

Theology of the Cross in the Holy Land

Dear folks,

Here is my last piece about our trip to Palestine/Israel. Ed will be back next week with something completely different.

Enjoy,

Robin

Theology of the Cross in the Holy Land

This last piece about our trip to Palestine/Israel will finally give you the essence of what I experienced and how it has impacted my life. I have avoided writing this piece up until now for two reasons. First, my jet lag addled brain wasn't capable of meaningfully articulating for you what I was aware of inside. Second, I know that if you are unwilling to follow my thoughts all the way to the center where deep joy resides, this short essay will seem unnecessarily negative, as theology of the cross is wont to seem on the surface.

When I was observing the multitude of pieties we came across on our pilgrimage, I did not, as Ed apparently was doing, look behind them for the theology that inspired any given response. Partly because I am always aware of the Ugly American Syndrome when I am abroad – the tendency we have to critique everything in the world by our standards of comfort and security. Partly because I have discovered in my short tenure as a theologian of the cross that it is, as Douglas John Hall says, a thin tradition. I rarely expect to find anything but theology of glory.

However, the last day of our trip, when I was getting tired and missing my family, two experiences conspired to thrust theological issues to the fore in my being and much of what I'd previously refused to look at directly crept through my weariness into my consciousness. The first stop on this day was the Great Synagogue in Jerusalem. We jumped off the bus and hurried into the building for the 8:30 Shabbat prayer service. The men in our group donned their cardboard yarmulkes and headed for the door of the sanctuary. The women in our group headed for the stairs. We were not allowed on the floor of the sanctuary. We were not allowed to participate.

As I sat in the balcony listening to the beautiful men's choir that accompanied the cantor, occasionally picking up a word or two in Hebrew, I became more and more angry. At first I thought, how dare they keep women away from their God? As soon as the thought had formed in my head I knew that it wasn't true. No one can keep me from my God; no one can keep me from prayer. However, this segregation did brush away, as one thoughtlessly brushes away a fly, my call from God to offer leadership in God's community. Women need not apply.

Our next stop was the Temple Mount. Here are two mosques, the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa. During Ramadan when three to four HUNDRED thousand people pray here daily, the men pray in Al-Aqsa where the Imam presides over the service. The women must pray in the Dome of the Rock where there is no Imam and they can only hear the Imam's words over a loud speaker system.

These two experiences combined with the words of one of our traveling companions who had earlier told me with pride in his voice that he was sure his ELCA congregation would never call a woman pastor, that women should confine themselves to being wives and mothers and leave public life to men, led me to modify Karl Marx's definition of religion. I don't think religion today

is the opiate of the people, keeping us docile. I'd say religion is the crack cocaine of the people. It gives us justification to do what we otherwise can find no other "moral" excuse to perpetrate on each other.

Those of you who are weary of "feminist tirades" are probably beginning to doze or are ready to click on the next piece of mail in your box, but bear with me for another moment. These experiences were only the "straw that broke the camel's back". Earlier in our two weeks together, we had visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum. Even after all of the reading I have done and exposure I have had to this horror perpetrated on the Jews, I still stumbled out of that place with a pounding head and a sinking heart. The enormity of the suffering is beyond comprehension as is the evil within the hearts of the murderers who could carry out such unspeakable acts.

Yet, when we visited Gaza and I saw thousands and thousands of Palestinians forced to live in makeshift hovels without the most basic amenities of life (at one point we passed what looked, from a distance, like a pond, but which our guide told us was raw sewage), it occurred to me that the Israelis are now doing to the Palestinians what was once done to them. Not the Shoah, the attempted total annihilation of their people, but the shunning, the rejection and ghettoizing which has been the history of the Diaspora.

How can we make sense of all this? How can we even speak of peace in the midst of such contradictions?

Since I have been home I have already had a discussion about sacrificial atonement with a friend who no longer believes in it. He says that to attribute to God the need for blood to pacify God's wrath is primitive and barbaric. He says that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was an example to us of how,

because of our gracious God's love and care for us, we are able to give ourselves, even to the giving of our lives, in service to each other.

In the past I have found this argument, if not compelling, at least disturbing. It makes sense to me that the Creator of the universe would not be so petty as to demand blood like the Mafia demand "protection money". As, say, the weather god might demand in return for continuing to let the rain fall and the sun shine so that the crops will grow and we will have food to eat for another season.

However, after our visit to the "Holy" Land, sacrificial atonement seems not only right and salutary, but absolutely necessary to wrench humanity from the pit we have dug for ourselves. The raw horrors of what humanity is capable of stood out in bold relief for me there. Not that we in the United States don't do equally horrific things at times, but from the comfort of my Midwestern suburban home, they are virtually invisible. Who among us wouldn't be angry to watch the creatures we so lovingly created and carefully set on a beautiful planet destroy each other and the planet – in our name no less?

But it isn't just God's anger that must be dealt with in Jesus' sacrifice. The blood that needed to be spilled wasn't only human blood; it was also God's own blood. God knew full well that any action on our parts could never bridge the gap our evil had caused between God and humanity, so God became human and dwelt among us, died and was raised for us. Only blood can do justice to the blood that has been shed. Such extreme evil can be countered with nothing less. God in Christ took our horrors to himself and gave us his freedom to live in the light even when we are surrounded by darkness.

One day in the middle of our trip we stopped in a town that had

a large artist colony and we shopped (yes Virginia, it wasn't non-stop grimness and theology!). I found a black and white photograph that I intend to hang in my office to remind me of my time in Palestine/Israel. In the foreground of the picture is an old woman who looks like she's from Eastern Europe sitting on a fallen log. She is wearing a babushka and even though her lips are closed, the shape of her face is such that I would guess she has no teeth. Nevertheless, her eyes snap as she looks straight at the camera and she smiles impishly as she points her right index finger at the photographer. "Chutzpah" is the word that comes to mind. Midground of the photo is completely dark. One assumes there is a forest behind the woman, but the absence of light keeps us from seeing even the shadowiest outlines. The background of the photo is what brings the whole piece together. Here we see on a hill above and behind the old woman a stand of trees with light streaming through them from the outside toward the camera.

I saw in this photo a symbol of life in this wonderful/fractured country. The people I met are alive and proud, aware of their ancestral rights and passionate about their ancestral dreams. But the clash of these dreams makes the future look bleak at best. Darkness seems to engulf the conflicts that rage between Israelis and Palestinians with optimism only an option for a fool. Yet beyond the darkness there is light streaming in from the outside. It is not the result of the darkness or the old woman's chutzpah. Rather it breaks through of its own accord, with a will not bound to circumstances or people.

Now after further reflection, I see that this is not just a photo of Palestine/Israel, but of all humanity, which I have had the privilege of understanding a bit better because of my experiences in the Middle East. We are, indeed, fascinating creatures. Lively and capable of so much good, yet bound to an evil that is beyond comprehension. Only from the outside is

there light, which can ultimately make a difference in who we are. This is not a new story. Many people have told it for many years. I pray God that it continues to be told until Christ returns and makes all things new.