

Sherri Alms: The Wilderness, the Eunuch, and One Nun

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My favorite thing about preaching is the title, which is often just about the only thing I have until the Saturday night before I preach. In fact, for all of you procrastinators out there, making yourself come up with a perfect title for a sermon that is not written yet is a fabulous procrastination tool. It certainly works for me! As soon as I read the lectionary for this week and caught sight of the parenthetical phrase "This is a wilderness road," I knew this was the right Sunday to tell you the story of my friend, Isabel. When I read further into the story of the eunuch and Philip, I realized I had not only the right text for my story about Isabel; I also had a title, which is "The Wilderness, The Eunuch and One Nun."

However, that title does not **really** get to the heart of matter. This sermon is really about miracles, the way they come into your life sometimes quietly and sometimes with a great big bang. What is important, I think, is that we learn to recognize both the quiet miracles and the spectacular ones. As I tell all of you often so you will know I have endured trials and tribulations even as a child, I grew up in a religiously conservative family so Sunday school was necessary, as was attendance at a parochial school. Between those two things, my sister, Julie, and I were always sure we would clean up at the game Jeopardy if only all the categories were Biblical. In addition to possibly winning the Jeopardy

jackpot, what this religious education gave me was a great love for stories. I was fascinated by miracles and forlorn. For it seemed to me that God did miracles for only so long as the time period covered by the Bible and then left us poor humans bereft of both the blessing and the "hello, it's me, God. You better listen." effect that miracles must surely have caused in those Biblical characters.

As I grew older, I looked at the Bible differently and figured the miracles could be explained away as allegory or through science. Later, I began to see miracles occurring in my own life. Today, I am here to tell you of just such a miracle. First, I have to tell you that I am still a somewhat rational person and my definition of miracles has changed since I was a child. My definition of a miracle is that it is a door opening in your heart. Like the Biblical miracles, sometimes that door opens because a great big wind slams it open and you sit up and take notice. Other times, miracles sneak quietly in so that the door opens almost without notice.

The miracle I am here to talk about today was not exactly a quiet one. This miracle is my friendship with a woman from El Salvador named Isabel, who is also the nun in the sermon title. Isabel has been not only a very good friend but also my student and my teacher. In fact, we met because I decided to volunteer at a Church of the Saviour incubated non-profit some of you are familiar with called Academy of Hope. The Academy of Hope is an organization in my neighborhood that offers adult literacy education. Their goal is to help low-income and otherwise disadvantaged people get their GEDs so they can find better paying jobs. When I decided to volunteer there, I was set on teaching a class, not tutoring since much of my volunteer life had been spent tutoring children or adults and I wanted a new experience.

So here comes a miracle sneaking in the door. The volunteer coordinator and I could not find a class at a time that I could teach. Somewhat grudgingly, I listened as Jennifer said,

"But I've found the perfect student for you to tutor. Her name is Isabel." She went on to tell me that Isabel was about my age, from El Salvador, and working toward getting a nursing assistant's certificate as well as her GED. As soon as Isabel and I met, we hit it off. We are both extroverted, talkative and as bullheaded as the day is long. Unfortunately or fortunately, as I was to learn when we had our fights, Isabel was usually right.

What can I say about Isabel to make you understand why she was and continues to be so important as a friend and a spiritual guide? Let me try to paint a picture of her. She was born in Honduras, a country her family fled to escape war when she was very young. Unfortunately, they fled to El Salvador where they settled in a small village not too far from the country's border with Honduras. They were what we would call "dirt poor." In other words, the family only barely made a living by subsistence farming. As one of the oldest of I think nine siblings, Isabel began working almost as soon as she could walk. Unlike some of her younger siblings, she got little education as a child, spending her days instead at tasks like carrying water for the household from the river and helping her mother to cook.

Throughout this time, as I found out later, the Salvadoran government was persecuting and killing people like Isabel and her family. A full-scale war broke out in the 1980s, giving us examples of courage and spirit like Oscar Romero, the Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, and the American nuns raped and killed. But they are only a few, and privileged at that, of the 75,000 people killed during the war. For, as Isabel has told me and I have read and many of you know, this was a war of rich against poor. In communities all over El Salvador, men, women, and children, far too many of them young people, were disappeared, tortured, and killed. Those who escaped that fate lived their lives in fear.

In this atmosphere, Isabel grew up. However, she did not grow

up meek and mild, thanks, she has told me to the example and influence of her parents. As she grew into a young adult, she discovered in herself a fierce Catholic faith that drove her to teach others around her. Eventually, this faith drew her to the life of a nun. She fled El Salvador and entered a convent in Guatemala, where her sister, Magdalena, would join her. Magdalena is with that same order today. In Guatemala, Isabel became a novice and a nursing assistant, working in a hospital.

At some point, she went back to El Salvador to resume teaching her people. However, this became too dangerous. Along with most of her siblings, in 1989, Isabel fled the country to come illegally to the U.S. She did not know a single word of English. She had suffered great trauma because of the war. Even thinking about that little she told me brings tears to my eyes. Moreover, she was one of the lucky ones for she escaped with her life.

She started over here, learning English, finding the courage to face her painful past through therapy and supporting herself by working as a nanny and an aide to elderly people. Some of Isabel's gifts lie in her tenderness and skill with young and old alike. She has two American children in Washington who will love her until the day they die and so many friends whose lives she has touched.

Over the next 11 years, Isabel worked with call, specifically whether she should return to the life and work of a Catholic nun. She moved from Cleveland to D.C., where her siblings in the U.S. live, joined Sacred Heart church, and, at different times, lived in Catholic communities. In addition to her hard work, Isabel also studied English, took classes to become a nursing assistant and enrolled in adult literacy classes, which is where we met.

I have to tell you at first I saw myself as I do very frequently as Isabel's great white hope. One of my biggest

stumbles is my pride in my gift for words and writing. I came to Isabel as the teacher with a capital T. Not only did I soon realize that my relationship with Isabel would be a relationship of equals, I also came to realize that God has blessed me by bringing Isabel into my life.

What has this to do with Philip and the eunuch? When I saw that text for the Sunday I had chosen to preach, I knew that it was perfect for my story about Isabel. For as Philip brought good news to the eunuch, Isabel has brought good news to me. Think of the symbolism of the eunuch in this story. I spent years writing very interesting interpretations of novels during my college career. I was known for always coming up with something just slightly off-center, no surprise to those who know me well. And so in this story when I put on my deconstructionist glasses, I see that the eunuch was empty, that there is a reason the Bible names this character not with a name but with that title of eunuch. For eunuchs are not only missing something, but what they are missing is literally the stuff of life, fertility and creation. Moreover, here came Philip at a river of water to give that life back to the eunuch.

While I was visiting Isabel and her family this past April, we spent one very long day sightseeing in rural northeastern El Salvador. We stopped at one point at the Rio El Sapo, the river of frogs. I love that image—a river full of frogs but honestly, I did not see even one. It was a hot sunny day and the riverside was steep and rocky with cool water flowing down through a shallow valley. I was one day away from coming home and feeling both the strain of not being able to converse fluidly with another and just how strange this country was to me. In other words, home sounded good. We were driving around in this rickety old van with several other people, friends from Isabel's hometown, and I was convinced the darn van was going to stop and not start again. All I wanted to do was to go straight back to Chirilagua, Isabel's town, but Isabel

insisted we stop and go wading in the river. She hopped nimbly among the rocks as the others joined her. I hung back, feeling very much the ugly American. But as I stood there watching, remembering the museum and memorial we had just been to that illustrated so vividly the terror and devastation of the war, I filled up for one moment with the joy that Isabel personified wading in the water and skipping on the rocks. Like someone had poured a big cup full of clear, cold water over my head and down my body. That cup was life and life given abundantly.

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation, justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth...Philip and the eunuch...went down to the water, and Philip baptized him...the eunuch went on his way rejoicing."

Here was Isabel whose life had included so much terror and hardship, like a lamb shorn, filled up not just with life but with life given to her through God. I was the eunuch on a wilderness road busily trying to read my way into wisdom and along came Isabel to make me understand that the life God gives us is precious. That is Isabel's first lesson to me: God gives us abundant life and we are to live it just that way.

Isabel's second lesson did not come to me while I was in El Salvador and it is encapsulated in something she must have said to me a million times during the time we worked together. "You must love yourself," she says, "before you can love others. It is so important to love yourself." In a book I read about Oscar Romero after I got back, it quotes from one of his sermons where he uses the text that we have today in First John. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." He said this to illustrate the courage so many people showed as they were persecuted and killed during the years of El Salvador's repression and war and to say to his country people that love brings strength in the face of terror. Even

as I wrote these words at home, I could feel how little qualified I was to say them to you, a clanging bell with no resonance compared to so many in El Salvador who truly have known terror. Yet, what I have learned from Isabel is the lesson of accompaniment, as Romero urged the privileged in El Salvador. Accompany the poor; be with them on their journeys. What Isabel taught me is that accompaniment is not about reaching down or even reaching out. It is about being with, side by side, learning from each other and finding out the hard truths of what love and friendship really mean. If you cannot love yourself, you cannot love another or God.

In the end, that is the greatest lesson Isabel taught me—the importance of love. I cannot believe I am going to stand here and try to talk to you about love because I hold those who talk or write about love to high standards as I hold love itself. I do not think love is a namby-pamby, hearts and flowers emotion. Love is fierce, bold as the text we read today proclaims it. Love comes when Jesus overturns tables in the temple. Love comes when a mother roughly grabs her child back off a busy street. Love sings without a tongue, fights without a sword, believes against reason.

Love implies a commitment, an accompaniment in life through argument, conflict, pain, even unto and through death. As I have grown older, I have said I love you to increasingly more people but it is not a phrase I employ often, or casually. In the wake of my friendship with Isabel, trip to El Salvador and consequent reading, love has come alive in the stories told after Jesus' resurrection and consequently in Acts. I can see how all those stories of Jesus appearing to people on roads and walking with them, the stories of the disciples coming upon people on their way to somewhere are stories of accompaniment, stories of being with in the face of persecution and terror.

What does terror feel like? I have known true fear only a couple of times in my life and I have relived it many times

since as a suffocation, actually not being able to breathe, to catch air into my lungs. As I read the stories of the war in El Salvador and persecution in Guatemala, I felt that fear again in the same way. I could not breathe.

However, what Isabel taught me by sharing her life, by being with me, is that love can overcome that terror. By the simple act of holding a hand or walking down a road or lighting a candle together, love overcomes fear and brings breath back to the body. What a way to think of resurrection...as air coming back into the body, fear diminished. It is not easy to love in this way, to commit to another and say I will walk with you. **That** is a miracle and God sent a child to show us how.

Isabel took me one step, maybe two or three – she is an amazing woman – further in my journey of learning how to love God and others. She helped me to see that the command to love your neighbor as yourself is like climbing a mountain without a rope. You go hand-by-hand, rock-by-rock, foot-by-foot and you hold on for dear life. You slip sometimes and the only way up is to do it all over again, only to do it better. You cry in frustration and you are bruised, scraped and cut. Nevertheless, you do climb and you do learn how and, if you are really blessed, you see ahead of you a figure who is climbing as you are. Sometimes that figure looks like Jesus. Sometimes, the figure looks like a small woman named Isabel. As you watch, you learn, you learn, and you learn. The climb does not get easier but you come to realize that this is a wilderness road and one you need to be on and one that gives you joy like clear cold water on a hot summer day.