



Tantur: Hill in the Holy Land

Episode 3: The Fifth Gospel

[NAT: crowds]

[VO]

The Holy Land is a place of juxtaposition. Of layering. Of mingling of ideas and states and realities.

You see it in a million different ways here.

The most prominent may be the mosques, synagogues and churches all lined up beside each other.

You see it looking from the Mount of Olives over the Old City of Jerusalem, where the Dome of the Rock and Church of the Holy Sepulcher give way to modern skyscrapers in the distance.

It's a little odd quite honestly to see the modern and the sacred so close, but only at first. And I guess there are a lot of uncomfortable neighbors here.

Sometimes, you find a juxtaposition of noise and quiet. Of bustle and calm.

At the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, crowds press to fit through the narrow door leading to the shrine of Jesus' birth. They squeeze through a tiny opening, just wide enough for one person at a time, and they go down a few steps into a cave, and wait for their turn to kiss a star marking the site where Christ entered the world.

The din is anything but peaceful. No Silent Nights here.

But if you press on, there are other caves in the same location. A few are under the Church of St. Catherine next door, maybe a few hundred feet from the Nativity. At least one interpretation of the Gospel story is that the Holy Family moved here to deliver the Christ child...because, as the story goes, there was no room for them to deliver a child where they were.

And it was here, in that second cave, where Notre Dame students on a summer study program...stopped to reflect. And then they did something...totally appropriate.

[NAT: Silent Night]

I'm Andy Fuller, and you're listening to Notre Dame Stories' Tantor: Hill in the Holy Land.

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Bethlehem, West Bank. Here is where the summer study session begins. It's a three-week course designed to immerse students in sacred, but also the complex aspects of the Holy Land. We followed two of those students, to get their reaction in real-time to what they experienced on part of the trip. Then we caught up with them back on campus, after they had time to reflect.

And, a production note about some of the material captured on-site...it took a while to figure out my recorder, so some of the stuff is a little hard to hear. We'll post transcripts of these episodes online.

[McManus]

We just left Tantor, which is where we're staying and we're walking from there to Bethlehem, where we're going to participate in a religious service. We've been walking along this security border...there's a wall, and a lot of graffiti, some of it pretty poignant.

[VO]

Emilia McManus is a senior from New Jersey, and whether she knew it at the time or not, she really kinda summed up a lot of life here. Walking along a border wall to get to Mass. This sort of layering between faith and conflict is evident everywhere in the Holy Land. The wall is the first thing you notice looking into Bethlehem from Tantor. It's a tall gray concrete structure built about 15 years ago that snakes along the border at the Bethlehem city limits. It funnels commuters through a checkpoint that

resembles security at an American airport - scanners, conveyer belts, x-ray machines...but here, there is also the presence of a few armed guards.

The experience of walking along this wall wasn't totally unexpected - students are briefed about this sort of thing before they go - but still, it's striking. It's a reminder that in the holiest place in the world, conflict is the constant undercurrent.

But after clearing the checkpoint and seeing the statements on the wall...the students headed to Mass.

[NAT: music]

Talk about juxtaposition.

[Pines]

Super fascinating. In some ways it really felt like mass at home just in terms of the community...but Arabic a big difference..

That's Analisa Pines, the other student we followed. She's a Junior from California. And for her, the trip is a chance to connect two branches of her family tree. Her father is Jewish, her mom, Catholic.

Honestly it still feels mythical...being Bethlehem, that doesn't even seem like a real place..

[VO]

After the tour of the Church of the Nativity, and the singing in the cave, the students walk through Bethlehem's old district...you get the sense it's laid out pretty much like it was when Mary and Joseph were here. And then a stop for ice cream and a few words from Kamal, their Palestinian tour guide. And apologies...we got as close as we could, but some of this is a little hard to hear..

[Pines]

Kamal: I like people coming to Palestine and seeing the place where Jesus was born. And you go to the Holy Sepulchre church, and you see thousands of people waiting in line. Totally fine - it's an important story. But sometimes I feel like people stand in that line and they think they're going to meet Jesus at the end. And guess what, if he's there in the tomb we have a big problem. He's not there, he is risen.

So if you really want to find Jesus, you find him in the people, not in the stones. There are people who take a trip "on the

footsteps of Jesus Christ" - going from one stone to the other and they don't find him. You're not going to find him where the stones are. Not even in the place where he was born. You find him in the refugee camp, in organizations helping women and children...it's all about people. If you solve the problem of the people, you solve the problem of the Holy Land.

Alright so today you were in Bethlehem, a Palestinian city. I hope you enjoyed it, I hope the people were nice to you.

[McManus]

I think we saw two narratives. We started off the day in a deeply religious mindset, where we saw the place of the birth of Jesus. And as a Catholic those are some of the most important places you can go to feel as close as you can to God, and your faith.

And then we were reminded later in the day, as we came out of the church and as we spoke with our tour guide, who was a Palestinian, that there are people that still live here. So while that area is deep in history, deep in legacy, tradition...still strife with some political struggles.

One thing I was reflecting on as Christians, being able to move wherever we wanted, to visit the sites that are the holiest in our faith, it's amazing, and I feel really lucky. It's a stark reality for some people who do live here and don't have access to those sites.

[VO]

At that time, Emilia is specifically referring to Rachel's Tomb, which is a 5-minute walk down the hill from Tantur. Side note: the Bible says that Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, who went on to father a tribe of Israel. Some scholars believe that took place at Tantur, and mourners carried her body down the hill and buried her outside Bethlehem.

The point Emilia is making is, virtually anyone can visit Rachel's tomb. Except Palestinians. The border wall is constructed on three sides of the tomb, so that Israelis can visit, but others cannot.

That would be a dynamic the students would encounter more than once.

[Old City Souk]

There's no place like the Old City of Jerusalem. The day after the Bethlehem visit, the students came here. 40-thousand people living in a square mile, home to holy sites of the three major

world religions. The shops line the narrow streets with merchants offering things from pottery to scarves and jewelry, and food like falafel to coffee to spices. I managed to sample all three.

It's easy to get lost, and found again, here. With few exceptions the streets are winding. They take you places you didn't intend to go, and cause you to experience things that perhaps you didn't think you'd experience. You're in the world here, with all its glory, all its tension.

On this day, the students were exploring the Jewish Quarter. Including the holiest site in Judaism...the Western Wall. It was more of a retaining wall for the Second Temple, not part of the actual structure on the Temple Mount. Today the Temple Mount is controlled by Muslims. It houses the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, that shiny gold dome you see in most pictures of Jerusalem. The two sites are remarkably close. On another visit to the wall during our trip, we were struck by the earnestness of the Jews who came to pray, while the Muslim call to prayer blared over the top from al-Aqsa, so loud it was hard to hear yourself speak. Much less pray. Again, juxtaposition.

On our visit with the students, we found a mood both spiritual, and celebratory...

And afterward, we caught up with Analisa...

[Pines]

So we just left the Western Wall, it's the most holy and special place that a Jew can pray. I've heard lots about it throughout my life, it means so much to the Jewish community.

My dad actually started crying, and told me it would be really meaningful if I could put a prayer for our family in it, and so I did. I got choked up.

So are you going to call him..

[VO]

And then there was a visit to the Sepulcher. Despite the sometimes contentious nature of the site that we mentioned at the top of episode 1, this is usually a place of fervent prayer and demonstrated devotion. As you enter, steps to the right lead up to the top of Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified. A group was saying Mass during our visit.

Back down at ground level and about 140 feet away, there's the Edicule, the place where Jesus was buried. Emilia struck up a conversation with one of the monks keeping vigil.

[McManus]

He was saying there were four religions that shared the space of where Jesus' tomb was located: Armenian, Latin, Coptic, Greek

They have some...not conflicting, but differing ways of honoring where he was buried. So we saw on the back end a location of a stone, and that's where Jesus' head was laid, and so they honor that location of where his head was placed. And there's a whole shrine dedicated to that spot.

It's fascinating. I didn't expect that at all. I was hoping for more peace among the three Abrahamic faiths, but to see divisions or at least different interpretations of the way that Jesus was crucified, the way he was born - we saw that yesterday on the way to the Nativity - is interesting, and helps you reflect more on your own faith. For sure.

[VO]

And to be sure, the chance to reflect on faith is an important part of the experience for students here. But it's only a part. The job of balancing what it is students see and experience here falls to Hannah Hemphill, the Jerusalem Global Gateway's academic director.

[Hemphill]

It's always a matter of remembering there's such a plethora of narratives and so it's looking at the itinerary, looking at the narratives and trying to strike a breadth of narratives.

Honestly, Notre Dame through its history at Tantur has a depth of connections that when I came into the job I built on that, and then had other connections I had built being formally a graduate student at Hebrew University, and so just pulling those together and through them meeting other people who care about the same thing. I know that people like Hannah and Kamal care about exposure to a variety of narratives, and making sure that people just don't come here and hear one narrative, one side.

Personally a lot of my connections come through the Catholic minority community here because I know people personally who were involved in that. Most of those people are very committed to having people

I do consider it a job where my mandate is not just simply exposure to information, but it's formation. I see that as the mandate of Notre Dame, they take very seriously the pursuit of truth, the pursuit of justice, and I see that as translating very well into a program like this.

[McManus]

So Hannah, our professor actually has this great quote where she says "A lot of people will come to the Holy land on a Holy pilgrimage expecting to see all the most important sites." And that's among all different traditions. But then they fail to see the living stones. So they see the old stones but not the real ones, the living ones. And so that really stuck out to me because there's more going on here than just the religious significance.

So there are people that are living through the tradition now, people that are living through the strife, instability, that are experiencing and cultivating the land in their own ways in the modern era. And their stories are often being ignored.

So we visited Hebron, which was a tricky but necessary site. Hebron we actually had a Palestinian tour guide that brought us around and he provided a alternative story to what he felt like was the relationship between Palestine and Israel.

Hebron we actually had a Palestinian tour guide that showed us around, and he provided an alternative story to what he felt like was the relationship between Palestine and Israel. [4.26] As outsiders, not even from this land, we could travel wherever we wanted. As a Palestinian, our tour guide was restricted in certain places. So he would stop at certain checkpoints and say you guys go ahead, I have to wait here.

[Pines]

Yeah, so Hebron--Hebron--said both ways, was super intense. We were not really prepared for it. All I knew is that it was a Muslim city that had a lot of historical significance in Islam, but did not know much more. And we knew there was a settlement there, but I didn't really know what that meant or what that would look like. And that was probably the most intense day of the trip. We got a tour from this guy named Abdullah, he's been arrested many times and because he's an outspoken pro-Palestinian advocate. And just walking through the streets, they're all covered by netting, because the settlers will often throw things at the Palestinians and they'll pee through the netting on them and just, you hear about the horrible things that, you know, the settlers do to Palestinians, but seeing that and seeing the trash that the settlers have turned on the Palestinians was really eye-opening to see that firsthand.

[McManus]

But there were moments too of peace and optimism. So for example, we did a dual narrative tour, which was really lucky opportunity where we had one Palestinian tour guide and one as Israeli tour guide. And we visited around all these different sites and each got to share their own story. And at the same time they fought a little bit, they push each other because that's expected. But that to me was a symbol of, okay, we can coexist, we can overcome these institutionalized barriers that often try and separate us. And so that was a great moment.

[Pines]

On some happier note, some highlights that I really liked. We ate dinner at the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem. So we were split up into different families who lived there. Our family is originally from Gaza and that was so much fun. They were just such a joyous family. It's like 30 of them all in one family living in this one big house and we had a great meal there.

And just talk to them, sometimes about lighthearted things like what they learned in school and their different professions, but also just hearing some of their stories and what it's like living next to the border wall. We did face masks with them. It was really fun. And then on the other side we got to eat dinner with Jewish families, got to spend Shabbat with them. And similar thing, where I thought I knew all about Shabbat, I celebrate Shabbat, but it was not like my Shabbat. There were a lot of prayers I didn't know, this is unusual, but my host was actually vegan so vegan Shabbat. So just eating dinner with both of those families was a really cool insight into the different cultures that you're not necessarily seeing just when you're getting tours and hearing the history.

[McManus]

Absolutely. I mean I've been privileged a lot in my life to have traveled a decent amount through Notre Dame, through my family, through my own ways. But I've never visited somewhere that really did capture my heart, that really felt like... I felt a connection to need to come back. Because you know sometimes you travel places or like I would love to go back, I would love to come back, but this was different. I felt like almost in a way that I needed to come back, that there was some kind of calling to come back and I don't know in what place or space that may be and whether that's just to learn more. Whether has to be somewhat of an activist, I don't know. I'm still discerning that but I'm still looking forward to it. It's a very special place.

[VO]

At the Church of St. Catherine in Bethlehem, next to the cave where the students sang silent night, there's a neighboring cave...the study of St. Jerome. He's most famous for translating the Bible into Latin from that cave. And he had this to say about studying scripture: Five gospels recount the life of Jesus. Four are contained in scripture, the fifth is contained in the land they call Holy. Read the fifth gospel, and the world of the other four will open up to you.

That's true of the pilgrimage sites. But maybe, it's also true in what Kamal and Hannah Hemphill said. Religious meaning isn't just about what happened in the past. It's about what's happening now. Finding ways to engage with people, hearing their stories, developing empathy and yes, figuring out ways to use knowledge for good, to bridge gaps, to stand for justice...perhaps that's as central to the Gospel message as anything. And for these students, it opened up to them in the land they call Holy.