

Sunday, February 28, 2021

Ancient Jerusalem: Kings

2 Chronicles 34:1-2: Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign; he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. ²He did what was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in the ways of his ancestor David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left.

Reflection: Kings were God's representative on earth, so they often were judged for their faithfulness to God and God's Law and their care of God's people, especially the vulnerable, widows, and children. These standards are not only for the ancient kings but for all people in relation to others. Perhaps, when we take offices of leadership that becomes even more the case. It has been said, "with greater power comes greater responsibility." This was certainly true of Israel's kings, whose history is recorded in the books of Kings and Chronicles.

There were kings of Israel who abused their power and paid the price for derelict duty. History beyond these kings often records leaders who have abused the power bestowed to them have fallen to the same fate. This brings to mind another adage: "The bigger they are, the harder they fall." We are reminded that God has the last Word.

"O God of the universe, you bestow upon us the power to love and care for your people, especially the vulnerable. Help us be your representatives to the world through loving acts of kindness, respect, and humility to those we meet today. Amen."

Video: Virtual Israel Tour Day 64: Ancient Seal in the City of David

Link: https://youtu.be/U_OZPkY5NbY

Monday, March 1, 2021

The Dead Sea: Water for Healing

Ezekiel 47:1-12: ¹Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. ²Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

³Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. ⁴Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the waist. ⁵Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. ⁶He said to me, "Mortal, have you seen this?"

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. ⁷As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. ⁸He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. ⁹Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. ¹⁰People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-gedi to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. ¹¹But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. ¹²On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing."

Reflection: The Dead Sea is a phenomenon unlike anything I have ever seen or experienced. I've

visited the Salt Lake of Salt Lake City, Utah, and it is nothing like the Dead Sea. You can bob in the water very easily, but to get out to the water, you have to walk over sharp salt crystals that threaten to tear up your feet, so you have to wear water shoes. Salt crystal formations are beautiful but dangerous to touch. However, with these dangers comes healing. The mud and hot springs around the sea are filled with healing properties and attract thousands of visitors each year. Clay and I took a mud bath after a dip in the sea and soaked in the sulfur-enhanced water. Our skin glowed and the warmth of the waters eased the pain of sore muscles resulting from a previous adventure and the miles trekked in the Holy Land.



Pastor Kris & Clay covered in mud

“O God of healing, may your presence in our lives be a balm to our souls. Soothe the hurts of our lives with your love today. Amen.”

Video: Virtual Israel Tour Day 9: Dead Sea

Link: https://youtu.be/T1_gLcCcc34

Tuesday, March 2, 2021

Jerusalem: Valley of Death

2 Samuel 18:16-18: ¹⁶Then Joab sounded the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained the troops. ¹⁷They took Absalom, threw him into a great pit in the forest, and raised over him a very great heap of stones. Meanwhile all the Israelites fled to their homes. ¹⁸Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself a pillar that is in the King’s Valley, for he said, “I have no son to keep my name in remembrance”; he called the pillar by his own name. It is called Absalom’s Monument to this day.

Reflection: When we think about the end of our life, how do we want to be remembered? As a pastor, I have walked in many cemeteries throughout the years. I have seen elaborate monuments, simple stones, and everything in between. This past summer, as I sat with my brother and chose the marker for my mother’s burial plot, I couldn’t get over the vast amount of choices of grave markers. It got me thinking about how we are remembered. I doubt that Absalom, King David’s son with Bathsheba, thought he would live on in the recordings of Israel’s kings in the modern Bible. He directed a pillar to mark his grave to be set up in remembrance of him.

Another option is to be remembered for the lives we have touched and the difference we make in the piece of the universe we occupy in this lifetime. This option is open to all of us.

“O God, you have gifted us with tools to mark our place on earth. Help us use these tools not to gain recognition but to reflect the love and faithfulness you have for your people. Amen.”

Video: The Valley of The Shadow of Death, Jerusalem

Link: <https://youtu.be/S2eKsFLAbMM>

Wednesday, March 3, 2021

En Avdat: David in the Wilderness

1 Samuel 23:15-23: ¹⁵David was in the Wilderness of Ziph at Horesh when he learned that Saul had come out to seek his life. ¹⁶Saul’s son Jonathan set out and came to David at Horesh; there he strengthened his hand through the LORD. ¹⁷He said to him, “Do not be afraid; for the hand of my father Saul shall not find you; you shall be king over Israel, and I shall be second to you; my father Saul also knows that this is so.” ¹⁸Then the two of them made a covenant before the LORD; David remained at Horesh, and Jonathan went home.

¹⁹Then some Ziphites went up to Saul at Gibeah and said, “David is hiding among us in the strongholds of Horesh, on the hill of Hachilah, which is south of Jeshimon. ²⁰Now, O king, whenever you wish to come down, do so; and our part will be to surrender him into the king’s hand.” ²¹Saul said, “May you be blessed by the LORD for showing me compassion! ²²Go and make sure once more; find out exactly where he is, and who has seen him there; for I am told that he is very cunning. ²³Look around and learn all the hiding places where he lurks, and come back to me with sure information. Then I will go with you; and if he is in the land, I will search him out among all the thousands of Judah.

Reflection: One of the more memorable sites Clay and I visited was En Advat National Park. It is believed that this is where David hid from Saul. It’s the most beautiful wilderness to behold. We picnicked in a relatively flat area, then followed a trail that wound through the cliffs. There was no place but up to climb, so we did. These goat paths were aided by ladders mounted on the cliff walls. We climbed at least a hundred feet straight up. No one in our group knew where we would end up, but scenery from that perch was amazing. Would the climb ever end? Yes, in a parking lot, where our bus was waiting for us along with others in the group who were less adventurous.

You can see why David chose to hide in this vast and beautiful spot. There are caves, freshwater, and lots of goats!



Pastor Kris at En Advat

“O God, provider for your people, we give thanks for all you give us each day. Thank you for giving us places of safe-haven, nourishment for our bodies, and challenges that teach us to appreciate your gifts. Amen.”

Video: En Avdat Israel 21.04.17

Link: <https://youtu.be/IEbCQq2D1IQ>



A trail through the cliffs.



The cliffs at En Advat



Ladders mounted on the cliff walls



View from the parking lot at the top of the cliffs

Thursday, March 4, 2021

Masada: Commitment to Freedom

Isaiah 61:1-3:

¹The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;

²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³to provide for those who mourn in Zion —
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

Reflection: Masada is another archaeological wonder and another palace built by Herod the Great. It is a huge site complete with all the amenities (*see the photos from our trip*). In the days of the Great Revolt, the last of the rebels against Rome entrenched themselves at Masada and turned their desperate fight into a symbol of the struggle for freedom.

Masada stands high above the land and as a symbol of freedom from captivity. The freedom Isaiah speaks of is freedom from another type of imprisonment: the barriers erected between God and God's people. We call it human Sin. Jesus bought that freedom for us. The barrier is gone, and we are free to live knowing nothing can separate us from God. I wonder if we realize that this freedom is precious and priceless to us.

Let's celebrate this freedom today and thank God for the ability to live our lives free from the burden of Sin. Take a deep breath and feel God with us.

"O God of freedom, bless us this day with the knowledge of our freedom and ability to be with you entirely, without barriers or fear of rejection. Amen."

Video: Masada, Israel: Ancient Fortress

Link: <https://youtu.be/JXQg-H4GsWA>



A model of Masada



Public pool at Masada



A tower at Masada



Clay sits on an ancient toilet.



Tubs at Masada

Friday, March 5, 2021

Israel: Holy Land for Many

Luke 9:1-6: ¹Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, ²and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. ³He said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money — not even an extra tunic. ⁴Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. ⁵Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town

shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”⁶ They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.

Reflection: One of the things you notice when walking around the grounds of the monuments and the streets of Old Jerusalem is the dust on your shoes. Because the climate is so dry most of the year, it seems as if this dust clings to everything. Jesus’ direction to shake the dust off one’s feet in places where the disciples were not welcomed takes on a more powerful meaning in the context of this arid land. Shaking off this dust is as if one was never there and the Gospel never came to into this house or village but instead moves on. I used to think it was as if the door closed, never to be opened again. However, if one was never there, it leaves the possibility that the door may be opened when the Gospel came around once again.

“O Jesus, thank you for being the Good News to share; let me not dust off my shoes today. Amen.”

Video: The Jesus Trail

Link: <https://youtu.be/M89ObIQhBRc>

March 6, 2021 Saturday

Bethlehem: The Birth Place of Jesus

Luke 2:1-7: ¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Reflection: We can thank European influence for the concept that Jesus was born in a barn-like structure made of wood and placed in a manger, also wood, which is a trough filled with hay. The doors are open wide, so one can peer into the scene. Cows, horses, and sheep are looking on.

I hate to burst your bubble, but, in an earlier reflection, I stated that there is little wood suitable for building houses, let alone barns. Instead, when you go into the church built over the place where Jesus was believed to be born (*Church of the Nativity*), you descend stairs leading below the church into the undercroft. A guide provides you with a candle, and you make your way into a cave. There is a place hollowed out in the back of the cave where typically the food—hay or oats—would be placed for the animals.

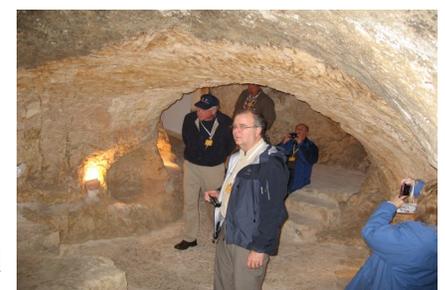
The other idea stemming from Christianity making its way north is the idea of an inn. In reality, the word translated in the Bible starting with the King James version is actually “guest house.” Houses in the time of Jesus were made of mudbrick. They were one-story structures with a roof area used as overflow for guests. This area was often open-air and where family traveling from far away would often stay for months or years. Also attached to the house was a place where the animals were kept at night. It, too, was open on one side to a pen or sheep-gate. It also was not uncommon to build



Outside the Church of the Nativity



Inside the Church of the Nativity



The cave below the church.

houses up against a natural cave, where the animals would stay adjacent to the house occupied by multi-generational families.

It makes more sense at the time of a census, where one had to travel back to their town of origin, that Mary and Joseph would plan to stay with family, particularly as Mary was pregnant. Does this change the way we think about Jesus' birth? Does it make a difference that Joseph's family couldn't find a place in their house for a nephew, or cousin, or, perhaps, even a grandchild that would be born? Maybe not everyone was so cool with the out of wedlock pregnancy!

“Come, Lord Jesus, be my guest. I welcome you into my heart today. Lead me, guide me as you see fit. Amen.”

Video: Bethlehem, Palestine: Church of the Nativity

Link: <https://youtu.be/NrMior480Ew>



The Nativity Grotto



Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, Bethlehem