



Jim Quattrocki, Tim Frakes and Peter Marty at the synagogue in Capernaum.

Looking for Jesus in the Holy Land

January 6-12, 2006

By Tim Frakes. Photos by Jim Quattrocki

January 6, 2005

I can't get enough of the Holy Land these days. This is my fourth visit. In September, 2005, I was here recording footage for a documentary about the Old Testament. This time, the topic is Jesus. It's funny, but in fifteen years of video work with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, this is my first video about Jesus. Of course, most of the projects I work on relate to Jesus in one way or another. But this trip is all about Jesus. "Introducing Jesus of Nazareth" is a simple retelling of the Gospel story. We interviewed a group of Lutheran Pastors in the United States and asked them to give us their best Jesus stories. Then, I wrote a script and asked Pastor Peter Marty to record the on-camera lines in the Holy Land.

With me are my old friend, Jim Quattrocki and Pastor Peter Marty. Jim has been my traveling companion on many journeys, including a trip to the Middle East in 1999. Jim is the main videographer on this trip. Peter Marty is the host of *Grace Matters*, the radio ministry of the ELCA, and Pastor of a St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa. The son of the

internationally famous theologian and author, Martin Marty, Peter is a brilliant talent in his own right. He agreed to serve as our on camera host for this program. The purpose of this trip is record Peter at or in front of Jesus related holy sites in Israel and the West Bank.

Our trip coincided with news that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had suffered a massive stroke. With elections in both Israel and the Occupied Territories looming on the horizon, the potential for political unrest seemed possible.

January 7, 2006

Our Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt went smoothly. We changed planes and landed on time at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion International Airport late in the afternoon. Ben Gurion is brand new. If there is a more modern or aesthetically pleasing airport in the world, I have not seen it. The terminal is spacious and airy. The baggage claim is speedy and efficient.

Samir, a driver from the Christmas Hotel in East Jerusalem, met our flight. We also picked up an American woman who was on her way to the Bethlehem Center, a Lutheran meeting facility in the West Bank. I visited the Bethlehem Center on my last trip, so she and I knew some of the same people. It is a small world.

We made it to the hotel a few blocks north of the Old City, grabbed some dinner in the restaurant and went to bed.

January 8, 2006

You've heard the expression, "Hit the ground running?" I've turned it into an art form. After a quick breakfast we grabbed a taxi and plunged into Jerusalem's Old Walled City. Modern Jerusalem is a divided town. The Jewish population lives on the west side. The Palestinians live in East Jerusalem. A complicated network of Jewish Settlements and Arab villages form suburban Jerusalem. Both groups share the Old Walled City with a daily influx of tourists and pilgrims. We entered the city through the Damascus Gate, so called because the road leading out eventually makes its way to the Syrian Capitol of Damascus.



A man pushes a flower cart in the Old City. Note the rubber tire used as a brake.

January is the rainy season in Jerusalem. We ducked for cover as a cold, grey downpour made the brown Jerusalem paving stones slippery and treacherous. The Arab Quarter of the Old City is exotic. The streets are narrow and twisted. Merchants pushing carts crammed with flowers, clothing, electronics and raw meat (eyeballs still in place), work their way through the crowds.

A short walk brought us to the Via Dolorosa, the narrow street known to Christian tradition as The Way of Sorrows. After Jesus was scourged, the Bible tells us that he was forced to carry his cross to the place of his execution. The Via Dolorosa marks this path. At the western end of the Via Dolorosa is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Jim, Peter and I ducked out of the rain and into the ancient church. On the floor, just inside the main door is a large slab of marble. Christian pilgrims from all over the world kneel down to pray and kiss the traditional place where Jesus' body was laid after the Crucifixion.

While Peter and Jim recorded the first few lines of our video script, I kept the security guard busy with some idle conversation. We probably should have had some kind of permit to record video footage inside the church. But since I didn't have any permit or the knowledge of where to get one, we decided to employ the guerrilla method. Shoot first. Ask questions later. I may burn in hell, but at least we got some great footage.

The security guard was Ethiopian and we began to talk. "I immigrated to Israel a few years ago. I am a Messianic Jew," he said proudly. Messianic Jews believe that Jesus is the Messiah. "How does your family feel about that?" I asked him. "They aren't too happy," he replied. When Israel became a state in 1948, the idea was to create a "Jewish State." People with Jewish roots came to Israel from all over the world.

After recording in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, we made our way to the Western Wall. Rome destroyed the Jewish Temple in 70 C.E. All that remained was the western foundation wall. Ever since, Jews come here to pray. Unfortunately for the Jews, the Moslems built a grand Mosque on top of the temple mount. The Dome of the Rock is the place where Moslems believe Mohammad ascended in to heaven.

At the Western Wall we recorded some footage, then caught a taxi and drove across the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives. By now the wind was really whipping and it had gotten quite cold and grey. As darkness fell, the skies opened up and it began to pour. Soaking wet, we hailed a taxi and rode back to our hotel.

January 9, 2006

The chronological life of Jesus as told in the four Gospels, takes you from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Egypt, then back to Nazareth. From there, Jesus went back and forth from the Galilee region to Jerusalem. Of course, the story comes to a climax in Jerusalem. We arranged things differently. Our plan was to visit Jerusalem, the desert region of the Jordan Valley, the Sea of Galilee, Mt. Tabor, and Nazareth and then back to Jerusalem.

When you rent a car in Israel, the rental car company won't let you drive it through the Occupied Territories. Since several Jesus sites are in the West Bank, we decided to rent a Palestinian car. The Palestinians don't care where you drive the car, as long as you bring it back. Green Peace Car Rental Company has a nice, safe sounding name. They even agreed to bring the car to our hotel. The aging Chevrolet was a death trap, loaded with many dents and dings. The interior was cracked and worn. The engine sounded like it was about to throw a rod. Even the Chevrolet logo on the trunk was missing the last few letters. It now formed the word "Chev."



Jerusalem in the rain.



Shooting in the cliffs over Qumran near the Dead Sea.

daytime temperatures at Qumran are often over 100 degrees. But in January, the air is dry and cool. Jim, Peter and I climbed up the cliffs looking for a place to set up. Near a steep drop off, the wireless microphone transmitter on the camera popped off and tumbled over the edge. You can't walk away from a fifteen hundred dollar piece of equipment. I had to scramble over the side to retrieve it.

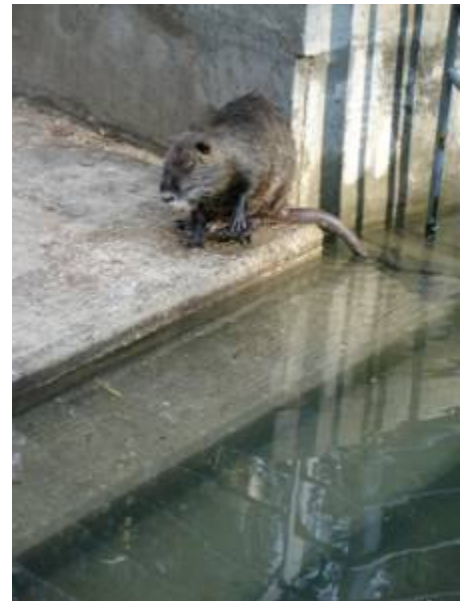
Back at the main visitor's center, we had lunch in the Qumran Restaurant, and then began our long journey up the Jordan Valley toward the Sea of Galilee. On the way, we stopped by the road and bought oranges from Arab boys tending a roadside stand. The fruit was sweet, juicy and very refreshing.

At the southern edge of the Sea of Galilee is a tourist trap known as the Jordan River Baptismal site. It is a kind of park built around the spot where the Jordan River flows out of the Sea of Galilee on its way to the Dead Sea. Tour busses bring a steady stream of pilgrims led by bible toting pastors. Typically, the pastors lead their flocks down to the water, preach a sermon, and then baptize a few members in the holy waters of the River Jordan. While recording Peter by the riverside, I noticed what looked like a beaver, swimming toward us. Closer inspection revealed a huge river rat! "Look at his tail!" gasped Peter. The beast climbed onto the concrete baptismal steps leading down into the water and started to groom. So much for the idyllic places where Jesus walked.

Our hotel that night was no hotel. The Kibbutz of Ginosar lies about ten kilometers north of Tiberius on the Sea of Galilee. A Kibbutz is a communal settlement. This one has a well developed guest facility complete with a restaurant, beaches and internet.

January 10, 2006

After a sumptuous breakfast of eggs, cheese and olives, we jumped into the Chev and drove north along the lake shore to Capernaum. Capernaum was a provisional headquarters for Jesus and his disciples. The Bible tells us that Peter and other disciples lived there. The ruins of ancient Capernaum have been excavated. The crown jewel is a third century synagogue. The structure was built 200 years after Jesus, but the foundations were laid during the time of Jesus. The Gospels tell us that Jesus preached in Capernaum's synagogue, so this is quite literally a place where Jesus walked. The security guards took one look and correctly identified us as a television crew. \$100 later, I had a permit and free run of the ruins. It turned out to be money well spent. Morning



Rodent of unusual size.

rains gave the ruins a glistening look to them. It was still too early for tour groups, so we worked without crowd interference. We recorded the open to the show and a number of other on camera sequences.

From Capernaum we drove to the Church of the Multiplication, the site where Jesus fed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. The Church is built around an exposed rock outcropping that marks the exact spot. From there, we headed up the hill to the Church of the Beatitudes. This is the place where the faithful believe Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. The Church of the Beatitudes was built in 1937 by the Franciscan Monks with money from Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.



Tim and Peter review footage.

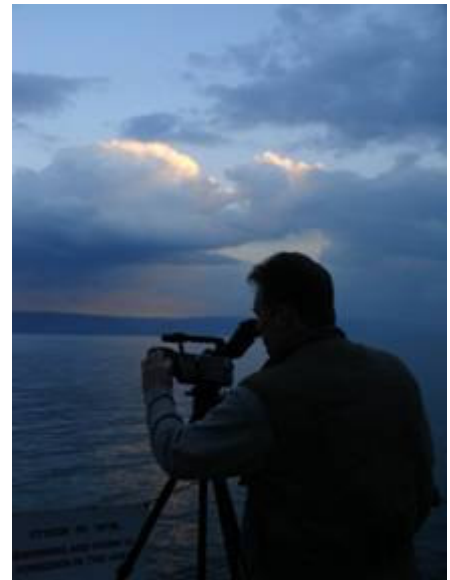
One idea I had while writing the script was to rent a small boat and record Peter out on the Sea of Galilee. A number of famous Jesus stories involve the fishermen-disciples and their nautical adventures. Sure enough, we passed a group of modern day fishermen hauling in their catch. After some fancy negotiation, we borrowed their rickety old rowboat (a perfect prop for the camera) and paddled into the lake. The boat was to water what our Chev is to the highway. I'm happy to report that it didn't sink. Plus, we got some fine pictures.

January 11, 2006

It rained all night and showed no signs of stopping after breakfast. This was our last full day in the Holy Land and we still had a lot of work to do. We loaded up the Chev and drove east toward Mt. Tabor. This is the place where Peter, James and John witnessed the Transfiguration of Jesus. In the story, Jesus takes his disciples up

onto the mountain where he has a conversation with Elijah and Moses. The Transfiguration is the beginning of the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. The rain still hadn't let up. Mt. Tabor was shrouded in clouds. A narrow, single lane road winds up to the top of the mountain. The Chev puffed and chugged and managed to haul us to the summit. On top of Mt. Tabor is the Church of the Transfiguration. The Church is built on top of much earlier Crusader ruins. The fog and mist gave the scene an eerie, mysterious look. The Transfiguration is kind of eerie, too, so the fog was perfect. We made our recordings, and drove back down the mountain and on to Nazareth, the place where Jesus was born. Once in Nazareth, we had lunch and made a recording. Then we drove into the hills overlooking the city for a wide shot. Nazareth is crowded and rather gritty. It is not what you picture in the Bible.

With most of our work completed, Peter, Jim and I drove back to Jerusalem. Samir picked us up at 1:30 a.m. for a 5:30a.m. flight home. Before he did, we walked back to the Old City. It was after dark and it was neat to see this famous place after all the tourists go home. One major goal of our expedition was to make six recordings for Grace Matters, the Radio Ministry of the ELCA. After walking the Via Dolorosa for a bit, we found a fairly quiet ally and recorded our last show. As we neared the end, Jim fired up one of his long, hand rolled victory cigars - another successful shoot in the can.



Sunset over the Sea of Galilee.