

A TOUR OF THE HOLY LAND
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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John 14:15-21

Every once in a while I will get a circular in the mail offering a tour of the Holy Land. “Walk where Jesus walked,” it will say. It promises to tour the sites which are mentioned in the gospels: the Sea of Galilee, Jericho, the Upper Room, the empty tomb.

The brochure says that if I can get a group together of a certain size, then I get to go for free. That sounds pretty good. And it says that the experience is guaranteed to strengthen our faith. Some of you have done it, and you have affirmed that it is an enormously meaningful experience. So I think what we ought to do is to take the entire church. Let’s just take everybody.

I know—there are problems. You’d have to get somebody to check your mail and water your plants. But it would be great. Surely it would make our faith stronger if we were to go to see the places where Jesus actually walked. What we ought to do is to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

After all, people of faith make pilgrimages all the time. The idea is that there are certain places in our world that are especially holy, places where “there has been a unique manifestation of divine activity, and where it might happen again.”¹ The hope is that if we actually go to the places where Jesus was, that maybe some of Jesus might rub off on us. We don’t just want to see these places, we want to experience them. We want the faith of Jesus to take hold in our lives.

Of course, you don’t have to go just to the Holy Land to be on pilgrimage. There are other holy places in our world where people go. A minister friend told one time of being

¹ “Pilgrimage.” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 3, p. 814.

in Montreat, the Presbyterian conference center in western North Carolina. The minister got into a conversation with an elderly woman. “How long have you been coming to Montreat?” the minister asked. “Oh,” she replied, “I have been coming every summer since I came to a youth conference many years ago. It was one of the high points of my life, and I keep coming back hoping that it might happen again.” Maybe if we go to the place where God appeared, then maybe God will appear again. Maybe God will appear to us.

The problem for so many of us is that our lives and our places don’t seem, well, very holy. You come to Columbia, Tennessee, for mules, but you don’t make a holy pilgrimage to Columbia. There’s nothing especially holy about Captain Dees or the Shell station or Wal-Mart. If we’re going to make a pilgrimage to a holy place, then we’re going to have to go somewhere else.

The disciples who listened to Jesus on that night before his death were anxious. Jesus was talking about going away. Going away! For these previous days and months he had been their life. Their lives had been made holy just by being in his presence. But now he was going away. What would happen then? If he left, then what would happen to their faith? They might struggle along a little bit, but it wouldn’t be holy anymore. It would be just like any place else. No wonder they were worried.

So Jesus speaks to them, and tries to calm their anxieties. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray to the Father to send you another Advocate, to be with you forever. . . . He abides in you, and will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you.”

Later on that night, Jesus will say: “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, then the Spirit cannot come.”² If Jesus had stayed on earth, then we would have to make a pilgrimage to see him. His presence and his power would be confined to that place. Jerusalem would be the place where people of faith would have to come in order to be touched by the faith of Jesus. And the farther away you got from the earthly Jesus, the farther away you would get from his holy presence.

But, says Jesus, it doesn’t work that way anymore. I am going away, and when I go the Spirit will come. And here is the good news: the Spirit is not limited to one place and one time. The Spirit of God abides in us and is in us. That’s what Jesus says. You don’t

² John 16:7.

have to make a pilgrimage to one particular place to experience the Holy. God's holy presence in Christ is now available to anyone who loves Christ and keeps his commandments.

And here we are, seeking as best we can to love Jesus. Here we are, truly and sincerely wanting to keep his commandments. We really do. And what does Jesus say? Just this: the Spirit of God is in us. "I will not leave you orphaned." We don't have to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, for the Holy Land is here.

Do you want to take a tour of the Holy Land? We can do it right here.

Come with me to the Jordan River (the baptismal font). Here Jesus was baptized by John. Here the dove descended upon him. Here the voice called from heaven and said: "This is my beloved Son." So, every time a believer comes to this place, and every time parents present their child before this water, God descends upon that one, and in the name of Christ we affirm the voice of God: "This too is my beloved child." It is holy water, and this is Holy Land.

Come to the Temple where Jesus and the disciples watched the poor widow putting her meager offering into the offering box (the offering plates). Others were impressed with the size of the offerings that were given by others, and beside theirs what this woman gave was almost nothing. But Jesus said: "She has given more than the rest, for she has put in her whole life." So whatever you put into this plate, it is enough. The smallest offering by the smallest child causes the angels in heaven to rejoice, because it is holy, and this is the Holy Land.

Come with me to the mountain, where Jesus opened his mouth and taught (the Bible on the pulpit). Here it is that he said: "Blessed are the poor in Spirit." Here he challenged us to "love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you." Here it is that people recognized that this was no ordinary teaching, but a teaching with authority. So, every time we open this Bible, and read again the words, and they touch our ears and our hearts, we are given the gift of the Spirit of Christ. This is truly a Holy Bible, and this is Holy Land.

Come with me to the Upper Room (the communion table). Here Jesus gathered with his disciples for the final time before his death. Here he said: "Do not let your hearts be anxious, neither let them be afraid." Here he offered them his broken body and shed blood. So every time we gather at this table, we are a part of that company of believers

who knows that we do not deserve to be here, but are present because of the gracious invitation of our Lord. For this is a holy table, and this is Holy Land.

Come finally to the empty tomb, where a dead body was laid but is dead no longer (where the casket is placed for a funeral). Here it was where women came expecting, well, nothing very much. And what they found instead changed the world. So every time we gather in this place for a funeral, and every time the casket is placed here, we know that this is not the end, that death no longer has dominion, and that truly we do believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. For this life is holy, and this is the Holy Land.

Finally, if we seek the Holy Land, we come to this place and to you, his people. If you are able, I want you to stand. Do you remember what Jesus said to you? “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. . . . I will not leave you orphaned. I will send you another Advocate, the Spirit of God. He will abide in you, and will be with you.”

Look around. You don’t need to make a pilgrimage to another place for it to be holy. The Spirit of God is with us and in us. What I am saying is this: You are the Holy Land.³✠

³ I am indebted to Fred Craddock’s sermon “It Doesn’t Get Any Better than This.” *The Cherry Log Sermons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 60f.