Right away we learned that to follow the Rabbi is to follow in faith. “Come, let's go.” You don't question it - - he will lead. Trust there is always some purpose to why and where he is taking you.

Come – follow me to the Shephelah... a region in south-central Israel between Mt. Hebron and the coastal plain of Philistia, in the area of Judea, where a semi-arid, temperate climate exists. The valley of Ajalon guarded by Gezer, the valley of Sorek and Elah guarded by Timnah, Beth Shemesh, and Azekah. The Lachish valley is guarded by Lachish. When you think of Shephelah – think of King Saul, Jonathon, David and Goliath, and Samson. Think of 5 turtleback ridges with 4 valleys.

**Atad tree:** Judges chapter 9. The people wanted a crown Abimelech king, and Jotham, the judge, climbed to the top of Mt. Gerizim and told a story (parable) using trees. “The trees went out to anoint a king. They said to the olive tree, “Be our King.”” “Why would I give up my oil to hold sway over the trees?” Next the trees went to the fig tree, “Be our king.” “Should I give up my fruit to hold sway over the trees?” So the trees said to the vine, “Come and be our king.” “Should I give up my wine to hold sway over the trees?” Finally, they said to the thornbush (Atad), “Come and be our king.” “If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade – but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the ceders of Lebanon!” Point: The king would be a thorn in the flesh of the people. Why would you want that? The Atad tree spreads and people hated them... This is the first parable in the Bible.

**City Gates**

Cities in ancient times were places of refuge... most of the time, walled cities... they were centers of community life – if you were more well to do you actually lived within the city walls – some people actually lived in the walls themselves (think Rahab)... City gates are defensive. Often 8-9 feet thick. When trouble would come to the region, the 'daughters' would flee to the city of refuge... Daughters are any outlying towns, villages or populated areas that didn't have protective walls( made up of middle to lower class.) Because of this, when enemies invaded the land – the outlying villages, fields, and homes would be pillaged and destroyed first. Causing the poor to remain poor.

In any city that had walls – there was a city gate. Dt. 14:28-29, “At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns (city gates), so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied.” The city gate was where people brought the tithes and offerings. At the entrance of the city gate, there would be storage compartments, gatehouses, chambers... so that those who were in need would be able to find food...

God says, “You are my city... and in my city, there is a gate.” God wants his people to be city gates.

There is another purpose for the city gates... not only was it a place to find mercy... it was a place to find justice...

Proverbs 22:22, “Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in the city gates... for the Lord will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them.”
Amos 5:11-12, “You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins.”

The elders and the judges would sit at the city gates... they would judge matters – like in a court... the alien, the poor, the widow, the wronged could come to the city gates and find justice... and mercy.

To belong to a city is refuge... to belong to a city is to have access to justice... to belong to a city is to receive mercy... When the community looks at our faith community – what do they see? We are called to be city gates... we are a city on a hill... and when others see her – does it stand for refuge, safety, a place of sure and true justice and mercy? Are we a city? Are we a city gate?

God would challenge his people to care for the poor in the city gates through the words of his prophets... and I paraphrase, “If you don't care for the poor, don't come crying to me when hard times come!”

Tel Gezer: think Solomon, Egyptians, King Uzziah - approximately 2,800 years old – dated by writings, pottery, carbon 14, building styles, etc... Whoever has Gezer has major influence. Major trade route as the Via Maras, King's highway, the Ridge Road, and other roads passed through this area. God placed his people at the crossroads! To be a city gate and a city on a hill – a light on a stand as 15 million people traveled from the North and the East to Egypt. The valley of Ayyalon is below the city... think Joshua 10 and 16. Because the Israelites left the Canaanites in Gezer region, they compromised their influence of culture in the promised land.

Israel was given a strip of land between the East and the West, the North and the South... great nations needed to traverse through this land... Located between the coastal plains (where the world and all of its spiritual/physical need) and the Shephelah... foothills... (where God's people dwell as standing stones and city gates.) They were to stand in the gap between the plains and the mountains. Where YHWH's worldview met the pagan worldview. God placed his people at the center of the action and influence with the Word of God in hand and the call to be faithful. Yet, they left Canaanites in the land... and instead of influencing them – they were influenced by the Canaanites. Several Philistine cities nearby, some within 3 miles – Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gaza, Gath, and Ekron. The Hebrews never controlled the coastal plain. And they never drove the Canaanites completely out of the land (Judges 1:33) In the shephelah of your world, who shapes whom??? God is looking for partners so that the world may know!

Merahefet: when a dove hovers in place, beating its wings in an upward, backward motion. For the Hebrew people this signified that God was with them. “God hovers over us like a mother bird over its nest. Protecting – shielding. Creation Story - “The spirit of God merahefets over the water.” Jesus Baptism - “A dove descended from heaven and merahefets over Jesus.” The sound of wings!

Standing Stones

We saw standing stones, maseveh, a standing stone of unusual placement, on our first night in Israel as the sun was setting in the West. To the Hebrews it meant, “God did something here.” A sign... You never write on it... just erect it... As long as there is a witness there is a story to be told. A standing stone has a witness – without a witness – they are worthless. This was not unique to the people of
Israel to place standing stones... many standing stones exist to Baal for example. It's too bad that at the crossroads of the world in Ancient times, we were witnesses to the standing stones of Baal.

Joshua erected standing stones when they crossed the Jordan river – 12 of them. Jacob had several standing stone moments. After his dream (ladder/angels) fleeing from Esau, after leaving Laban, and wrestling with God...

God calls us living stones... witnesses to what he has done. 1 Peter 2:5 - “You, like living stones (standing stones) are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Do those who know you view you as a standing stone?

Karab tree: 'Locust' Tree that produced pods – 'chocolate' tree. John the Baptist probably survived often on Karab pods.

Tribe of Dan and Judah:
- Numbers 10:25. Dan is the rear guard and there flag is the serpent. They function as the 'door' on the way to Jerusalem. They were to be the first witness of YHWH to the nations (Judges 18:30-31). They continued to worship idols. Judges 1:34-35, “The Amorites confined the Danites to the hill country, not allowing them to come down into the plain.” The Via Maras enters by way of Danite country. We had a good look at the ridge of Dan from Zora to Eshtol.
- Dan always seems to mess up. Genesis 49:16-17, “Dan will provide justice for his people as one of the tribes of Israel. (Samson?) Dan will be a serpent by the roadside, a viper along the path, that bites the horse's heels so that its rider tumbles backward.: Dan is often paired with Judah in Scripture.
- In Revelation, the tribe of Dan is missing.
- Samson is from the tribe of Dan. Samson has a weakness of the eyes... a loner of sorts. He is a good example of God's 'measure for measure.' He had weakness of the eyes (Delilah) and in the end his eyes plucked out. Judges 16:1, “One day Samson went to Gaza where he saw a prostitute.” Even though Samson was a Nazarite – he broke every vow of a Nazerite... touches dead carcases, cuts his hair, etc... Samson was used to illustrate the importance of God's people and God's community. Often, Samson did his own thing by himself. It weakened his resolve to remain separate and set apart.
- Judah means “God praiser” and they go first. Jesus is born of Judah descent.

Eli and his sons: (priests) ...another story on 'measure for measure.' Eli failed to discipline his sons and as a result – his vision became dull (1 Samuel 4:15) and he could not hear the voice of God any longer (1 Samuel 3:1-21)... 'measure for measure' – Eli died old and fat (1 Samuel 4:18). He stole food from the people... and just like an idol – fell down before God.
- Eli's sons stole meat from the temple sacrifices. The sons send the ark into battle and the ark is captured. The ark is placed in the temple of Dagon in Ekron - “God is not as strong as Dagon.”
- The people of Ekron break out in hemorrhoids and the idol of Dagon falls over “fell face down (bowed).”
- The Philistines bring the ark back with a gift of gold hemorrhoids to Beth Shemesh. The people rejoice! “Our God YHWH is greater than Dagon!” The people placed a standing stone to mark the day the ark returned.
- Role of a priest: be ritually pure, mediate between God and people (sacrifices), meet the needs of the people, and put God on display (reveal God's glory to others.)
**Pig bones:** The people were commanded to not eat pork. When the cities are excavated and they work through the various cities and civilizations, it can be determined by place and dating how many and how faithful the Israelites generally were to following God's commands. In the time of Hezekiah – no pig bones. During Samson's time – 25%. During the Canaanite occupation – many pig bones.

How many big bones do we have lying in the corners of our heart? Obedience present? Or are there lots of pig bones...

**Oldest Hebrew Inscription found:**
We were not expecting to see Josef Garfinkel, the recent archeologist who excavated the 'two gaited city' we were exploring. There he was, on the hillside, just below the second gate with some colleagues. This surely was one of the highlights for RVL. Tel Beth Sha'araim – two gated. This is a city of David's time – a place where he would have frequented. This was the gate that King David entered long ago!

**David and Goliath: Throw your stone:** This story took place just below the cliff walls of Beth Sha'araim. For 40 days Goliath went out twice – at mid-morning and at mid-afternoon (the 3rd and 9th hour sacrifices.) This was a direct mockery of the Israelites God. As the Philistines fled, the 'dead were strewn along the Sha'araim road to Gath and Ekron.” 1 Samuel 17:52.

**David and Goliath continued: King David and King Saul:** The kings of Israel were commanded to not accumulate wives, riches, or horses. They were to hand-copy the Torah and read it everyday! (Deuteronomy 17:14-20) David is of the tribe of Judah, a 'God praiser.' This is evident in living out his calling when he says to Saul, “The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine... this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defiled the armies of the living God.” It was a king's responsibility to look after the sheep of Israel (People of God.) David says, “Your servant has been keeping his Father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth.” And David is going to do the same thing to Goliath. A king is supposed to watch his sheep. “Saul is a king for them... David is a king for me.”

Guarding the 'sheep' was Saul's responsibility... the text refers to Saul over and over as being tall... but he would not stand up to Goliath. But David does... He is the shepherd king. This is the day that Saul gives away his kingship to one who will follow through with God's calling for a king. Saul says to David, “Go, and the Lord be with you.” David says, “Your servant will go and fight him!” And the Lord did go with David...

The contrast is stunning... Saul, the great 'slinger', outdone by a small shepherd boy... a slinger in his own right. David goes into battle with who he is and what he has... a sling and five smooth stones... it only took one. David has YHWH on his side and an unwavering trust in him. 1 Samuel 17:46, “This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God is Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give all of you into our hands.” YES!!!!

Goliath fell face down. He 'bowed' down before Israel and before YHWH and the Philistines fled!
Why five stones? Goliath had 4 brothers and there were 5 Philistine cities... could it be that each stone was for each of Goliath's brothers? Or could it be representative of the 5 books of Torah, Goliath was 'hit between the eyes.' Exactly where tradition of God's people are to keep his word, “Between the eyes.”

_Don't be afraid to throw your stone... with what you are and what you have. Do what you do best, with what God has given you, to be his shephelah person._

_Notes of interest: _Solomon doesn't follow through with any of the requirements of a King in Dt. 17:14-20. He breaks all three commands listed there. We often think that the people's request for a king was not what God intended – yet, we find guidelines about the appointment of a king when they enter the land in Dt. 17._

_Side note:_ David introduced Iron into the weaponry of Israel and they began to become more dominant in war. He must have acquired the technology from they Philistines. David used the best technology to advance the kingdom of God... How about us?

**Samson and David:** contrast
When David was in trouble – hiding out in the cave of Abdullum, he ran into the arms of YHWH. He wrote Psalm 42 from this place, “I cry aloud to the Lord... I lift my voice to the Lord.” (Also see 1 Samuel 22) “You are my refuge...” Contrast this to Samson who runs to the arms of Delilah.