

“Remember Your Baptism with Joy”
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Ethiopia Pilgrimage Reflection
Takoma Park Presbyterian Church
Takoma Park, Maryland
January 31, 2016

Scriptures:

Luke 3:7-18, Acts 16:16-34

Please say two words after me: Mekane, Jesus.
Mekane Jesus means “the place of Jesus” in Amharic, which is the national language of Ethiopia.

This congregation blessed me and sent me on a day pilgrimage to Ethiopia as part of the Montgomery County Sister City program. Twenty-seven of us travelled, mostly younger scholars and faculty, from the Montgomery County Community College to the city of Gondar, which is in north-central Ethiopia.

The sermon today focuses on Ethiopia ...and our lives....as a place of Jesus.

Mekane Jesus is also name of the Ethiopian Protestant church that Presbyterian missionaries helped inspire. (Protestants now number some 19 million in Ethiopia.)

In 1918, during the influenza epidemic, the Ethiopian Emperor invited a Presbyterian medical missionary working with the Sudan Interior Mission.

The Presbyterian doctor agreed he would come, if he could share the stories of Jesus. And so it came to pass.

I’m going to ask various groups of you to stand for a moment (you may stand more than once) to share some brief stories.

First, one of the students from Montgomery College asked me not to make them stand in church. So I’ll ask , please wave for a moment, if you were faculty or young scholar participant on the voyage.

Thank you for the honor of travelling with you. I learned so much from you. I'm so grateful for our journey together.

Those of you who have participated in a church mission trip with the Heifer Project International, please stand, if you are able. (You may be seated.)

Remember the Global Village? How we saw how subsistence farmers live on each continent?

Visiting Ethiopia was like being in one vast Global Village. Eighty-six percent of the population makes its living in agriculture.

The animals everywhere were delightful: bulls, cows, donkeys, horses, so many sheep. (Many of our students wanted to bring them home!)

The food there was delicious; we ate like kings and queens. I would return to Ethiopia for one of the fresh mango smoothies.

But it also was hard to eat.

Fifteen million people in Ethiopia are at risk for starvation in a time of drought, while foreign companies and countries are leasing land to export crops, especially biofuels.

When the crowds asked John the Baptist what they should do, he answered whoever has food must share it with those who have none. (Luke 3:10-11)

When we share with those who have no food, we make Mekane Jesus: a place of Jesus.

If you are a student, a teacher, work in education, or shared a pencil to take to Ethiopia, please stand if you are able. (Thank you, you may be seated.)

We visited the University of Gondar, which has an impressive 26,000 students. Ethiopia is planning on opening 11 new universities in the next decade; the country is making a major investment in education.

We also visited an elementary school that serves some of the poorest children in the city. It's one of the two sites where we shared the pencils you donated.

We learned that the price of one pencil was equivalent, literally, to the price of daily bread (injera).

When we share a pencil like that, to help students learn, we are truly making a difference -- and a Mekane Jesus: a place of Jesus.

If you work in public health, health care or are a doctor or nurse, please stand, if you are able. (Thank you. You may be seated.)

We had the opportunity to visit two hospitals. One is state-of-the art. It's the grandest building in the whole of Gondar. It's built largely with PEPFAR funds (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) to combat AIDS.

We also visited the University of Gondar's Medical school hospital. It serves 5 million patients. In the pediatric wing, we asked what were the leading causes children's of illness and death.

They are malnutrition, pneumonia and diarrhea - all preventable.

Thank you to those who work in the healing professions. With your work, you make Mekane Jesus: a place of Jesus.

If you work in journalism or communications, please rise, if you are able. (Thank you, you may be seated.)

Ethiopia is one of the world's worst places for journalism with the lack of press freedom. Journalists are routinely imprisoned under its overly-broad anti-terrorism statute.

Eskinder Nega is an Ethiopian journalist. He has sentenced to 18 years in prison for daring to write the truth and even suggest that something like Arab Spring could be possible in Ethiopia.

He has received the [PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award](#).

He writes, "All the great crimes of history... have their genesis in the moral wilderness of their times."

Thank you, journalists, for your working, seeking to shine a light in moral wilderness of our times. Your work is part of Mekane Jesus.

If you are African or have lived in Africa, please rise, if you are able. (Thank you, you may be seated.)

On the pilgrimage, we had participants from Ethiopia, Cameroon, Nigeria and Ghana. I kept asking the West African students to compare what they knew from home to what we were experiencing in Ethiopia. While each culture is distinct with its clothing, language, food and history, I was surprised how much the participants said was familiar across West and East Africa.

Thank you for all your prayers and encouragement for this pilgrimage. I hope to be able to better listen to you, and learn how your lives and countries are Mekane Jesus: places of Jesus.

Ethiopia has such extraordinary beauty - in it people and varied landscapes. We saw much joy and terrible suffering.

Ethopian poetry has form called "kinae". Kinae have a surface meaning and a deeper meaning. Especially during centuries of feudalism, when there was no freedom of expression, it spoke truth which was otherwise hidden.

The surface meaning can be describing something from ordinary life, but the deeper meaning often had a moral twist, pointing out a ruler's misdeed.

It's so important to exercise the practice of second sight, to keep looking because there is more going on than appears at first -- to exercise second hearing, to keep listening for what more is going on.

As part of our church's Racial Mindfulness ministry, we watched a video by a Nigerian novelist called "The Danger of a Single Story."

www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

Because if we only know one story about a people, it's easy to have a story about a people. We can think "All of those people are that way." A single story easily leads to stereotyping.

Different traditions remember stories differently.

Could you name, out loud, some definitions of the word "Epiphany"? Not the historical event, but the word itself. (Awakening, revelation, or "I saw the light" were suggested.)

That's right! In the West, the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches remember Epiphany as the day when the magi came and offered the infant Jesus gifts. Sometimes it's called Three Kings Day. But only one of the four gospel books tells that story.

In the Orthodox church, recalls the revelation when Jesus was baptized, and he heard, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Mark 1). That's Epiphany for the Ethiopian Orthodox church.

The highlight of the pilgrimage was attending the 3 day celebration of Jesus' baptism, called Timkat.

One student noted that for all of us who attended Timkat, we would each have a different story to tell.

One story is that of the generous emperor, Fasiledes, who built a massive stone pool near his palace in the 1600's. It's surrounded by a 3 meter wall, looking like a fortress. He built it for baptism and is the center of the celebration so hundreds of people can be in the pool.

Another story is that of that Emperor's father, who made a pact with the Portuguese to keep the Ottoman Empire at bay. The Portuguese required the Emperor and his subjects become Catholic – which did not please the people of deeply Orthodox Ethiopia.

So when the son Fasiledes became king, he reconverted to the Orthodox church. And he built a large pool for massive rebaptisms.

When I spoke with the Protestant Mekane Jesus congregation, I asked if they participated in Timkat. They replied, "No. We do not rebaptize."

Our tradition recognizes water baptism in the name of Trinity from any church – I had not appreciated how important that is before.

One story would be about the day-long parade, people from different churches carrying or rolling floats made to look like the Ark of the Covenant, dancing, with hearty chants. I don't speak Ge'ez, the liturgical language, but one word came through loud and clear: Al-le-lu-ya!

This day-long parade gave way to the faithful sleeping out under the stars, and the loud chants giving way to the sonorous call-to-prayer for hours in the early morning, including reverent antiphonal (call and response) chanting with the faithful.

One story would be how thousands of Ethiopians come from great distances, often on foot, to take part in this jubilation, in hopes of getting close to wall-surrounded pool.

Another story would be about the Westerners, like me, who could get V.I.P. passes and get front-row seats, while the faithful throng waited outside.

One story would be of the exuberant crowd, pressing, pressing, pressing to get in or out. Another story would be about getting pick-pocketed, which I did, despite securing my pocket with two safety pins.

Gathering near that pool, the early morning liturgy lasted for hours through the sunrise. After a procession with the bishop came near the pool, the singing turned into the spoken word. Tens of young men lined the pool, stripping to their shorts. And when a word was spoken, joy was unleashed. With a great jump! the men leapt into the pool.

Great shouting and splashing and jubilation ensued, with calls of “Al- le” “Al-le” resounding (short for “Alleluia”).

After all the repression, in the unfreedom in Ethiopia, here joy was in full force – in a space of freedom. Remembering your baptism with *joy!*

Now hundreds of men were jumping into the pool. (There were no Ethiopian women in the pool. Does this speak of patriarchy?)

Police and military guards were everywhere we went...at hotels, at museums, on the streets, at the university. Ak-47's and batons were at the ready.

In our two Bible readings today, the soldiers. At John's baptism, they asked what they should do.

And later, when the disciples are imprisoned, a jailer and his family come to faith and are baptized.

The military and jailers are often portrayed as “bad guys.” The Gospel is so radical; it keeps surprising us. No one is beyond God's embrace.

For us this year, who are we to say that God is not working among Republicans or Democrats or Greens or Libertarians?

At the baptism festival, people threw empty water bottles into the pool to be filled. The filled water bottles were thrown back into the crowd, then uncapped, and the water gushed over the clamoring faithful, those who could not get into the pool and were eager for the water blessing. "Remember your baptism with joy."

On the enclosure wall, guarding the pool, sat two young soldiers. And in that moment, they were not longer simply soldiers. Yes, they were still in uniform. But something more happened.

People were throwing the filled water bottles up to them, they were uncapping them, and dousing the people beyond the wall who could not get in. These soldiers were caught up in the joy of the moment, sharing the blessing.

For all the contradictions of that Mekane Jesus place, for a moment the reign of God embraced us all.

Can we imagine the people on the wall are not some "others" or someone else? But that each of us is on that wall – between the joy of our baptism and the world. We touch the world when we go to school, and in our work, and in our community, seeking to bridge something of the joy and grace we know with the larger world.

Ethiopia is like our world, rent by division and violence.

Yet with our lives as a bridge, our faithfulness in the midst of contradiction, we help make our world a Mekane Jesus, a place of Jesus.

Let us live our baptism with joy, and act with faith, hope and love.

Amen.