

SEA OF GALILEE

Sea of Galilee: Mt 4:22-25, 17:24-27; Mk 1:16-20, 6:45-56; Lk 5:1-11; Jn 6:16-21

Mount of Beatitudes: Mt 5-7; Lk 6:12-49; Tabgha: Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:31-44; Lk 9:10-17

Mount Tabor: Mt 17:1-9; Mk 9:2-9; Lk 9:28-36; 2 Pet 1:16-18

The Sea of Galilee (also Sea of Tiberias or Sea of Gennesaret) is located in the northern third of Israel. Today the areas around this large body of water feel almost deserted, but in the time of Christ the Sea of Galilee was a district alive with the daily life of a ring of fishing towns and villages, including Capernaum and Bethsaida on the north, Magdala on the west, and the Greek cities of the Decapolis to the east. In addition, Herod Antipas built the new town of Tiberias on the west side of the lake, making it the capital city of Galilee and dedicating it to the Roman emperor. Not to be outdone by his half-brother, Philip later raised Bethsaida to the rank of a *polis* and renamed it Julia in honor of the emperor's mother.



Sea of Galilee

One of the major trade routes of ancient times came from Damascus in Syria, southwest to the Sea of Galilee, following its northwest shore and cutting through the pass at Mount Arbel on the sea's west coast to continue on to the Mediterranean Sea, thus connecting the King's Highway in the east to the Via Maris (the Way of Sea, which extended from Mesopotamia to Egypt). As a result, the area surrounding the Sea of Galilee in the time of Jesus, especially on the sea's northwest coastline, included towns bustling with trade and commerce.



Mt of Beatitudes (seen from the Sea of Galilee)

Many of Jesus' disciples were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus called them from catching fish to catching men. Jesus traveled with the disciples across the sea, he walked on its waters, and he calmed the storm when the disciples' boat was near to capsizing. When the crowds were great, Jesus even used Peter's boat to teach from the sea. During our pilgrimage we too will have a chance to ride upon the waters of the Sea of Galilee like Jesus' first disciples.

On the northern side of the Sea we will visit the traditional site of the Mount of Beatitudes. Just as Moses went up the mountain at Sinai to receive the Law, here Jesus went up the hillside and gave the New Law for the New Covenant, beginning with the Beatitudes. Looking over the sloping landscape that surrounds the sea, with its many hills, we can easily recall Jesus' Sermon on the Mount teaching that the light from a city on a hill cannot be hid (Matt 5:14) — Jesus was the master teacher using images that his disciples had right in view to make his teaching clearly understood.



Altar in the Church of Tabgha



Mt Tabor



Apse Mosaic, Church of Mt Tabor

Further along the shore of the Sea of Galilee is Tabgha, the traditional sight of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. When the crowds followed Jesus, “he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). In response, Jesus feeds the people; first with his word, teaching them, and then also with bread and fish, at the hands of his Apostles.

Having grown up in Nazareth to the west of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus would have walked the Galilean hills and paths. During one of these travels during his ministry, Jesus ascends Mount Tabor bringing with him Peter, James and John. Here Jesus is transfigured before the disciples’ eyes, his countenance altered and his raiment becoming dazzling white. With Jesus appear Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah, representing the Prophets, both of which find their fulfillment in Jesus. What both Moses and Elijah could not see upon God’s holy mountain during their lifetime, they behold on Mount Tabor as they speak to Christ face to face.

The Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, was likely taking place at this time, which helps us understand Peter’s inquiry into whether they should construct three booths. God’s people were instructed to erect booths during this great feast as a reminder of the temporary dwellings used after the Exodus as they wandered in the desert under God’s protection. This feast, which also remembered the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, is fulfilled in Christ, who is himself the New Law. We too, like Peter, James and John on Mount Tabor, are called to hearken to the voice of the Father when he says, “This is my beloved Son, ... listen to him” (Matt 17:5).

While the lands about the Sea of Galilee may be quieter today than in Jesus’ time, the Sea itself looks very much the same. Looking out over the landscape, one can envision Jesus at the seashore, teaching and spending time with his disciples. Here too, Jesus desires to spend time with each of us during our pilgrimage.

Some thoughts for your reflection and *lectio* on these passages and events of Scripture:

- St. Athanasius calls us, as “lovers of Christ,” to “read the Words of Scripture, and really apply our mind to them.” Read and hear our Lord speaking to you just as if you were in the crowd on the Mount of Beatitudes or at Tabgha.
- Jesus teaches the people from Peter’s boat. Then he turns to Peter and says, “put out into the deep.” In what area of my life is Jesus calling me to trust him and “put out into the deep.”
- On Mt Tabor, Peter, James and John look upon Jesus’ glory. With his altered countenance and dazzling white raiment, the disciples see Jesus anew. Often we need to look beyond the simple, earthly appearance to see the deeper, spiritual reality. This will be true of many of the places we visit in the Holy Land, especially where we are only able to see ruins or remains of ancient locations and buildings. Pray for the grace to see beyond the meager temporal realities and encounter our Lord in this land where he once walked and taught.