

FROM PASTOR MARC'S DESK...

By the time you read this article there's a decent chance that I will be preparing to depart for Jerusalem on the Mosaic of Peace Conference with the Presbyterian Mission Agency led by Carl Horton. I may have already boarded the plane. I may be walking on the other side of the earth even as we speak. Some of you had the opportunity to experience this remarkable journey to the Holy Land with Pastor Lawrence in 2018. For those of you who (like me) were unfamiliar with this experience until recently, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) website describes it as an opportunity to...

"...experience this remarkable and troubled region, encounter its diverse people, explore its rich history and complex current situation, and engage with those who seek its peace. By attending this conference, you will be inspired by the stories of Christian peacemakers in the Holy Land, walk in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace and encounter contemporary Palestinians and Israelis; equipped by engagement with Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders, experience contextual theology and study peacemaking practices within the framework of PC(USA) policy; connected with global and local partners to take meaningful action for a just and lasting peace in the region."

This will be my first trip to the Holy Land. I've been pondering a bit what I hope to experience from this generous and unique opportunity. To be honest, I have always felt a little lukewarm towards taking a journey to the Holy Land over the years. Not because I didn't think that visiting the Holy Land would be a meaningful experience (I did). However, I have also been aware that (I think especially as people of faith), there can be a subtle seduction to lift places like this up on a pedestal and make them into a "tourist trip" rather than seeing a real place for what it is on its own terms. I think this can run the risk of dehumanizing a place if we are not careful, and I've always wanted to be mindful about that possibility, I suppose.

What I hope to get out of this experience probably more than anything else is not simply an opportunity to be able to walk the footsteps of our Biblical predecessors (although I certainly do!) I want to see Jerusalem: the real place. People live there. It's their home. It's where they conduct their common day-to-day lives (perhaps not so much unlike how we might consider our own common day-to-day lives here in Oxford...even though our lives and our realities are very different).

One of the things that I find fascinating about the Gospel story is that as much as we often think about this place as the Holy Land, the Gospels remind us that

back then it was just the middle of nowhere to a lot of people. Shepherds hung out in the fields. Mary and Joseph took shelter in a manger, or a house, or a cave. Back then, not everybody was necessarily lifting up Jesus' hometown on a pedestal. They asked questions like "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

What excites me probably more than anything else about this unique (and perhaps once-in-a-lifetime opportunity) is the opportunity to set aside the rose-tinted glasses (as I suspect Jesus' followers likely did) and to have the chance to experience it as a real place with all of its beauty and all of its messiness. To immerse in a world where conflict is real and endlessly complex. The Mosaic of Peace encourages us as participants to resist easy answers but instead to "hold the tension." It is my hope to hold that tension...hopefully with some deep humility and to be grown spiritually because of it.

I suppose if we look around neighborhoods like Oxford we can probably identify some complicated tensions in our own community as well. Oxford is no stranger to beauty, and we are also no stranger to conflicts, prejudices, and problems of our own for which there are no easy answers. Perhaps "holding the tension" might be one faithful first step for us, too, sometimes. I hope that the Mosaic of Peace will offer me a deep and valuable lesson on how to do that.

I am deeply grateful for the generosity of this congregation that allows this spiritual learning opportunity to be possible for me, and I am deeply grateful for all of you.

Let us continue to hold the tension together.

Grace and peace,
Marc