

## Exploring D.C.

*Studying the Bible is a lot like taking a trip or exploring a city. What can you learn about exploration of the Bible from this travel account?*

I love to explore. So, when my husband and I had a chance to take a road trip, I wanted to go some place new, interesting, unknown. We picked Washington D.C.

Now of course, I did know something about the place. My dad took me there when I was eight. I remember that there were a lot of pigeons, and I remember falling into the reflecting pool in front of Lincoln memorial. I have also seen photos and images of D.C. in videos, commercials, and magazines: the White House, Lincoln Memorial, Washington Memorial, the Capitol, Arlington National Cemetery. But I knew that seeing pictures and experiencing a place are two very different things. Since neither my husband Jon nor I had visited Washington D.C. as adults, we decided that it was the perfect place to spend a week exploring.

Before our vacation, we read a book about American democracy. This helped us start to think about our nation and its values. We had heard that capital cities are a reflection of the self-concept of a nation, so as we drove into D.C. we were eager to see what we could learn about our country by exploring its capital.

When you get to the center of D.C., your eyes are drawn to all the white stone and polished marble. There is a monument or statue at every turn! One of the first things that struck me was how many of our monuments are related to war. (In Vienna, Austria there are just as many objects made of stone, but most of those commemorate musicians, artists, or intellectuals.) Not only are there war memorials for every war we have ever participated in (Vietnam, Korean, WWI, WW II, the Civil War, the Spanish-American war, the Gulf war), but even the presidents who have been singled out with statues or memorials were in office during war. This raised interesting questions: Is our country particularly drawn towards war or do all of the nations of the world highlight military endeavors in their capitals? How do we as a country feel about our military exploits? I noticed differences in the representation of the different wars. There is a tinge of grief in the Lincoln Memorial as we are helped to remember a war between brothers. The Korean memorial focuses on the difficulty of being a soldier. The Vietnam memorial lists every name of every soldier killed in that conflict and provides a way for visitors to locate a name of a family member or friend on the wall. What did the designers of each of these monuments have in mind? What were they hoping to communicate to the millions of Americans and foreigners who visit each year? What do the differences and similarities of these different memorials tell us about that phase of our history and about the outcome of each of those wars?

Passing by the street vendors, I gave up the opportunity to buy cheap T-shirts, Washington Monument key chains, and American flag baseball hats. Jon and I were more interested in looking for clues to questions we have about race in America. How does our nation's capital portray itself in terms of our ethnic makeup? We expected the quotes on the Lincoln Memorial to be stirring, since from childhood we associated Lincoln with anti-slavery. What was unexpected was the graphic nature of the Holocaust Museum. Located in a city that exudes confidence and celebration of human accomplishment, stands a museum that is more than a collection of artifacts. It recreates a taste of the horror of the holocaust through its lighting, architecture, displays and sounds. The experience moved me to prayer, mourning the loss of innocent life and pleading for peace on the earth. I find it interesting that we remember the brutality of the Germans, but there is no equivalent building to remind the world of America's treatment of the natives of this continent. Did a government official intentionally decide to avoid this somber issue of American history in the capital, or is it a sign of collective amnesia? I didn't find an answer to that question.

My physicist husband is interested in the history of technology, so the National Air and Space Museum was on his must-see list. Since I can't tell one plane from another, I probably wouldn't have entered this museum at all without Jon. He was an informative guide, pointing out details I would have never seen on my own. After two hours walking around on tired feet, looking at aircraft and spaceships, I was about to launch into the "are we ready to go yet?" speech when we came to the room housing *Enola Gay*, the aircraft used to drop the A-bomb on Hiroshima. My attention was quickly riveted by the display, and for a while I forgot about my tired feet and my growling stomach. It was moving to see replicas of the pilots in the aircraft, to hear recordings of their conversations and radio communication from the historic flight, and watch footage of them 50 years later reflecting on that mission and sorting through the multitude of issues involved in their participation in that bombing. I left the museum quiet and thoughtful. The *Enola Gay* room had led us into deeper discussions about the issues involved in a country going to war, the ethics of technology, and role of the U.S. in world affairs.

My favorite spot in Washington D.C. was the Supreme Court. Prior to this trip, I had no mental picture of it, just an abstract sense of what the court does. It is a stately, impressive building. Across the top of the building is carved "With Justice for All." For a few minutes, we were able to watch the court in session. Our justice system became alive to me as I sat yards away from the justices listening to the presenting lawyer. They kept interrupting him, asking questions and commenting on his points. It was so different than other courts I have seen where there's a single silent judge and it's really the lawyers' show. Noticing this difference led me to ask questions about how the Supreme Court functions. I got answers from literature, displays, and an attendant, which led me to a greater understanding of the goals and role of both federal and state judiciary.

Upon leaving the Supreme Court, I sat on the granite steps enjoying the view. I mused to myself, "What a remarkable legal system we have! How ingenious it is to have checks and balances within the government." I shared some of my thoughts with Jon as we soaked in the autumn sunshine. Before taking on a new experience, we chatted a while about the benefits of the American judicial system as it was created by the authors of the Constitution.

As we continued to explore, our view of the U.S. grew more complex and sophisticated. Some questions were answered, many more raised. I found that the more I learned, the more I was able to see, understand, and connect with other parts of the city. A week was just enough to convince me that I must come back, to take another pass at the things we saw, to see more, to try to grasp the essence of our nation's capital.

Pulling together what we saw (and what was conspicuously missing), we were impressed by the strong mix of the honorable and questionable elements of our nation's history. I am glad our country says it values "Justice for All." This gives us a common point to strive for and judge ourselves and our government by. Yet it makes me deeply sad that so many have died because governments and individuals do not really desire justice for all; they want prosperity and power for themselves. I was very conscious that I was exploring a history that is not yet complete; the future chapters could be beautiful or despicable.

On the ride home, Jon and I discussed how well our country is doing at pursuing liberty and justice for all people. We brainstormed ways he and I can promote justice and equality. What will it mean for us to raise our children to be people that pursue racial justice? What experiences will we create for our children to mold them into just people? We decided we want Michael and Mary to grow up in a mixed-race neighborhood. We want them to grow up with friends of color. So, we're going to think about this every time we buy a house, join a church, or choose schools for our children. We hope these steps will help our kids develop a broader understanding of who is included in "Justice for **All**."

Lindsay Olesberg  
IVCF-USA, July 1998 (revised Nov. 2000)