

Today you head to Bethlehem to visit the cave revered to be the birthplace of Jesus, and see the Church of the Nativity built over the site. ([Luke 2:1-21](#)). Entering the church means having to stoop low as the only doorway in the fortress-like front wall is just 1.2 meters high (3.9 feet). The previous entrance was lowered around the year 1500 to stop looters from driving their carts into the Church. Today's basilica, the oldest complete church in the Christian world, was built by the emperor Justinian in the 6th century, replacing the original church of Constantine the Great, built over the cave in AD 339. Before Constantine the Romans tried to wipe out the memory of the cave by planting a grove dedicated to the pagan god Adonis, lover of Venus, and established his cult in the cave.

Persians invaded Palestine in 614 and destroyed many churches, but spared the Church of the Nativity when they saw a mosaic on the interior wall depicting the Three Wise Men in Persian dress. In 1482 King Edward IV sent English oak and tons of lead to renew the roof but in the 17th century the Turks looted the lead to melt into bullets. The roof rotted and most of the rich mosaics on the walls of the nave were ruined. When Unesco put the basilica on its list of world heritage sites in 2012, it was also deemed to be endangered because of damage due to water leaks. A \$15 million restoration on the church's roof, walls and mosaics began in 2013.

While the Gospels do not say that Jesus was born in a cave, there are written references to the Nativity cave as far back as AD 160. Even today in the Judean hills, families live in primitive houses built in front of natural caves used for storage or to shelter animals.

Afterwards, we will gaze out over Shepherd's Field with the many caves where shepherds "kept watch over their flock." It was here, according to the Gospel of Luke, an angel announced the birth of Jesus. The angel's good news was not given to the noble or pious, but to workers with a low reputation. Jewish literature ranked "shepherd" as among the most despised occupations of the time - but Jesus was to identify himself with this occupation when he called himself "the Good Shepherd" ([John 10:11](#)).

In Kathie Lee Gifford's book *The Rock, the Road and the Rabbi*,\* Rabbi Jason brings a beautiful explanation of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, with the Levitical shepherds in the area tending the flock of sheep bred for the sole purpose as sacrificial lambs, and raised without blemish. If you have not read her book, you might enjoy it as you prepare for the trip. I certainly did. The Rabbi's perspective brought a new depth of understanding.

You will visit the Garden of Gethsemane to pray and contemplate what it must have been like for the Disciples and Jesus that night before Jesus' crucifixion ([Matt: 26: 36-44](#)). The garden, near the foot of the Mount of Olives, is about 1,200 square meters and was well known to the disciples as it is close to the natural route from the Temple to the summit of the Mount of Olives and the ridge leading to Bethany. (I so wanted to climb the fence and kneel at the magnificent olive trees that are centuries old) Beside the garden is the Church of All Nations, built over the rock on which Jesus is believed to have prayed in agony before he was betrayed by Judas Iscariot and arrested. About 100 meters north of the church is the Grotto of Gethsemane, where Jesus and his disciples often camped at night and it is believed to be where the disciples slept while Jesus prayed. The Grotto is basically unchanged from the time of Jesus. Near the grotto is the Tomb of Mary, where Christian tradition holds that the Mother of Jesus was buried after she "fell asleep" in death.

You'll continue to Mount Zion to visit the House of the High Priest Caiaphas, where Jesus was questioned the night of his betrayal ([Matt: 26:57](#)). Hopefully Pastor Phil will lead singing of "Were You There". It is a very moving experience. Also on Mount Zion is the Cenacle, the traditional location of the Upper Room since the fourth century AD, where you'll meditate on the events of the

Last Supper. ([Mark 14:12-26](#)). According to tradition, this is where the apostles stayed when they were in Jerusalem, where the Last Supper took place and where Jesus washed his disciples' feet ([John 13:1-20](#)), a symbol of a ministry of loving service. This is also said to be the same room where Jesus appeared, both before and after the resurrection. The current structure of the room dates approximately from the fourteenth century, which accounts for the Gothic-era columns.

The Cenacle is a much sought-after destination for Christians who travel to the Holy Land, and yet is also the center of political controversy as it has great spiritual significance for both Jews and Muslims. The present structure is contested and claimed by both Israelis and Muslims. Muslims consider it to be a mosque and the Israelis consider the lower level of this structure to be the Tomb of David, which has belonged to the Israelis since 1948.

While you will not be able to participate in a communion service at this location, the goal is to come together for a prayer and communion at the end of the day.