



I am grateful for the opportunity to share with my Hood Seminary family some of the sites I was able to see while on a Holy Land pilgrimage at the end of February. I am Juston Smith, a proud 2014 M.Div. graduate, and associate pastor of First UMC in Gastonia. Along with colleagues and laity, 23 of us traveled around familiar scriptural sites, and I share with you some of the sites along Jesus' journeys. As I cannot share with you every place we visited, I thought I would share with you some of the most memorable locations, starting here at the *Church of the Annunciation*. You can see behind the altar the place where Mary would have been living with her family when she would have been visited by the angel to hear she would bear Emmanuel.

"In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth" (Luke 1:39-40). The church to the right is the *Church of the Visitation*. It is in this place, Ein Karem, where Elizabeth's baby leapt in her womb (John the Baptist).



Bethlehem is home of the *Church of the Nativity* which houses the *Grotto of the Nativity*. The *Grotto* is the cavernous stable within this Greek Orthodox church where the original manger was located.

One of the most striking places was *The Wilderness* overlooking the *Jordan Valley*. It is like a sea of white rock covered mountains, which brings to life, even more, the story of Jesus' going into the wilderness following his baptism and being tempted by Satan. "The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread'" (Matthew 4:3).



Being out on the *Sea of Galilee* and around the *Mediterranean Sea* at *Caesarea Maritime* brings to life the idea of "living water" and the beauty of God's creation. Both bodies of water are beyond description as to their color, calmness, and clarity. In the best words possible, think of the most purest teal-blue yet still clear. The shells along both shores are like nothing we see around the "touristy" beaches we frequent.

Finally, the beauty of the *Temple Mount* and being with three faiths in one place that felt peaceful was a very moving experience. We had the opportunity to pray at the *Western Wall* with our Jewish brothers and sisters. We also learned the Arabic mosaic written around the octagon of the *Dome of the Rock* is the birth narrative of Jesus. I wish there was more time and space to share the entire experience, and I pray that you'll go with me next time!



Grace & Peace,  
Juston Smith