



SUNDAY SERMON

Holiness Is Not Found in the Absence of Conflict

DATE

Lent I

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PREACHER

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Just over a week ago a gentleman presented me with his business card: “Wajeeh Museibeh; Custodian and Door-Keeper of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; Jerusalem”. Arguably the holiest destination in Christendom, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built upon the rock of Golgotha, the place of the skull, where Jesus was crucified and the tomb from which he rose. So why is the Custodian and Door-Keeper of this holiest Christian site a Muslim? (Because) The six branches of Christianity that lay claim to this holy of holies cannot manage to get along with one another. To keep the peace, for the past 800 years, a Muslim family – Mr. Museibeh’s family – has held the keys. Humorous, tragic, ridiculous, honest, human, sinful, laughable. Whatever. For 800 years, it’s worked.

Twenty-six fellow Columban’s and I recently returned from a ten-day pilgrimage to the Holy Land during which we traveled and prayed in some of the very places where Jesus and his disciples lived and prayed. Mr. Iyad Qumri, our guide for much of the pilgrimage, is a Christian, an Arab, a Palestinian. We saw the Holy Land through the lens of the present day plight of Palestinians.

Everywhere we turned, we saw literal layers of history: Judean, Roman, Byzantine, Medieval Crusader, Ottoman, British, unto the present. Each day, stories of Hebrew prophets, Jesus’ life, Roman power, were presented and woven together with stories and experiences of contemporary conflict and military checkpoints. Along cobbled streets, Israeli police armed with M16 machine guns as ubiquitous as the vendors of dates, figs, olives, and holy trinkets.

I realized a parallel story line, a shared narrative across the millennia: of living in a contested state, contested territory, contested times. As today’s concrete wall slices right through and divides small neighborhoods of Bethany, so the Roman occupation road defines the boundaries of Capernaum, just a stone’s throw from the synagogue of Jesus’ early ministry. Regardless which century, it’s the same story line, the same tension – the imbalance of power with glory, subservience, humiliation, poverty, wealth all juxtaposed.

That there are six denominations – Armenian Apostolic, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Coptic, Syriac, and Ethiopian Orthodox – all within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre vying for real estate and proximity: this pattern of relationship is not the exception; it’s the rule. Within the same sphere is found the holiest of holies for our Jewish sisters and brothers – the Western Wall that borders King Solomon’s Temple, and for Muslims too – the Dome of the Rock, where the Prophet Muhammad began his night journey to heaven.

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There was no place or time that was or is neutral, or even pretends to wear the veneer of equanimity. And while our trip offered a welcome respite from the relentlessly polarized context of our own city and nation, we did not escape the tension of life contested. Would that we could find a solution to the dilemma, an answer, the knowledge of good and evil. Eagerly we succumb: come here little boy, come here little girl, and I will show you the way – says the snake in the garden.

The narrative context of Jesus' life is the military economic oppression of the Roman occupiers coupled with the wayward corruption of the religious authorities. But more fundamentally, Jesus is sent to inhabit and reveal spiritually contested territory – where the devil dwells, and the angels too. And here's the thing: the same territory that is contested is the very territory that is holy. During our pilgrimage our eyes and hearts were opened to the very presence of God.

Beloved, holiness is not found in the absence of tension, or in some long sought after sense of peace and serenity. Yes, when I think of holiness, I imagine a place – within my heart, and in my household, and with all the people of the land, and with our God – I imagine a place of harmony, wholeness, and peace.

But what if that's simply the tempter's lure? What if holiness is to be found not in the absence of tension or conflict, but in its very midst – found in our desire for peace – pursuit of redemption in the midst of tension?

As with our own hearts and lives, our own nation's capital, Jerusalem is a place of both: contest and holiness. Ever since the time of King David when the first stone was laid does the Psalmist plea: "pray for the peace of Jerusalem."

I don't mean to suggest that we concede to dis-harmony, conflict, and injustice, or build walls and feed the animosity. The walls I see cause nothing but suffering. Neither am I painting real pain and struggle with a rosy hue. I am suggesting that we enter right into the midst of our strife to seek and find the holy. It is in the places of great pain that we may find the grace for which our hearts are longing.

Much of Jesus' early life is unknown to us. But the writers of all the Gospels agree on two things: that when he was baptized, Jesus was revealed to be God's beloved, God's chosen one. And, that he was sent by the Spirit out into the wilderness to face the tempter, the devil. These two: affirmed as beloved, and tested: would he stay true to his being as God's beloved? He did. Then begins his ministry. I wonder if this points to the life we live... We are, each of us, beloved; children of God. And we are each sent out – or we stumble out – into the wilderness, into places and times of great hunger and confusion. We are put to the test. It is in that hour, that place, that we may discover who we are.

The church invites us into this season of Lent, our own forty days in imitation of the forty days Jesus' spent in the wilderness. It is a time in which we are invited to listen anew, once more, to the longing of our hearts for the deep, abiding love of God. To seek the holiness, I propose we take this time to enter into the very place where we know tension most acutely: A relationship that cries out for forgiveness. A confession we need to make to unburden our soul. A part of our own self that we have come to fear or loathe that instead needs our mercy and love. I suggest

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we not squirrel ourselves away in the relative tranquility of the sanctuary. Rather let us seek out the one with whom we are at odds, that neighbor or family member whose views and apparent values we find so troubling that we have, until now, actively shunned them. Says the prophet Isaiah, I do not seek your sacrifices, I seek that you feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, and be repairers of the breach, bridge the divisions. Enter the division. We know the pain of our current polarization. Don't look for God somewhere else. Don't think you'll get your life in order by moving away from the places that hurt. Move in, move toward. Holiness is life lived contested.

As Jesus was tested in the wilderness, he drew strength by returning to the Word of God. We can do the same. Dwell in the Word. Read the Holy Scriptures. Take up your Bible. Read one of the Gospels – Mark because it's the shortest, or Luke because of its preferential treatment of the poor and of women, John because its mystical. Read some of the psalms. Don't just read them, pray them, sing them; they are written as prayers, as lamentation, as songs of joy and praise – to give voice to our fear, hope, trust and love.

During our pilgrimage we heard from three scholars. Each described the current conflict through a particular lens: Jewish, Christian, Muslim. Each dramatically different from the other. Each concluded that the current state is intractable. None could see a viable political resolution. Yet none of them were without hope. Just the opposite. Each in his own way affirmed that resolution would be realized – somehow. One cited scripture. One cited history. One simply affirmed that it is impossible to live without hope.

Beloved, God called you and blessed you for such a time as this. And now the Holy Spirit sends you out – blessed and beloved – into the fray, into the pain, to find there the holiness you seek, to name it and bear witness in the contested territory of our hearts, families, and nations. Bless you. You already possess all that you need for this hour.