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Date: June 5, 2011
Sermon Title: Here and There: A Report from the
Front Lines (of Paris and Prague)
Scripture: Acts 14:21-26
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Acts 14:21-26

After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, 'It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.' And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.

Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From there they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed.

For 36 years, I've been taking off from my church, flying off to exotic lands for great adventures and always returning to regale you with stories the first Sunday back home. People hung on every word as I described the horrors of slum life in Bombay or Calcutta, the ravages of poverty in Haiti or an earthquake in El Salvador, as I faced the fears of civil war in Nicaragua and the Congo, as I met with Pygmies in the bush and tribal chiefs and military dictators and Roman Catholic cardinals, as I preached in mud huts and grand cathedrals, as I built churches and houses and orphanages, as we fed the hungry, visited the lepers, or helped survivors of the tsunami.

In many ways my journeys mirrored St. Paul's three missionary journeys. If you read the Book of Acts in the Bible and Paul's many letters, you get a clear picture of his adventures, and mine.

Met by stiff opposition, like St. Paul? Check.
Dealt with snakes, like St. Paul? Check.
Faced by sorcerers, like St. Paul? Check.
Arrested, like St. Paul? Check.
Beaten, like St. Paul? Check.
Preached before excited crowds, like St. Paul? Check.
Investigated by the authorities, like St. Paul? Check.
Drove out demons, like St. Paul? Check.
Preached till people fell asleep, like St. Paul? Check.

All this and more I came home to tell, the exotic and frightening, the inspirational. Now I've returned from Paris and Prague, two of the most beautiful cities in the world. We have seen some of the beautiful art in the world, listened to some of the greatest music in the world, eaten in some of the finest restaurants in the world, surrounded by exquisite architecture and breathtaking experiences, accompanied by 14 straight days of pure sunshine. I don't know that any two weeks could have been more heavenly, more fun, more luxurious, more perfect. And yet there are stories to tell. Life here and life there were much connected.

Our first full day in Paris we awoke to the news that Joanna Bell had suffered a massive stroke. She was brain-dead. The hospital was preparing to harvest her organs for transplant before letting her die. Sad. Untimely. And fitting. Joanna came to our church about five years ago. She was living with Jesse Linderoth and awaiting her own transplant, a liver transplant. She weathered it well. She prospered. She came to church every Sunday. She loved being an usher. Indeed, she was perfect as an usher, with a beaming smile that just let you know it was good to be alive. She had grabbed hold of a miracle, her life was transformed, she was very grateful to God, and she loved expressing that at our church. And then it was all gone.

As Christians, we rejoice in salvation and heaven and in the "Blessed Assurance" of Joanna's eternal life. But our hearts hurt for the parts of her life left un-lived and the deep sorrow of those who wanted to live that life with her.

Life and death were much a part of our honeymoon paradise in Paris and Prague. Life and death are very much centered in cities rich with history. Monuments everywhere, honoring great people who lived, heroic people who died. Kings. Artists. Emperors. Saints. Warriors. Clergy. Life and death everywhere, noted, honored, remembered.

It's stunning and unsettling how much of that death is religion-based. Alida and I entered a lovely church in Paris. Right at the entrance a sign said that

outside this church on the square, right by the front door, over 300 French priests were slaughtered during the French Revolution. A few days later at the main palace at The Prague Castle, the guide showed us the window where representatives of the Pope were tossed out – “defenestration,” it's called – execution by tossing out the window.

Turnabout is fair play, so our Prague Old Town Hotel is famous as the backdrop for the execution of several young Protestants who wanted a little too much freedom of religion, so they were hanged.

Just around the corner was a mammoth statue honoring Jan Hus, one of the truly great heroes of Czech history and Christianity. Hus was leading the Protestant Reformation 100 years before Martin Luther, 100 years before there even was a Reformation or Protestantism, but he was on the front line, protesting for the very things that became the foundation of this church. He was burned at the stake.

Religious intolerance, religious persecution, religious evil reached its nadir with the Holocaust. In Paris we saw where the Jews were rounded up. In the Czech republic we spent a day at Terezin, a prison camp and transit camp for European Jews on the way to the death camps. It is humbling to face the dark side, whether of history or of religion. At least it would be humbling if we stayed humble.

While we were prancing the hallways of the great art museums of Paris, walking along the river's edge of the Seine, sitting at an outdoor café under the 9 PM sunlight, you were facing the countdown clock on Doomsday, May 21, God's Judgment Day. Now, I did a whole sermon on that before I went away, so let's not go into it much today except to say that the basic premise behind May 21 Doomsday is that the world stinks, people stink, life stinks, and God is fed up. Let me say May 21 didn't get much hype in Paris. Things looked pretty good sitting on our balcony overlooking the Rue des Écoles, just up from the Sorbonne and just down from the Panthéon.

This is not to say that life is perfect in Paris and Prague. They are as fed up as we are with the politics of sensationalism and scandals, corruption and crises; they are as worried as we are about the Middle East, terrorism, the economy, and unemployment. There is a nationwide strike scheduled for Prague later in June, with books and posters featuring Che Guevara in both cities, but perhaps the historic sweep of both cities gives a certain perspective. Life is good. Life is still life, and life is good.

At the Louvre we stood silent before the great art of the world, what some joker called “No head,” “No arms,” “No body,” the Winged Victory sculpture

with no head, the Venus de Milo statue with no arms, and the Mona Lisa, with just her smile. Yet for all their fame, they could not outshine the inspiration and beauty in room after room, museum after museum, artwork after artwork by the famous and the forgotten, each one capturing a moment in time, some eternal truth.

Renoir and Chagall, my beloved Camille Pissarro, an entire museum of Salvador Dali (whose surreal brain could never shake loose from God); five whole rooms devoted to nothing but Rembrandt and Christ. Several galleries filled with a style of painting called "Naturalism," paintings so real, so natural, that in one called "The Orphans," the young brother and sister stand before their parents' graves and you want to weep with them. Beautiful. Beautiful.

Of 14 days of our honeymoon, we spent 12 immersed in great art and great music, beauty so profound, so deep, so true, so real that you see creation for what it is, God's handiwork; and you see Bible stories for what they are, God at work in human history; and you see excellence and talents for what they are, gifts from God, for our pleasure.

I told you May 22 would be a great day because the world doesn't stink, people don't stink and life doesn't stink. I'm not underestimating the power of hurts, injustices, sorrows, disappointments, annoyances. We returned from our two weeks of pure bliss on Tuesday night. By 6 AM the next morning, I'd already gotten a ticket. The cops stopped me by the Mercato for not wearing my seatbelt ... 92 bucks! Little things and big things can drive us to distraction, which is a good phrase, "drive us to distraction." Things do happen that can distract us from the trueness of faith, the holiness of love, the beauty of life itself.

One memory? O.K., one. Saturday night, May 21, 7 PM, having dinner at a restaurant up in the Eiffel Tower, overlooking the River Seine and the mystical city of Paris, pinching ourselves just to make sure it was real. Love got us there, our church sent us there, one family even gave us a specific gift just for that restaurant.

As we looked out over the city with a history both rich and tortured, it was easy to imagine everything from Napoleon to Hitler, from "Les Miserables" to Impressionism, from Molière to Voltaire, from Champagne to Picasso, from Bardot to escargots, from Maurice Chevalier and Catherine Deneuve all the way to Woody Allen's newest movie, "Midnight in Paris."

Paris is the most wonderful, moving place. It has refused to be defined by its defeats, its errors, its tyrants, or its failures. Always it has risen to new

heights from humble beginnings on two little islands in the middle of the River Seine. Looking out over Paris we saw life and love and faith more resilient than death and hate and doubt.

We saw the same thing last night, 2,000 people gathered at Ludlow High School for "Relay for Life," the huge anti-cancer all-night fundraiser. Cancer is real and devastating and heartbreaking; the sickness and treatment are harsh and tough. The fears are real. The sorrows are real. And yet, everybody there chose life and hope and faith. They chose that. They chose resilience and determination. They chose to love and to live.

On my last trip to Prague, I was editing and finishing my last book of poetry, *Fieldstones of Faith, Volume II*. One of the poems was directly inspired by my three visits to Prague and seeing for myself the resilience of its people after decades, even centuries of hardship. I called it "The Gates of Hell," based on Jesus's promise that his church, our church, this dear Christian faith of ours is always destined for greatness, no matter what we face.

Let me close with that poem:

**The Gates of Hell
(Matthew 16:18)**

Across peaceful and hostile lands
spires still inspire
The Church still stands
atheists do their best
to lambaste
religion's excess
nevertheless
The Church
with capital "C"
us, we
still stand
and withstand
every
adversary.

The Nazis and Communists
have come and gone
no need to be afraid
I saw their May Day Parade

Once, yes,
they did suppress
and in time may try again
to mock or oppress
yet
the Church still stands
Gothic, Baroque, whatever
it does matter
the Church is structure
girth
heft
power

Presumed, assumed, exhumed,
Power, symbol and time
beyond fear
when yesterdays are past
the Church is still here.

The Gates of hell
cannot prevail.