

"In the Meantime" by Kate Cudlipp

11/05/2006 by Kate Cudlipp: In the Meantime

Sermon by Kate Cudlipp
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In the Meantime

[Last week Pat Conover preached](#) about seeing the things we do not want to see, about how hard it is not to turn away from the horrific pain and suffering in the world, about the temptation to rush past the crucifixion to the resurrection. He spoke about loving "happily ever after" endings, but how, in reality, we live "in the meantime." Indeed, we do live in very mean times when it is hard to imagine a happy ending for the vast majority of humankind or for the earth, itself.

In the face of these realities, we have today's lessons, one from the Hebrew scriptures and one from the New Testament, that look past the mean times to something far different:

Isaiah 25: 6-8

*On this mountain,
YHWH Omnipotent will prepare for all peoples
A banquet of rich food,
A banquet of fine wines,
Food rich and succulent,
And fine, aged wines.
On this mountain,
God will remove the mourning veil covering all peoples,
the shroud covering all nations,
destroying all death forever.
God will wipe away
the tears from every cheek,
and will take away the shame
of God's people on earth, wherever they live.
YHWH has spoken.*

Translation: The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures

Revelation 21: 1-4

Then I saw new heavens and a new earth...And I heard a loud voice calling from the throne, "Look, God's Tabernacle is among humankind! God will live with them; they will be God's people, and God will be fully present among them. The Most High will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And death, mourning, crying and pain will be no more, for the old order has fallen."

Translation: The Inclusive New Testament

Both passages were addressed to people living in "mean times": the Isaiah passage to the Jews living in the period of Babylonian exile, and Revelation to Christians facing

persecutions at the end of the first century C.E.

Both passages hold up visions to encourage and strengthen those who heard them. These are more than “pie in the sky by-and-by” promises. They are images of God’s power and presence in times when God must have seemed absent or too far away to care about what was happening to God’s people.

Human beings have remarkable resilience as long as we are able to hope. People in the direst circumstances can find reasons to celebrate and to keep going if they have hope. Where there is no hope, individuals, families and communities die.

What is it that gives people hope? These passages give us one answer: the vision of a better world, a world of love and plenty, of beauty and joy.

In his Epistle to the Romans Paul says, “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it eagerly and with patience.”

Notwithstanding a matter of semantics around the word “see,” Paul is describing the power of a vision, a dream – of what is both present and not yet. If we do not have a vision of God’s realm, if we have no dream of “new heavens and a new earth where death, mourning, crying and pain will be no more,” then we are stuck either with the horrors of this life, which are too much to bear, or with death-dealing emptiness as we close our eyes to the suffering around us.

“Without a vision, the people perish,” we hear in Proverbs 29:18.

When I set out on the Camino de Santiago – the thousand year-old pilgrimage route across the north of Spain – I did not need a compelling vision to sustain me because unlike the medieval pilgrims, I did not have to risk my life or my health to undertake the journey.

In the Middle Ages, the Way-the Camino-was fraught with danger: disease, robbers, contaminated water and food, uncertainty about where nourishment and lodging could be found, and no guarantee of when-or if-one would find the way home.

Yet year after year at the height of its renown, the city of Santiago de Compostela was the destination of perhaps a hundred or more thousand pilgrims who traveled for months-or years-in order to be blessed by proximity to the bones of the apostle James (whose name is “Diego” in Spanish, hence, the city’s name, San-tiago). Their faith in the redemptive power of those relics was their vision.

The journey was different for my traveling companions and me. We arranged places to stay a day or more in advance and always knew we could find a bed in one of the pilgrim hostels – the *albergues* -- along the Way. The route was well marked, so getting lost was a near impossibility (except for the time we discovered that enterprising citizens had put up signs to divert pilgrims to their town, an hour’s detour from the main route!). Food was plentiful and fresh, and water was abundant

and clean. The wine was good, too. My greatest physical challenges were blisters, lost toenails, sore muscles, a turned ankle and the heat.

Like medieval pilgrims, we carried what we needed with us, although we certainly had more stuff and more ergonomically correct packs than they did. The early pilgrims' equipment consisted of a gourd for water, a cloak for warmth and protection from the rain, a hat and a walking stick. We washed our clothes and ourselves every day; the early pilgrims did not.

How strong the vision that sustained the medieval travelers!

Was there a vision God wanted for me from the Camino? I believe so, but I need more practice at seeing or hearing what God offers. I imagine that is true for many of us.

On reflection, I see signs-hints-of the vision: The Camino gave me a glimpse of a world where folks share food and medical supplies, compassion and laughter, follies and forgiveness, and where my traveling companion and partner-Carole-put my well-being ahead of her own.

In addition to Carole, God offered other companions on my journey-

1. Our friend Patricia, who walked with us for two of our three weeks of pilgrimage.
2. Padre Mour who walked from Munich to Santiago, a journey of ninety days. Padre, an Italian priest who spoke at least four languages and was called from his mission to homeless youth in Mexico to start a shelter for runaway teens in Munich. He had no money for travel but knew the pilgrimage to Santiago was important to his spiritual growth. He was going to hitchhike back to Munich once he reached Santiago.
3. Esther, a Hungarian woman who practiced various healing arts and who knew that she needed the experience of the Camino to deepen her work.
4. Birgit, a German nurse.
5. Cida and Jair from Brazil, who helped us to learn that a common spoken language is not the only way to communicate.

Besides companions, there was the walking. Walking for three weeks slows everything down. It encourages being in the moment. It also provides an embodied experience of something that both is and is not yet. Many times, we came over a hill and saw the next town in the distance. We could see it, but we knew it would be an hour or more before we arrived. We were walking "in the meantime."

I wish I could say that the companions and other signs from the Holy One brought about a conversion in me, a new turning toward God; that I experienced great clarity about God's call on my life and fewer questions or doubts. That was not the case. I continued to be Kate on the Camino: the risk-averse, want-to-be-prepared, no-surprises Kate.

However, God does not give up. At the end of our pilgrimage, Carole and I arrived in Santiago after five hours of fast-

paced walking, just in time for the noon pilgrims' mass in the Cathedral. We walked through the doors as the bells in the tower struck noon. It was Sunday, and there was standing room only. Pilgrims with their backpacks (including us), other tourists and Santiago citizens crowded the nave and transept. At least a dozen priests took their place in the choir, soon to assist in celebrating the mass.

I was tired and paying little attention to the service as we tried to find a place to stand where we could see the altar and the *boto fumo*, the huge incense burner that is a unique feature of the cathedral. The service was in Spanish, so I could not focus on the words (notwithstanding the Spanish lessons I took prior to leaving for Spain).

The priests fanned out through the cathedral to serve the Host. I saw Padre Mour-our padre!-and felt a little more connected. The organ began to play, and a nun led the congregation in singing, "I am the Bread of Life"-in Spanish, of course. The tune was familiar because we have sung the hymn here at Seekers once or twice. I love the refrain, and when the music got to that point, I sang quietly to myself,

*And I will raise them up,
and I will raise them up,
and I will raise them up on the last day.*

I was so thankful to hear something that touched my heart. Then a priest appeared a few feet in front of me with the consecrated wafers. I did not intend to join those who lined up to be served, but to my amazement, I began to weep and found myself stepping into the line to receive the Host.

I still do not know what that brief interlude means, but now I see it was a gift, another small glimpse of a new earth. For a moment, I saw the motley group of Christians and others, assembled in the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela, as one people. Individuals who had come from different starting points, apparently motivated by different hopes or dreams, had nonetheless converged on a destination they all had in common. It was a communion of saints.

As I reflect, I realize I am learning-or relearning-two things from the Camino:

Without a vision, the people perish. Without a sense of something beyond our everyday needs, something more than the tedium or excitement or pain of the moment, we are creatures stuck in the mean times, unwilling or unable to see the things we do not want to see, unwilling or unable to help dry God's tears. Unless we take time to see beyond our everyday transactions-time to reflect, time to pray-we will miss the vision.

The second thing I am learning is that seeing the things I do not want to see begins close to home. If I am unwilling or unable to open my eyes to the needs of those closest to me-on the Camino, here at Seekers, among family and friends-I have little chance of responding in love to those at a distance. If I am truly open to those nearby, the circle will widen, my capacity to look at the things I do not want to see will grow.

Mother Teresa said, "It is not what we do that is important, but how much love we put into what we do: we should do small

things with great love.” This is wonderful and dangerous advice for all of us living “in the meantime”!