

I suppose you could say I was...fortunate with the timing of my birth. Soon enough the timing was just right for trips during high school and college to different parts of the country and even overseas with French clubs and choir tours. But then came seminary, and I took a class that led me to Israel and Palestine, the Holy Land, they call it. Of course, it was also perfect timing when tensions ran high between Israeli troops and Hamas. Missiles launched as we were on the plane ride to Tel Aviv. Now there were certain stops on the itinerary we could no longer make because they were in firing range from the Hamas terrorist group in the West Bank, but at no point did we ever feel unsafe. Once we got to Jerusalem, towards the end of our trip, you could see Israeli military personnel on every street. Welcome to the Middle East, the Holy Land, they call it.

One of the stops in Jerusalem was what is called the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, where it is believed is the site of the tomb that held Jesus' body for three days, as well as the site of the crucifixion. Of course, when you walk in, you do not walk in alone. This is the most sought-after place to visit for Christians all over the world. You walk in with a mass of people, almost feeling as if you are eerily close to experiencing what it must have

been like for Jesus to walk the streets of Jerusalem thousands of years ago. So, you walk into this sacred site through so much ornate art and lavish decorations with gold and more gold leading you up to where it is believed Jesus was crucified. Then you make your way down to what looks like a little church building inside this larger church you're already walking through. But that little church down there holds the precious tomb. You make your way through the line that lasts forever and then some, and you duck inside the tomb. Then, you have a grand total of several seconds to take it all in and move on out as the religious higher-ups on the inside voice their impatient displeasure to keep the tourist attraction running up-to-speed for the rest of the mass of humanity coming through.

Until, last week happened, when the doors to the whole Church of the Holy Sepulcher were slammed shut over disputes with property taxes among other wonderful political annoyances. For three days, oddly enough, what is believed to be most holy site for Christians everywhere was closed in as tightly as the very stone itself on the tomb thousands of years ago. Christians became irate. How dare they close the doors, especially as we

approach the holiest week of the entire year for us. How dare they keep us from observing, from experiencing such soul-enriching holiness!

Except the problem is with many of these sacred sites, these tourist attractions, is that we do not know *exactly* where any of these Biblical events happened. We honestly don't know where the exact point the cross stood up that held our Savior. We don't know the precise spot where Mary held the baby Jesus for the first time. We cannot, with pin-point accuracy, figure out where our Messiah ascended into the heavens. We have our fair share of well-educated guesses, to be sure, but let's be honest with ourselves: we don't know for sure.

And I remember one of my seminary professors saying that he hopes we never will. Because, at that point, we will worship the place and not the person: not the God-in-flesh, not the Savior of all that mass of humanity that passes through, and the even more massive mass of humanity that will never see it first-hand. Don't get me wrong, it was an experience of a lifetime, no doubt about it.

However, there is a part of me that looks back in appreciation of those old men inside the tomb who told me to move it along, because, after all,

there's...nothing to see there. He's gone. He's no longer inside that tomb. You want to see Jesus? Go out into that mass of humanity, and he's right there in the thick of it. He isn't behind the gold ornate artwork. He doesn't stay in some tourist attraction no matter how much we call it the "Holy Land." You wanna know what's holy land? All of it. The entire Creation, because you can be sure God has been there since the beginning as much as God was in Jerusalem itself in Jesus Christ long ago.

So, when it comes to the Gospel this morning: of course, Jesus says, "Go ahead, tear it all down! Tear me down while you're at it, but you have no idea what is about to happen next." No tomb, no building, no human structure of any kind can contain this earth-shattering Gospel of a passion for the entire mass of humanity from the beginning of time and into eternity. No temple, no church anywhere can keep Jesus to itself. He's already been unleashed into the whole world, so that nothing, not even death itself, stands a chance against the universal-reaching love of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord, the church's one and only foundation. And for that, we most certainly give thanks to God indeed! Amen.