

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
January 23, 2011

Sermon Notes
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Earlier this week *The New York Times* featured an article called “Last Christians Ponder Leaving a Hometown in Iraq.”¹

Originally established as a cantonment or billet for troops following WWI, Habbaniya Cece, west of Baghdad, is home to Mary Queen of Peace Church and the last Christian man in the village, caring for the church and aching times when things were different.

From the article:

[The folk of Habbaniya Cece]...talk about their town as an oasis of ethnic and religious harmony, where Christians and Muslims, Arabs and Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites all lived together for decades without friction.

[As testament to this] On one short stretch of rutted road ... [along with the church] Mary Queen of Peace, are an Assyrian Church, a Sunni mosque, a Shiite mosque and another, older, Sunni mosque.

“Khadem Owaid, the caretaker of the Shiite mosque, said people from the town had no part in the sectarian violence that swept through the province after 2003. “The occupation destroyed everything,” Mr. Owaid said. “It was strangers who came and made trouble, trying to plant something between us. But we’re living together now, there’s no problem.”

Strangers making trouble, trying to plant things between us, sounds familiar in world and worldly affairs...the article continues...

The church building now is a monument to [the Christians’ absence], with its heavy wooden pews moved to the edges of a barren concrete floor. It has no heat or electricity. Next to it is a large field of garbage. “When I come here I feel pain,” Mr. Hawal said. “I don’t think it will ever be back again like it was, when we had a beautiful garden.”

Ms. Dulaimi, a neighbor and a Muslim, said she used to keep a notebook of the names of all the families in town, Christian and Muslim, but she burned it two or three years ago, “because I didn’t want to remember” [all those who had left].

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/20/world/middleeast/20christian.html>

Like Mr. Hawal, she especially recalled celebrating Christmases together.

Christian friends would remind her that the holiday was approaching, and she would bake cakes and pies for the occasion. But this year, she said, “I didn’t know when it was Christmas” [there was no one left to remind us].

As I read this on my commute, I found myself staring out of the window of the train, into a cold, blue-skied morning, feeling the sadness creep in – not for the church building or the throngs of people that once were, but for the painful longing of Mr. Hawal and others mentioned in the piece. I felt the ache for what they had lost and had little hope to recapture - and for what appeared to be an end road of memories and shadows.

Mr. Hawal’s final comments were: “If another Christian family would take care of the church...he would leave town” to find a thriving Christian community.

If...

Truthfully, I felt an urge or a pull to go there, to share his burden and somehow shatter the sorrow, helping to rebuild an interfaith community that once was. I found myself wondering how we let such things slip away. Clearly, Mr. Hawal is holding on – for reasons best known to him, but reasons surely integrally connected to his faith, as well as his memories. What made him stay and others move on? Whose right? Who’s wrong? Who knows?

It may be as simple as what a friend of mine often says, “Sometimes God calls you in and sometimes God calls you out.” Surely, those who left share what Mr. Hawal remembers.

This morning’s readings, like all our readings, are all about faith. I always recognize Scriptures first as writings about what people did based on their faith and the promise they held in God and the prophecy of those who spoke of and God.

Isaiah’s reading this morning takes place in the same geographic location as the *New York Times* article cited earlier. Today’s Iraq and Iran – were all part of a broad region known, in part, as Persia in biblical times. The region was bustling and to know that all you need to do is hear the names: Persia, Macedonia, Greece, Crete, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Armenia, Palestine, Egypt, Arabia and its desert, Libya, Ethiopia, Mesopotamia...

All these countries were connected by land or sea, all had travel routes, and all brought throngs of people and diversity and cultures together. And with thriving cultures and trade emerged powerful forces, raiding armies, domination and

those choosing to invade and oppress for the sake of greed and power, itself – or simply the insatiable bloodlust of some.

Naphtali and Zebulon, mentioned by Isaiah and Matthew in today's readings, were on the Western Shore of Israel and The Great Sea, plundered and attacked time and again, just as it continues to be the center of conflicts today.

In Isaiah's time and afterwards, he and his editors were living in and writing about this same region of Mr. Hawal's. The same places that had been attacked by the Assyrian King and other plunderers, with names like Tiglath-pileser, Esar-haddon and more who darkened the lives of the Jews, carrying them off into captivity, slavery, or worse.

I always remember that Isaiah's prophecies contain his words and those of future editors, as well. Even in these first books of Isaiah, it is clear that certain redactions and editing took place long after his death. It is doubtful that we will ever know exactly which words were his and which were those of the editors of The Book of Isaiah.

It remains a matter of conjecture as to whether his words, the words of the editors, or both were inspired. What is clear is that the scope of their writing and longing is rooted in a trust of the traditions that surrounded them in the relationship of the Hebrews with their God in these places and others...

place where they believed God would somehow bring light and their centuries of domination and enemies would justly and roundly be punished and the promises of God fulfilled.

That is what they truly longed for. Different from today? You say...

The bible shows us that this long history of fighting and strife projects the faithful and hopeful forward, based on promises from the past, with little current recent times to remind them of what it is the hope for.

For Mr. Hawal, who remembers, who lived through a different time and has seen it lost, with little hope for renewal – it may be even more difficult. Yet, even in the wave of such things, he continues on, dutifully, faithfully...and one wonders if he has lost the part of the promise that also calls for a time to move on.

Weaving this all together: God and humanity, past, present, future, eternity – is not such an easy thing to do. Yet it is what we think we do all the time in some ways.

Matthew's writing surely picked up on the prophecy of the Messiah and Isaiah's references to the region of Zebulon and Naphtali (Galilee) coming out of the

dimness or darkness into light, when he links Jesus to the fulfillment of the prophecy.

“Now when Jesus heard that John [the Baptist] had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea in the territory of Zebulon and Naphtali – so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.”

Jesus had to know that staying where he was would be dangerous. His cousin had been arrested and imprisoned by Herod Antipas, son of King Herod who tried to kill Jesus at birth. John was jailed in the fortress of Machaerus, an outpost east of the Dead Sea. Anyone associated with John would be suspect and at risk. Especially from the son of the king who first wished him dead.

Jesus' ministry was just beginning, learning as he went - as any minister or rabbi might (part of the human condition, which Jesus knew well). It is also reasonable to believe that he knew this was not a place to be, so he moved north, about a hundred miles or 160 km into the large regions of Naphtali and Zebulon – a region by that time called Galilee.

Was he moved there by God to fulfill prophecy? Did he have the intuitive map of which way to go? Or was it a wise and pragmatic decision based on circumstances? You will need to decide.

What did happen through Jesus, though, was that peoples' dreams, hope, and faith for “the kingdom of God” was rekindled, embers waiting to ignite –

and Jesus led them in a direction that was powerful and bold enough for its impact as we know today...

and dangerous enough for his physical life to be executed by those who feared his power, his boldness – his faithfulness.

In many ways, those following Jesus, his charisma, and his teachings began to see what Mr. Hawal and others hoped for. They began seeing the chance for the Second Coming, the promise, the resolution to pain and suffering...in a way, completion.

And this searching, even today, is not in isolation of just one tradition or faith. There are many parallel journeys in a world seeking such things, and there is an exceptional power inherent in so many following paths to God. Abraham once knew that; the city of Hebbinaya Cece, once knew that – perhaps, one day, we, too will know that in its broadest possible form.

In the meantime, we share a longing for what once was, whether directly remembered or having been passed on from generations – but that is hardly enough.

As Mr. Hawal cares for the physical remnants of Mary Queen of Peace, so, too do we in caring for our places of worship and spaces. But by themselves, places, spaces, dreams, memories – need little more than caretakers. The life, the action, the faithfulness will always be in what we are willing to do based on what we hold dear.

The ache for “back to the future” is always there –and to be learned from - but the return there is highly doubtful, as doubtful as it is to return to Isaiah’s time or for Mr. Hawal to return to his.

We are being called and pulled to a new time, just as assuredly as God is doing something new in this time. As such, we will continue to struggle with what God is calling us to do – not what we think God is calling us to do.

How to differentiate between those two – will always be a personal and communal endeavor, rooted in prayer and meditation and risk.

As much as I admire Mr. Malawi and others who protect the monuments and the symbols of the Temple, our call to serve is to **others**, more than serving places where others may gather. For it is in the gathering that we find our way and commit to the work ahead.

It has always been that way – whether as one among the twelve Jesus called or the many more who follow.

I like to remember these words of Teilhard de Chardin in why faith and action and risk are so connected:

“Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, [we] will have discovered fire.”

May we ignite the fire. And may it be so.