

Reflections on our Ecumenical Pilgrimage – Bishop Jim Gonia



From October 16-29, 2023, a group of 32 pilgrims – made up of Lutherans, Episcopalians and Roman Catholics, and including both English and Spanish speakers – traveled together to walk in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul in Greece, and to journey to both Rome and Assisi. Led by Father Quirino Cornejo (who serves both the Episcopal Church of Colorado and the Rocky Mountain Synod) as well as Bishop Kym Lucas and Bishop Jim Gonia, the pilgrimage was originally intended to include the Holy Land and Italy. Thanks to hard work of Good Shepherd Travel, the trip was rescheduled within a week after the violent attacks by Hamas in Israel. Accompanying the pilgrims was Shiraz Al Rishmawi, a resident of the West Bank and staff member of Good Shepherd Travel. Although the destination had changed, prayers for peace in the Holy Land were never far from the hearts of those who journeyed together.



As one whose current call involves regularly reflecting on the life and witness of the church, it was both refreshing and humbling to walk in lands where the existence and ministry of the church date back millennium rather than decades or even a century or two. It became clear to me that a faith pilgrimage involves walking in the footsteps of those who have gone before us, learning from their struggles and shortcomings as well as being inspired by their courage and joy.

We are heirs of the faithful who have journeyed in Christ long before us, and they provide us with important legacies that continue to shape our current reality as the church. I was struck in particular by three specific legacies:

- We are heirs of the baptismal legacy of Lydia
- We are heirs of the preaching legacy of Paul
- We are heirs of the reformation legacy of Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther

We are heirs of the baptismal legacy of Lydia ...



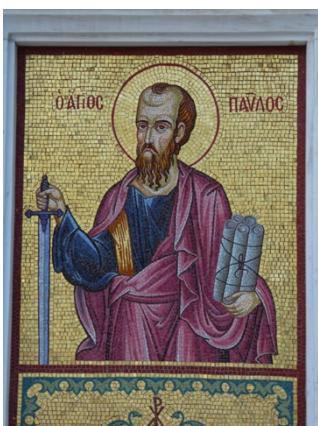
One of our early stops in Greece was to the ancient city of Philippi, where the Apostle Paul first traveled after being compelled to leave Asia and visit Macedonia (Acts 16:9-12). After viewing the ruins of Philippi, including the presumed location of the prison in which Paul and Silas were jailed (Acts 16: 23-40), we traveled a short distance outside the walls of the city to the baptismal site of Lydia. (Acts 16:13-15)

It had never occurred to me before that this dealer in purple cloth who hailed from the Asian Minor city of Thyatira, was actually the first person to be baptized on what we now know as the European continent. The story of the church on our own continent can be traced to this story of Lydia and her family being washed in the waters of God's grace.

Gathered by the gentle stream that flows by the Holy Baptistry of Saint Lydia of Philippi, our group came down to the water in pairs to share in a baptismal remembrance. It was a powerful reminder of our unity in Christ and of the baptismal legacy of Lydia herself.



We are heirs of the preaching legacy of Paul ...



As we made the journey across Greece – from Philippi to Thessaloniki to Corinth and then to Athens – the story of Paul's preaching – to any and all who would listen – led our way. Paul was deeply invested in his preaching ministry in Corinth, spending a full eighteen months there as he supported himself as a tentmaker. (Acts 18: 1-11) When members of the synagogue were unreceptive to Paul's message, he focused on the Gentiles residents of the city: *and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized. (Acts 18: 8b)* Thus was born a church community to whom Paul

continued to preach and provide nurture from afar, addressing two of his letters to the faithful there.

The preaching ministry of Paul became particularly real when we stood on the ***bema*** in the ruins of ancient Corinth, where city officials addressed the public, and where it is said that Paul was brought for judgment before the proconsul Gallio, on the accusation of conducting illegal teachings.
(Acts 18: 12-16)





Athens provided another vivid reminder of Paul's commitment to preaching the gospel in the multicultural and multireligious context of his day. After visiting the remains of the Acropolis and Parthenon, dedicated to worship of Athena (the Greek goddess of wisdom, arts, literature and war), we

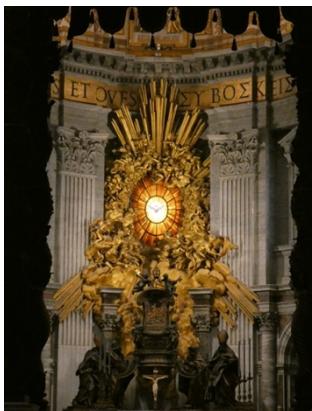
descended to a smaller dome known as ***Mars Hill***, also called the Areopagus. It is from here that Paul delivered his famous sermon to the people of Athens, one that continues to be a favorite of mine for its contextualization of the gospel.

(Acts 17: 16-34)



Paul's commitment to *proclaim the message and to be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable* (2 Timothy 4:2) is the reason many statues and icons of Paul feature him holding a sword. The sword doesn't reference some proclivity to violence on Paul's part, but rather his deep-seated call to proclaim the Word of God that is *living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword*. (Hebrews 4:12) As members of a church body that is passionate about the clear proclamation of the gospel, it is clear that we are heirs of the preaching legacy of Paul.

We are heirs of the reformation legacy of Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther ...



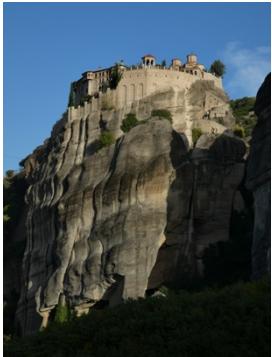
From Greece our pilgrimage took us to Italy – first to Rome and then finally to Assisi. While the Orthodox churches of Greece were stunning to behold with their intricate interior paintings and abundance of icons, the basilicas and churches of Rome were a testament to the power and authority of the church.

The church's future changed forever when the Roman Emperor Constantine outlawed the persecution of Christians in 313.

Thanks in part thanks to a vision he

received at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine began to support and fund many endeavors of the church, and was finally baptized just before his death in 337. Some years later, another Roman Emperor, Theodosius, made Christianity the official religion of the Empire in 380. This placed immense power and wealth into the hands of a church that began to merge political and spiritual authority.





It's not surprising, then, that over time there arose movements of reform inspired by those who remembered the humble origins of the church and longed to see the faithful focus on the essence of their relationship with Jesus and care of all God's people. The famous monasteries of Meteora in Greece (whose origins can be traced to the 11th century) and the ministry of Francis of Assisi (died 1226) were driven in their own ways by a rejection of the opulence and corruption of the church.

A few centuries later, the visit of Martin Luther to Rome in 1510 was a pivotal moment in the life of the young monk, who grappled with the extravagance and distortions of the church, with its focus on the veneration of relics and the selling of indulgences. Both Francis and Luther called upon the faithful to remember Christ's call to minister to the poor.

If our pilgrimage in Italy did anything, it convinced me that a focus on continued renewal within the church is always needed, so that we may always remember that we are loved unconditionally by God in Christ so that we are freed to love and serve our neighbor without hesitation. Our journey was a powerful reminder that we are heirs of the reformation legacy of Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther.



When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (I Corinthians 2: 1-5)



The Pilgrimage Group: Franciscan Monastery, Assisi Italy.



Pastors participating in the Pilgrimage, Ancient Corinth

Daily postings and photos from the Ecumenical Pilgrimage can be found on the Rocky Mountain Synod Facebook page.