Ananiah.' (Nehemiah 11:32) There may be some confusion with a reference in the gospel of John to 'Bethany beyond Jordan' where John was baptizing people (Jn 1:28). This was another village, possibly the very small community of Bethabara on the eastern side of the River Jordan.

Jesus prayed by the sea, preached by the sea, and sometimes moved off shore to find some rest from the crowds following him.

Bethany is remembered as the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus who were friends of Jesus but did not follow him on his preaching journeys. There are several stories in the New Testament about Jesus at Bethany. It seems that Jesus preferred to stay with his friends rather than in Jerusalem, and the village was close enough to the holy city that he could walk into the city in the morning and return to the village at night. Bethany was a retreat for him when he was tired and when he knew he was in danger because the religious authorities in Jerusalem were angered by his teaching and actions.

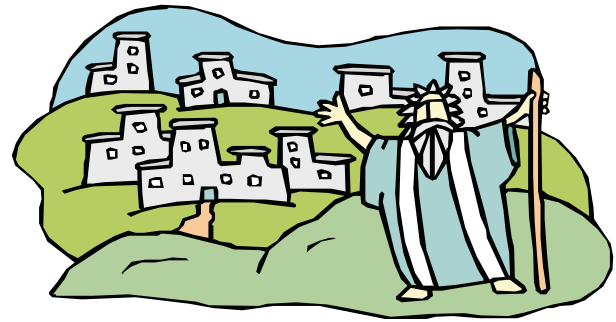
SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION OR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

- A. Read Luke 10: 38-42. This passage recounts perhaps the first visit of Jesus to the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. There are various interpretations of this brief passage. Which woman do you think exemplifies discipleship? How did other women in the New Testament serve Jesus?
- B. Read the account in John's gospel of the death of Lazarus. (John 11:1-44) Jesus says that Lazarus died so that the Son of God might be

glorified. What do you think he meant by this statement? Did Jesus know that this miracle would lead to his own death?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

- A. The village of Bethany is now an Arab village called 'Al-Azariyah', an Arab version of the name Lazarus. Muslims revere Lazarus as a saint. What is the Muslim view of Jesus?
- B. The village of Qumran is not far from Bethany. Why is this famous now?



carried his cross along a route from the Tower to the place of execution called Golgotha, which in Aramaic means 'Skull'. Golgotha and the tomb where the body of Jesus was laid were outside the wall on the north-west side, because anything to do with death was excluded from the city according to Jewish custom.

JERUSALEM

Jerusalem was (and is) the centre of the Hebrew religion. It is an ancient city that changed hands many times through the centuries because of its strategic position on the north-south route along the hilly backbone of the country.

Archeological evidence indicates that there was a habitation on the site as early as 3000 BC. When it was captured by King David about 1000 BC, it was a Jebusite stronghold known as 'Zion.' David fortified the city and made it his capital of the United Monarchy, which encompassed most of Palestine. His son Solomon built the First Temple north of the original north wall and then enlarged the city by fortifying the intervening space. In 597 BC and 586 BC, Jerusalem was captured and finally destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Most of the Jews were deported to Babylon. (2 Kings 24-25)

About 70 years later, the Persian armies captured Jerusalem. Their king, Cyrus the Great, allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and to build the Second Temple. (Ezra 1-6) During the next century, the walls of the city were rebuilt and Jewish law was re-established under Ezra. (Ezra 7-10) In 64 BC, Jerusalem was conquered by Pompey, and thereafter was ruled by the Romans throughout the New Testament era.

The Third Temple was built by Herod the Great who ruled from 37 to 4 BC. This is the magnificent Temple that Jesus visited as a boy and man. To the east of the Temple, and across the Kidron Valley, is the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was betrayed. After he was taken prisoner, Jesus was led to the Antonia Tower of the Roman garrison where Pilate resided when he was in the city. It is believed that the original Praetorium existed in this fortress and this is where Jesus was tried. After being tormented by the soldiers, Jesus

Jerusalem was (and is) the centre of the Hebrew religion.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION OR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

- A. Actual remains of Solomon's Temple have not been discovered, but descriptions of the Temple exist in the Bible. Read 1 Kings 6-8 2 Chronicles 3-5, or Ezekiel 40-42. How do you picture Solomon's Temple in your mind?
- B. Read 2 Kings 24-25. This is an account of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. How do you react to this violent story in the Bible?
- C. Read the story of the Passion from Gethsemane to the crucifixion. (Luke 22:14-23:56) Find references in the story to places on a map of the city.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Jerusalem is now the city of three religious faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What religious sites exist in the city today? What would you like to see if you went to Jerusalem? 🗺

IMPLEMENTATION NOTES

During the season of Lent in 2001, for the regular Wednesday evening gathering at the church of the Transfiguration in St. Catharines, we used Sharyn Hall's *Pilgrimage* study with great success. In fact, under normal circumstances, our studies are cancelled during Holy Week but, because the topic fit so well into the original pilgrimage that Jesus made from Jerusalem to Golgotha, we changed our pattern and spent Wednesday in Jerusalem with Jesus.

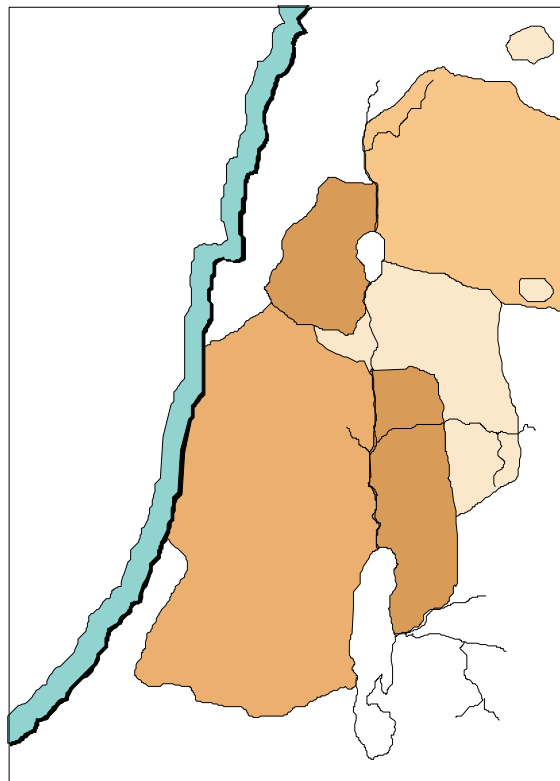
Sharyn's program is helpful in a number of ways. At least among the members of our group (about 15 in total, although not everyone was able to make every session), people found the form of a pilgrimage extremely accessible. It allowed each one of us the opportunity to learn a little more about the places about which we hear and read each week in church but really of which we have little knowledge. This learning happened in a variety of ways — geographically, historically, biblically — to name just a few. It made a difference to delve more deeply into the bible but, perhaps more significantly, the discovery of what places were related to and important in the ministry of Jesus was an eye-opener for several members of the group.

At the same time, using the vehicle of a pilgrimage allowed us to start to make the journey from Jerusalem to Golgotha ourselves. It is at this point that the questions posed for each session begin to have their impact. While the initial portion of each gathering dealt with geography and history, from here we moved to a sharing of our own experiences as they related to the ministry of Jesus that took place in each of these stops on the way. Considering the events that took place, with the assistance of the questions Sharyn poses, we were able to make connections between our own lives and those of the people in scripture.

The real beauty of this pilgrimage study is that it may be used on its own as is, if you are the kind of person who likes to "do things by the book", or it can be easily modified to suit the circumstances of the group and/or the particular interests of the people involved. There were many weeks in which

I added questions to the ones already available, questions that posed additional theological considerations. As well as this, I even changed the venue one week, going to Samaria instead of Bethany — not because Bethany wasn't an interesting place to which to reveal — but because I thought Samaria contained a number of theological issues particularly pertinent to the Holy Week pilgrimage.

While we used this study at the Transfiguration as it is meant to be used — as a Lenten program related to the Holy Week journey of Jesus — if you are the kind of person who can take something and make something else out of it, the form of Sharyn's pilgrimage package would make a wonderful study at any time of the year. Just pick some different places from the map in which Jesus stayed and/or ministered (what about the desert, for example?) and go for it. The possibilities are endless! 🌿



The Holy Land



Groundswell is an initiative of the Adult Christian Education Committee,
Supported by the Division of Congregational Support, Diocese of Niagara.

Contact: Joyce Wilton, Cathedral Place, 252 James Street North, Hamilton, ON L8R 2L3
Phone: (905) 527-1316 ext. 430 eMail: jwilton@niagara.anglican.ca
Fax: (905) 527-0963



Niagara's Committee on Adult Christian Education