

Faith Without Borders: Finding God Away From Home

Presented at the Gospel Fellowship Church

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Text: Acts Chapter 10.

This text recounts the story of Peter's vision of something like a large sheet descending from heaven with all kinds of living creatures. When God calls him to kill and eat, Peter protests that some of these creatures were unclean according to the Jewish tradition. Meanwhile Cornelius, a Gentile living in Caesarea received a vision in which he was instructed to send for Peter. When Peter does go to meet Cornelius and his family and friends, he realizes that the vision meant that God was moving his gospel into Gentile territory. This is a startling revelation for Peter, one which he would continue to wrestle with in the future. But Cornelius accepts Jesus as the Messiah and is baptized.

Connecting Our Story to Peter's Story

This story in which Peter learns that God is interested in the Gentile world – not only in the Jews – is perhaps one of the most dramatic in the life of the early church. In many ways Peter was a traditionalist. He thought he had God figured out. Jesus was a Jewish Messiah – let the rest of the world go hang! He would give himself to the work of Jewish evangelism. But God's designs were larger than those of Peter, and he had to use some high drama to get that design through to a somewhat stubborn and narrow-minded Jewish disciple of Jesus.

In the aftermath of this event, Peter would still vacillate on a few occasions. But as we know, the Apostle Paul kept Peter's feet to the fire. And in the end Jesus was proclaimed to the Gentiles throughout Asia Minor, Europe and North Africa – and eventually to me.

(Now if this incident had not happened I might still have had a fighting chance to hear about Jesus since I have Jewish blood flowing in my veins. But what about the rest of you poor Gentiles?)

One thing this story should teach us is that God is not confined to the comfortable ethnic, linguistic, denominational and national boxes that we set up for him to dwell in. There is a sense in which Peter's experience of the sheet coming down from heaven needs to be repeated in all of our lives. All of us are tempted to make God into our own image and then condemn those who don't conform to that image – just like Peter did.

We are – all of us – products of our experiences. But I believe that God is in the business of helping us see that he is not a “cookie-cutter” God – that he meets people around the world at the point of their need. And sometimes that is in ways foreign to our ways. Perhaps, by taking note of what God is doing beyond our borders, we just might learn something that will help us in our faith journeys where we live.

As most of you know, Ruth and I had the privilege this past April of living for a week in the context of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt where our son, Nelson, has lived and worked for the past year. For me, this experience was somewhat comparable to that of Peter's. There was a time in my life when I would most likely have just written the whole kit-n-kaboodle off as a form of godliness without authenticity.

But what do you do when you see something descending from heaven, like a great sheet, and a voice saying, “Come and see what I am up to”? “But Lord, this is so different from what I am used to. Surely what I know and experience is much more valid than what I see over here.” “Hush, hush!” says the voice. “Come and see, and then you may speak.”

There was more in this sheet than I can tell you about in the time that remains this morning. But I want to tell you about some of what we saw. Some of it you may want to judge immediately and close your mind and heart to. But perhaps some of it may serve to spark your imagination as to how you and we together as a faith community could learn from these descendants of the Pharaohs who have followed Christ as they understood him for nearly twenty centuries.

Contents of the Sheet I Saw in Egypt

One thing we experienced was that the Coptic Christians were eager to call us brother and sister. It may be that Nelson had softened them up in advance

of our coming. In any case, there was no question that we were embraced by all the Christians we met.

The local priest, Abuna Youseff, took the better part of a day to drive us around to some important historical sites in the region. He speaks English quite well so it was not difficult to communicate. On the way I asked him a simple question: “How come you can work together with Mennonites who are so different from you?”

It took him half an hour to explain. Basically, he said that it was based on relationships. Mennonites had come to their aid in times of dire need. And we soon saw that they loved Jesus as much as we did, he noted. We are brothers and sisters who care for one another! When I looked into his eyes – so dark and so steady – I knew he loved Jesus.

At a party to celebrate the completion of one of Nelson’s English study blocks, Father Joseph made a little speech. First he thanked Nelson for helping his people learn English, which for many of them is a gateway to a better life. Then he turned to Ruth and me. “Thank you for coming to be with us for a while,” he said. “And thank you for sharing your son with us. We all love him very much. As far as we are concerned you are not just visitors or tourists. You are our brother and sister.” And then he presented us each with an Egyptian mug.

I think about my own biological family. We are quite different, each from the other. As a matter of fact I heartily disagree with some of my siblings on some important issues. But the fact remains that we have the same parents. That makes us brothers and sisters. One of my younger brothers has recently been diagnosed with incurable cancer. When we last talked, I pledged my unconditional support for him during the journey that lies ahead of him and his family – even if that hurts financially. We are brothers, after all!

What does it take to be accepted as a brother or sister? Agreement on every point of faith and life? No. All it takes is to have the same father or mother. At least that is how it works in the Heppner family. Could it be that we need to learn that being a Christian brother or sister to someone else does not require one hundred percent agreement on the fine print? That all it takes is a recognition in each other that we love Jesus? What do you think? If God is our Father, then we are brothers and sisters and should treat each other like family, wouldn’t you say? If that is true then we have a large family indeed.

A Second Thing we experienced among Coptic Christians is that they have a strong sense of history. They trace their Christian heritage to St. Mark, who they claim evangelized North Africa some 20 centuries ago. And on another level they claim to have the blood of the Pharaohs flowing in their veins. They are proud of both of these historical facts.

Even before the Muslim armies conquered Egypt in the seventh century, Christians in this country suffered much for their faith at the hands of pagan rulers who demanded worship. So for nearly 2000 years now Christians have lived as second class citizens in Egypt experiencing varying degrees of tolerance and persecution. And they have many stories to tell of how their forefathers remained faithful against tremendous odds. They hang pictures of these heroes of their faith in their churches. They serve as icons – or reminders – of God’s faithfulness in the past.

All you need do is point to an icon and even a child will tell you the story behind it. I listened to a young university student tell such a story with great enthusiasm. And to them the miraculous elements of some of these stories are believed as readily as most Christians in America believe the story of Jonah and the Whale. “God was faithful in our past, and he will be faithful to us,” is what they are saying.

You see, Coptic Christians are open to mystery in ways that many of us raised in the world of modernity in the West simply can’t abide. We prefer that everything be quite logical and explainable in rational ways. These Christians, it seems, step into the sea of mystery without batting an eyelash.

So one of the questions I am left with is whether we could be more connected to our history than we are. I meet so many Christians who are not aware their spiritual roots. They know the stories in the Bible, perhaps, and then there is a vast chasm – until they were born. And they try to connect the biblical story to their own by jumping over the stories of those who came before them as though those stories are of no consequence.

It almost seems at times as though we are proud of our ignorance of the heroes of our faith that came after those mentioned in the Bible. Actually it may be arrogance and self-centeredness more than anything which we have picked up from our society. “Nothing of significance really happened until I

was born,” we say. “And once I am gone the story is over.” We don’t actually say it that way – and when we are sober we don’t actually think like that – but that is how we often act.

Perhaps we should tell more stories to our children. Stories rooted in our spiritual heritage. And it might not even hurt to put up a few pictures so that our children can point to them and retell the stories they portray – even in our church.

The other question I have is whether we should learn to be more open to mystery like our brothers and sisters in Egypt seem to be. Modernity has taught us to be rational and logical, but modernity is crumbling all around us. Many in the postmodern world that is emerging are in fact open once more to mystery. Perhaps we have something to learn on this score from a church that never did become as infatuated with modernism as ours did.

Our teachers have told us that two plus two always equals four. What do we do when suddenly they become five and we have no way of knowing how that happened? Are we scandalized or do we allow ourselves to step into mystery?

A Third Thing we learned in the context of the Coptic Church was that these Christians employ a wider range of sensory perceptions in their experience of God than we do. Our own tradition has placed a high priority on the use of words as the key vehicle of expression and inspiration.

Coptic Christians also use a lot of words, including the biblical text. As people gather for their services, for example, biblical psalms are read for half an hour – to prepare them for the service, they say. And then during their long services – lasting up to three or four hours – many large chunks of the biblical text are read as well.

But, beyond words, their services are rich with symbolism. Special robes for different parts of their liturgy represent something important. Every detail visible to the eye means something. The sense of sight is engaged.

At a few points during the service incense is burned. It fills the air throughout the church – and your nostrils – reminding everyone of the pervasive presence of God. They use their sense of smell.

Near the close of the service, the priest strides down the isle joyously splashing water on the people – a symbol of God’s abundant grace for all. Refreshing droplets of water on your face feel quite pleasant after a long service. The sense of feeling is utilized.

All this makes me wonder whether our more singular focus on hearing words has short-changed us. Could it be that our experience of faith would be more meaningful if we allowed for more use of other sensory perceptions than hearing into our faith community?

A Fourth Thing we picked up in the context of the Coptic church community was a commitment to spiritual disciplines that we might consider going overboard. Perhaps some of these disciplines are a burden at times, yet Christians simply make them a part of their lives whether they feel like it or not.

While we were there, Christians were fasting from all meat as well as all dairy products, including eggs, butter, cheese and everything that might contain them. It was Lent. While we found it somewhat monotonous, they seemed to take it in stride – a small sacrifice to remind them of the great sacrifice Christ made on their behalf. As a matter of fact, we were told that Christians participate in some kind of fast more days of the year than not. That sounds very strange to us who seemingly can’t go even a short time without all the delicacies that our affluent lifestyles can afford. We just can’t resist the enticement of fast food establishments on nearly every corner of our cities.

Another discipline is that of prayer. Probably at least a third of their long services are devoted to prayer – at least so it seemed to me. We found it strange, however, that Coptic Christians don’t generally “say grace” before a meal. When they served us pita sandwiches after the service, the priest simply waved his hand and invited us to help ourselves. My goodness, they had just finished praying for more than an hour! Now it was time to eat!

Another part of the Coptic tradition is the fact that some persons feel called to a vocation of prayer. Some even chose to stay single so as not to be distracted from their life of prayer. Many of these prayer warriors of the past established monasteries out in the desert on either side of the Nile. Father Joseph explained that they view these centers as “praying outposts” that

provided a “hedge of protection” around those called to a normal life in society. It sounded strangely familiar to me. It is precisely the language recent evangelical movements have used – praying a “hedge of protection” around your children, for example. Only this was a macro version – a hedge of protection around entire communities!

Another discipline, perhaps better described as a tradition, is that of going on pilgrimages. Instead of going to entertainment centers for holidays, Coptic Christians will typically pile into buses and take long trips into the desert to visit historic religious sites. Often their leaders go with them or those who live at these sites explain the significance of what they see. You want to make sure you can tell your grandchildren that you once hiked up Mt. Sinai – that is for sure. And often here is time for meditation and prayer before climbing back on the bus and heading home.

Can we learn something from such disciplines our brothers and sisters in another faith tradition practice?

Could we, who live with affluence never dreamt of before, find ourselves strengthened through voluntary fasts of various kinds – intentionally doing without something we could well afford – just to ground us in what is really important?

Should we recognize more directly the vocation of prayer some of us are called to? I know we say we all should pray. But are there not brothers and sisters among us who are especially called to prayer? I remember how in the Ambiabos Church in Bolivia, sister Pascuala was recognized for her gift and calling to prayer. When a crisis arose, Pascuala was called. I wish you all could have heard her pray – but it was not a show to which tourists were invited!

And could it be that we would benefit from edging our “holiday times” into the realm of pilgrimage. It may not be practical for everyone, but can you think of taking a trip as a pilgrimage of sorts instead of just getting away. You might call it a vacation with a spiritual purpose. I believe that might be possible and beneficial for some of us. The only thing that stands in our way is a lack of imagination.

A Fifth Thing we noticed was how children were integrated into the life of the faith community. I am sure parents in that culture encounter a variety of problems raising their children, like we all do. But they have a way of involving them even in their most sacred services.

I was struck by the fact that the “team” participating in the Mass included persons of all ages – children, young people and adults. And even though their services are long and sometimes uncomfortably hot, children participate in special ways during the ceremony. Some of them even wear special vestments. They are obviously proud to be helpers. It is hard for us to understand how the attention span for children could last 3 or 4 hours. Perhaps when they feel valued and involved it is not so hard.

This observation just made me wonder whether we could perhaps allow for a greater participation of children in our important times together. It is one thing to give them a blessing and send them off to their own special time, or even to have a children’s feature during the service. All this may be well and fine.

But I am wondering whether we cannot find a way of involving children in more meaningful ways as contributors to our inter-generational services. Perhaps if we believe that our children have something to offer us we can invite them into our church family experiences in more significant ways.

I don’t know what that might mean for us. But I do know, for example, that some of our ten or eleven year olds could read scripture as well as any of us. What harm could be done by allowing them to do so?

So coming out of Egypt I am left with the question of whether we can find more creative ways of involving our children at the heart of our community life instead of on the periphery.

And finally, a Sixth Thing we observed while in Egypt was the ability of the Coptic Christians to celebrate. Sometimes it seems to me that in our faith communities our celebrations are confined too narrowly to pot-lucks, knackzoat and visiting. If they got any more raucous than that some of us would begin to feel guilty.

I want to tell you about the Palm Sunday Celebrations we attended at the retreat center where Nelson lives. It happened on the Sunday you were all celebrating Easter here in Canada. As I mentioned earlier, Christians are a minority in Egypt. All week long they are surrounded by reminders that they are second class citizens. Perhaps that is why they look forward to coming to the retreat center so much where they will for one special day be in the company of only their Christian brothers and sisters.

The service began at 7:00 a.m. at the retreat center church. By the time we made it down to the church it was well under way. And people were still streaming onto the grounds, mostly in family groups. The church only held perhaps about 300 people. But I would guess that by noon at least a thousand people had gathered. Throughout the service there was an automatic rotation system at work. On a regular basis some would leave the church to make room for others who wanted to come in. Many of those milling about outside were involved in weaving palm leaves into various shapes. Some intricate work indeed! I bought one from a young lad for a pound.

When the service ended at about 11:30 a.m. everyone crowded together in the courtyard between the entrance to the church and the balcony surrounding the courtyard. All this took place as the priests found their way to the balcony above the people. Anticipation was in the air. This was would be the high moment of the day!

On the balcony someone had filled large buckets of water in preparation for this moment. The priests then took pitchers, filled them, and then began hurling the water over the people who were wildly waving their palm weavings below. From old Grandmothers and Grandfathers to little children, everyone seemed to lose their normal sense of decorum as they pressed forward hoping for some water to hit them. The water, as far as I could tell, simply symbolized for them the abundant and free grace available to all who desired it.

It was a sight to behold. At least when I compared it to other Palm Sundays I remember with little children parading up the isle so decently with their construction paper palm leaves. If anything, I think it was closer to the real palm Sunday exuberance than anything I had experienced before.

I took some pictures and then handed my camera to Ruth. I told her I wanted in on this one. I wormed my way into the crowd – my palm weaving waving

over my head. Those in front of me were leaning forward – probably by 30 degrees – as were those behind me. So guess what angle I was leaning. Flesh pressed against flesh, tilting forward – waiting and longing for the water – the water of life to touch me too. I sometimes wondered what the Bible meant when it talked about the throngs pressing to get close to Jesus. Now I think I know.

Suddenly there it was – a deluge of water coming my way! I strained forward together with all those around me. And the waters from above mingled with the water on my cheeks and I knew I was blessed – away from home, in the context of these Coptic believers in the land of the Pharaohs.

I worked my way back to the edge of the crowd with the awareness that this was why I had come half way around the world. Now I was ready to pack my bags and head for home.

What Can I Say? I wonder whether we have lost our ability to really celebrate. We pride ourselves in keeping our composure and all our rational and logical ducks in order. But do we know how to dive into the river of God's mercy and love – without reservation and with great joy? What keeps us so sedated and so nice and decent? I don't know what this experience will yet do in my life. All I know at this point that "It was worth the trip!"

Can we, perhaps, learn something about celebration from our brothers and sisters in Egypt? I leave that question with you.

Conclusion

We began with Peter's experience in which God was trying to break him out of his comfort zone. And it took quite a feat to get the ball rolling in his case. I conclude by simply asking a question: "What do you think God is up to in your life to break you out of your safe and pleasant comfort zone?"

And when he has gotten through to you, will you – like Peter – head in the direction of Caesarea and to the uncharted regions beyond? Or will you head back to the safety of Jerusalem where you and your friends have everything more or less figured out.

May it be said of me "...that the next day he arose and went off...and on the following day he entered Caesarea...

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