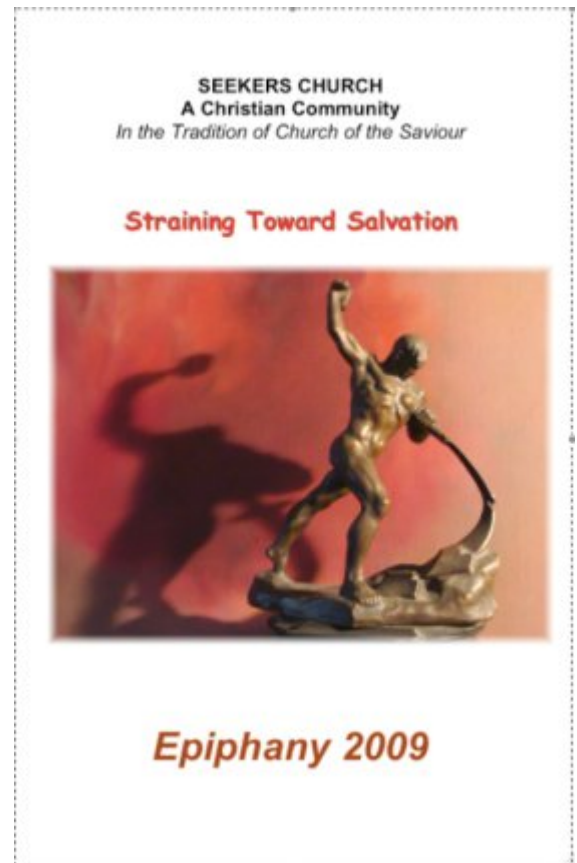


“The Bible in One Hand, the Newspaper in the Other” by Kate Cudlipp

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January 4, 2009, Epiphany



A little over a week ago, as I was beginning to think about the fact that I had signed up to preach today, Carole and I watched "The Grapes of Wrath." It's a powerful film in many

ways, but what struck me was an observation by Jim Casy, the one-time preacher. He was telling Tom Joad why he couldn't be a preacher any longer. He said:

Tom, you gotta learn like I'm learning. I don't know what's right yet myself, but I'm trying to find out.

That's why I can't ever be a preacher again. Preacher's got to know.

I don't know. I got to ask.

I thought, "Boy, am I glad that Seekers Church doesn't assume our preachers know the answers because I surely wouldn't be standing at this pulpit if that were the assumption."

The sermon today is part of my ongoing reflection on what difference it makes to me-and to the world-that I am the inheritor of over 5000 years of a religious tradition that includes the faith and faithlessness of the people of Israel, the prophets that arose to call Israel back to its true vocation, and the birth, life and death of Jesus, who though he died, lives on in this very troubled world.

Carole and I traveled to Israel in November for eight days of full-body immersion in what three world religions call "a" or "the" "Holy Land." I expected to be informed by seeing places I had read about in the Bible all my life, but I continue to be amazed by the power of my experiences there to convey the contrast between the realm of God and the troubles of the world.

This is not a sermon about what is going on between Israel and the Palestinians. I do not have sufficient grounding or understanding to presume to apportion blame or propose solutions-I fervently pray that others with wisdom and grounding will emerge. However, being in that ancient land

which is steeped in blood and faith, in suffering and triumph, evoked the tension of living fully in the world while holding onto, and working for, an alternative vision. Perhaps this tension is one aspect of our Epiphany theme of "straining toward salvation."

As a way of engaging that tension, the theologian Karl Barth is said to have advised Christians to "read with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." I'd like to do that for a moment:

In our Hebrew scripture for this morning we heard the prophet Isaiah speaking to Jerusalem: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms."

Dateline, Washington, DC: "Early Dec. 26, Carlese Hall ran down the street and banged on a parked police cruiser near her rented home. Noticing that Hall was bleeding, the officer asked her what was wrong, and she replied that she had 'killed my daughter and set the house on fire.'"

Isaiah continues speaking to Jerusalem: "Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you."

Dateline, Jerusalem, December 25: "Gaza militants continued to fire rockets at Israel on Wednesday, including five that hit around the major southern Israeli city of Beersheba."

And again from Isaiah: "A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD."

Dateline, Gaza City, December 29: "In three days of treating the wounded from Israel's air assault, nurse Ragda Mustafa has not had time to shower when she changes her blood-splattered clothes, and she takes just brief naps at her small hospital in northern Gaza."

"Read with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."

I must confess that most of the time I'm simply stuck in the middle of the world around me, unaware and unwilling to see beyond it. I'm talking about a world in which friends are losing their jobs or living with cancer or saying goodbye to loved ones. I'm talking about a world where children are "collateral damage" in wars they didn't start, where prisoners are subjected to gross abuse -right here in the US as well as in other countries, a world where 923 million people are hungry.

What I see frightens me, and I put up my defenses to keep from being overwhelmed-just like King Herod.

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." (Matthew: 2: 1-3)

King Herod was frightened-and all Jerusalem with him. Sounds like the world today.

In Carole's and my time in Israel, we could not escape the evidence of Herod's power-and his fear. Our first encounter was a visit to the remains of the city of Caesarea, built by Herod as a deepwater port on the Mediterranean, with a 3500-seat amphitheater, an arena for chariot races-and a temple to Caesar Augustus.

Our second encounter was in Jerusalem where, notwithstanding the destruction of most of the city by the Romans seventy-four years after Herod's death, his imprint survives. We saw his handiwork in the huge stones of the Western Wall (some weighed 600 tons!), one of Judaism's most sacred sites, and in other remnants of the vast expansion of the Temple Mount that Herod undertook to glorify God-and himself.

About 40 miles south of Jerusalem we climbed the steep ascent to Masada, a massive hilltop fortress near the Dead Sea, with a three-tiered palace that Herod built out of the north face of the mesa as "an airy and luminous residence" for himself. [Quote from a National Geographic article, December 2008.]

Altogether Herod built eleven fortresses around the kingdom of Judea. He had three of his sons killed because he suspected them of plotting to overthrow him. So while historians say it is unlikely that he ordered the slaughter of every male infant in Bethlehem, there can be little doubt that he would have feared the birth of a new "King of the Jews" and would have gone to great lengths to eliminate that threat to his power.

I think King Herod must have read the "newspapers" of his time. I'm not so sure he read the scriptures. (Another sermon or several could be given on the mis-reading of scripture, but that is for another day.)

In contrast to Herod's fortresses, the baby of whom Herod was so afraid grew into a man who built no fortifications, assembled no armies, and traveled with no bodyguards.

Our Israeli guide took Carole and me to many sites sacred to Christians, but none had been created by Jesus to bolster his standing or assure his immortality. In Capernaum we saw excavations of what may be the foundation of the house where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and the synagogue where Jesus preached. We visited the places tradition identifies as the sites of the Sermon on the Mount and the feeding of the

five thousand, each now marked with a church, but in Jesus' time simply remembered by those present as the places where another realm broke into this one.

Jerusalem is replete with Christian shrines that mark the path many believe to be the one Jesus traveled in his final days, but none were ordered built by Jesus. He traveled a different path and served a different sovereign. While engaging the events of the day in the most direct ways, he saw a Truth both beyond and hidden within them.

I caught a glimpse of that elusive Truth as Carole and I stood in a church built in what is popularly believed to be the Garden of Gethsemane. (Three of the ancient olive trees in that small garden have been scientifically dated as being over two thousand years old. I wonder what they have witnessed!)

The altar of the church sits over a large, dark, flat rock, which tradition holds is the place Jesus prayed to God, "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not what I want but what you want." While standing in that place and remembering that prayer, the certainty that Jesus had of a life greater than this one came home to me there.

A group of Korean pilgrims entered the church. Carole and I were standing to the side of the altar. The group filed in and knelt at the rail around the altar and the rock. One by one, they reached down to touch the stone. Their leader began to sing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"-at least that was the tune. Many wept as they sang, and I did, too.

No fortress, no palace, yet so much more than a memory was present in that church: the living Presence of one willing to be faithful unto death. This was not the death of one who is celebrated for blowing up his enemies. This was not a faith in the power to obliterate one's foes. No, this was faithfulness to the message of God's redeeming love for ALL-the message of Epiphany. "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they

are doing."

I don't know what I am doing. I come back to the beginning of the sermon and Jim Casy's observation: "I don't know what's right yet, but I'm trying to find out. I don't know. I gotta ask."

I want to be asking alongside others who are asking, "What is the way that Jesus pointed to? What choices must I make in my life each day to be faithful to that way?"

Carole's and my first view of Jerusalem was from Mt. Scopus, which is on the northern edge of the city and on the route Jesus might have followed in traveling to Jerusalem to be tried and crucified. As we approached the ridge with a view of the city, Eva, our Jewish guide, suddenly remembered a CD she wanted to play for her Christian travelers, in honor of that journey two thousand years ago. She handed me the disc, still in its cellophane wrapper. I, of course, had trouble getting the wrapper off. Eva was saying, "Hurry, we're almost at the summit!" Traffic was quite heavy, and she didn't dare slow down.

I got it unwrapped and she put it in the player. The song "The Holy City" began to sound from the speakers. The song was a favorite of my father's, but I had always thought it a little over the top in the sentimental department. This time, however, coming up over the northern hills of Jerusalem and turning off to get a panorama of the city, I felt tears welling up. The story the song told was a story I wanted to be part of, a story I wanted to believe in. It ended with a verse that envisions a New Jerusalem, a city where-

The light of God was on its streets,

The gates were open wide,

And all who would might enter,

And no one was denied.

May I walk with you as we try together to determine the choices we must make to be faithful to that story?