September 6, 2015 Proper 18

All Saints’ Church Year B

Isaiah 35:4-7a James 2:1-10, 14-17

Psalm 147 Mark 7:24-37

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in thy Sight, dear Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

About twelve years ago, I had the good fortune of being invited to a wedding of one of my students, at Sharm el-Sheikh, southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, in Egypt, a resort on the Red Sea.

The wedding festivities lasted a few days, with the last night filled with an evening of dancing.

I arranged for a taxi to pick me up about 4 am, just as the evening was coming to an end.

I wanted to visit the Library of St. Catherine’s, the oldest continuously inhabited Christian monastery in the world, over 17 centuries old. The monastery is nestled at the bottom of Mount Decalogue, or as we refer to it, Mt. Sinai, positioned next to the Burning Bush, understood to be where God appeared to Moses as fire without consuming the bush.

It was at least a 3 hour drive into the center of the Sinai Peninsula- one narrow asphalt paved road through the desert, with a few check points, along the way. My driver picked me up and we started; he was playing a tape of the recitation of the Qur’an and I asked him to keep it on which pleased him.

The memory of this day is sealed in my heart. With the recitation as the chorus, the desert expanded for miles, as far as I could see, only sand and sand dunes. The sun was rising over the horizon, with the moon setting, casting a red hue on the desert. There was a warm wind, and in the distance, as we got further away from city life, I could see Bedouin tents, with beautiful colors of red, yellow and green. Women were carrying bundles of dung to start their fires- tent flaps were opening up. Young boys on their camels raced to my taxi and then tried to keep up with us. Their speed was amazing- they came so close I could see their smiles and high cheek bones as they raised their fists in delight. Their bodies were taut and sinewy, and they were joyful, laughing as they raced.

Everything was pulsating with life, so much life. Yet, I felt so foreign, so out of place. The asphalt road felt like a line drawn in the sand, separating our two worlds. I was an American, privileged enough to hire a taxi, and I was entering into a time that hadn’t changed for centuries, 17 centuries and more. A paved road, with check points, cut through a way of life that was ancient, proud and so, so, separate.

Was I safe? Who knows? I was driven. I couldn’t be this close to pages of the Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest book of both the Old and New Testaments to survive antiquity and not see it. It was almost 2000 years old, handwritten, and a treasure. I wanted to be in its presence and I was willing to take the risk, make the effort, to get there.

What took Jesus into foreign territory- away from his home, his people, his comforts, his traditions, into the land of the enemy?

The prophet Isaiah says, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come to save you.”

From whom?- Those “Gentiles” that destroyed Jerusalem 500 years before Jesus’ time and sent her people into Exile, into Babylon to be swallowed up by her conquerors.

The disciples are lost (there is no taxi driver). Mark, our gospel writer, is confused. From Tyre to the Sea of Galilee by way of Sidon is like going from Baltimore to Washington DC by way of Philadelphia.

Jesus and his disciples and even Mark are afraid to absorb the geography; it’s beyond the map of their minds, their tongues, their hearts.

Isaiah writes, (just before our passage for this morning), with horrifying images of the enemies’ doom:

* Their slain shall be cast out
* The stench of their corpses shall rise
* The mountains will flow with their blood (we don’t read these passages in church)

Jesus and his disciples are in the land of the enemy. Unhinged, here they are, right in the middle. So Jesus must be on edge, to say the least. He doesn’t want anyone to know that he is there. Yet, he could not escape notice.

A woman comes, her ancestors were the enemy; this woman, a descendent, is Gentile, Syrophonician. She crouches as Jesus’ feet, kneeling. She begs him for her daughter to be released from a demon. She is persistent, yet full of humility.

Jesus says, “Sorry, no way, I’m feeding my own children, not my enemies. I am not giving my food to dogs.”

And then comes her great comeback line; the only one to ever win an argument with Jesus:

“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

This attitude, this prayer, this need, this courage has already healed her daughter. “For saying that, you may go- your daughter is healed.”

Just as Jesus will “unstop” the ears of the deaf man, which appears later in our gospel reading, God has unstopped Jesus’ ears.

We are witnessing a radical shift. Jesus, at his most human portrayal, has had his whole world opened up. No more boundaries. No single paved line cut across the desert. No separation.

“Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill be made low. The rough ground will become a plain, rugged terrain a broad valley.”

“Making a way in the wilderness, streams in the wasteland, All will return to the LORD.”

Jesus’ message is a universal message. This grace, love, forgiveness, hope, and inclusion is for all and is the heartbeat of the human spirit.

I cried for the three hours I was at St. Catherine’s library- such beautiful manuscripts, artifacts, and icons. I was in the midst, deep down, of our tradition. And yet, throughout the monastery, there were Bedouins working- making bread, washing sheets, manning the gift shop, sweeping, and talking whenever possible about the beautiful manuscripts.

At closing, 12 noon, I left and just as I was outside the gate, I noticed I didn’t have my camera. I squeezed back in just at the gate was swinging shut. Mohammad told me that I had to leave, but when I told him about my camera, he made me a cup of tea. Women couldn’t walk freely in the monastery, so he went searching. Two hours later, he found my camera. When I asked him why he was being so attentive, he told me, “My people protected the builders who created this monastery. This is sacred ground and you are in need. I am here to help, just as we have always helped and protected.”

When I returned to my taxi driver, I was thrilled to see he was still there, even though I had already paid him. “I would never have left you. That would have been dishonorable. You are on a pilgrimage.”

Jesus is also on a pilgrimage and he is in the middle of enemy territory and discovers that he is the savior for all. He is in the midst of “Radical Participation” with the world, with the universal message of salvation, which often doesn’t often awaken and “happen” until you are on unsteady ground.

Radical Participation breaks down our illusion of our separateness, our boundaries, our exclusions. When you cross boundaries like this, you also challenge the idea that God comes in a box of your own making.

When we seek what is Truest in our own tradition, we are one with those who seek what is Truest in their tradition. It takes work to recognize this truth.

Letter of James makes reference to this work. He is fed up with religionists who flaunt their faith and leave off good works. As William Sloane Coffin reminds us, “Traditionalists (stressing rules of belief that often separate us) represent the dead faith of the living, while Tradition is the living faith of the dead.”

We can both be steeped in our Tradition and find the way to universal truth. Both can be True simultaneously.

Our ears are unstopped, healing descends, and hope rises.

AMEN

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