

“Why Bologna?”

July 30 Sermon

We spent eight weeks in our Church Bible Study on “The Nature of God,” which was fascinating. It took us from the amorphous (God as Spirit, Truth) to strong images like King, Judge, Lion, Rock, Fortress, to the most popular: God as creator, God in nature. And, of course, there’s God’s own warning in the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt not make any graven image of me, don’t paint me, don’t sculpt me, don’t carve me, don’t make me out of anything into anything.” Or, as God said to Moses, who wanted a clear description of who God is, God said, “I Am Whom I Am.” Period.

One fun exercise we did in Bible Study was to sing through the hymns that tackle “the nature of God” like the one we sang today: “Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes.”
Immortal...invisible...inaccessible...hid from our eyes.

Well, not in Italy. Alida and I have been blessed to be in Rome and Bologna this year, and believe you me, God is not invisible, NOT inaccessible, definitely not hidden away. It is such visits and such experiences that lead to my sermon title, “Why Bologna?” similar to sermons going back to 1974.

In 1974, I went to Africa, I often joked at the time that up ‘till then the furthest I’d ever been was New Jersey, not much of an exaggeration. So, I went off to the Congo, Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia. I was pastor of a little church in a little town in upstate New York, this was the early 70’s. This was before tourism exploded, and ‘adventure travel” so I was about the only person anybody knew who had been to Africa. I was the instant expert on Africa. If it pertained to Africa, I was the “go-to” guy, giving hundreds of slide shows, presentations, radio and TV and press interviews. Looking back on it, it is amazing how little I knew, yet how much I talked!!

Travel was such a rarity that the first Sunday I returned, my church people gave me a standing ovation! And then I launched into my sermon, “Why Africa?” As the years went by, circumstances and ministry took me further afield, across America and around the world. On behalf of Christian missions. On behalf of Habitat for Humanity, or, on my own. And every time I returned, I’d preach, “Why

India...Why Nicaragua...Why Haiti..." And equally compelling, and mysterious, "Why Jackson, Mississippi? Why the Lower East Side of Manhattan? Why Worcester, Massachusetts? Why Tijuana, Mexico City, Immokalee, Florida?"

Each time was less a travelogue, I had my slide shows for that. Oh, my, remember slide shows? Oh, I was horrible, but there I was with my clicker, "click, click, click," telling stories of faraway people in faraway places, with not so very far away needs. But my "why this, that or some other place" sermons were designed to answer everyone's questions: Why care? Who gives a hoot? And for my church people in particular, "why should we let you go away, and leave us alone?" As one Deacon said upon my return, "you cannot go away again. Who's going to pray for us if we're sick?" Why was it worth it on my dime, and on their time, for me to be in places they'd never heard of, in Africa; or never thought about, in Mississippi?

The Bible is full of travel. Some of it voluntary. Some forced. Some called to it. Mary and Joseph were forced to go to Bethlehem. Then trek a long way as refugees to Egypt. Abraham was asked to go, literally, to God knows where. Ezekiel and Philip were led to the wilderness. Jonah reluctantly travelled to enemy country. St. Paul wandered the Mediterranean basin, ship-wrecked, beaten, imprisoned and snake-bit along the way, ultimately ending up in Rome. Israel wandered for centuries. The disciples took the Gospel of Jesus "to the ends of the earth." The Bible is often just a long series of stories, travel stories, about people met, things that happened, lessons learned. Lots of take aways at every turn, around the corner, across every border.

One of the most soulful scriptures from the Bible is about the downside of travel – it's Psalm 137, made famous by Reggae music and the Rastafarians. It's about the time of exile for the Jewish people, forced from home and country, and all that was familiar, forlorn; and yearning for their homeland, Zion. The Psalmist cries, "By the Rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, Yeah, we wept when we remembered Zion...Now," the singer goes on, "how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Psalm 137: 1-4, Song by Boney M.)

Our travel is not like being conquered, dragged off into exile, or as slaves, not that traumatic. But all travel has its challenges: homesickness, cultural shock. Near 100 kids from our church will begin their journey off to college or boarding school, maybe grad school, or a first job in a few weeks. And filled with anxiety, to

some degree, some may hide it well but there will be questions and doubts, nerves, and uncertainties. From time to time, it will seem like a “strange country,” and they may need to “sit down and weep.”

Going to Bologna isn't exactly the same as leaving home, not so fraught with potential drama. I didn't have to deal with a lousy roommate, or bad food. Alida and I have certainly enjoyed our journeys together through the years, Florence, Madrid, Rome, Paris, Venice, Vienna, Budapest, and I think you've heard me mention Prague, once or twice. Our own 21st Century version of “the Grand Tour,” making up for lost time, opening up to whatever God may choose to teach us. All this coming after decades of Latin America, Africa, India, Haiti for me...30 years of Appalachia for Alida, plus trips to India, Vietnam, China. The Ying and Yang of the world: so very different, so very, very, very much alike.

That may be the most enduring lesson of all these travels, that neither God nor humanity is much different one place to another. I love reggae music and I love the song “By the Rivers of Babylon” and I understand Psalm 137 and the heartache of homesickness and loneliness. And I have certainly “sat down and wept” far from home. But I don't buy the verse that says, “how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange place?”

In my folk music life, that would be after Doo-Wop and before The Rolling Stones, I loved the native American folk singer, Buffy St. Marie, who sang confidently, “God is Alive, Magic is afoot, God is Alive, Magic is afoot.” I've seen that God, very much “alive,” and God's magic very much “afoot” in thatched roof, mud brick, tiny churches in rural Africa; in the humblest store-front churches of urban America, in the grand Cathedrals and Basilicas of Europe; and in the simple, pristine beauty of this quintessential New England Church. What travel does for me is to open my eyes wider, to expand my consciousness and experience and understanding of faith itself.

I've always loved the definition of faith St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Hebrews (11:1-3), “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Faith isn't superstition, or anti-science, or afraid of reason or intellect or questions. Faith is simply an approach to the mysteries of life,

mysteries that are all around us and invite a spirit of wonder, and welcome a church where “God is alive, and Magic is afoot.”

In Bologna, I began each day at 5:30 or 6am, walking the streets, going from church to church as they opened. In every church, people are always there, lighting candles, kneeling on the hard stone floors, looking intently at the Christian story unfolded on artwork adorning the great altar and all the side chapels. In all these ancient, massive churches, 500 years old, 1000 years old, 1500 years old, the stories told in art are riveting, compelling, at once frightening and loving. Jesus is everywhere, crucified, gory and suffering; yet loving, empathetic, even in his agony. Nearby is always Mary, his mother, the Christmas Mary, with baby Jesus on her lap; the Crucifixion Mary, horrified, grief-stricken, then cradling the dead Jesus in her arms. All around the church are the Saints, the yesteryear heroes of faith who chose to follow Christ, who faced their own agonies and suffering, and martyrdom; yet each one somehow serene, victorious. Somehow beyond earthly terrors.

One morning I stood next to a motorcycle gang member from Germany, his leather jacket and gang colors proclaimed his loyalty – a mullet haircut added to his image, tattoos all over him of indiscriminate meaning, a large man, menacing. In gruff English he said to me, “Mary Magdalene, where is she?” Yes, I thought, Mary Magdalene, known throughout Christendom as “the Penitent.” Mary Magdalene, the truest love for Jesus, the person who most embodies faith, devotion, and loving service.

I needed a Mary Magdalene for my biker friend, my eyes darted around the church, and she was everywhere, always at the foot of the cross, embracing the cross, and Jesus himself, the blood flowing upon her from his crucified body. I found Mary Magdalene. “Danke,” he said. “Thank you.” And he went over, knelt, prayed fervently.

Such experiences were daily occurrences as we visited 53 churches, encounters with people of every kind and age, drawn to these places of intense faith. For me, I feel the mystery and wonder of faith, and what the Apostles’ Creed calls “the Communion of Saints.” Church is a place where good happens, good emanates, good causes things to happen. That’s why we’re there, right? We need something, we expect something, we’re looking for something.

Last Sunday, we worshipped in five churches, from 9am to 1pm with a total, hear what I said, a total combined audience of 200 people. So, something is missing there, something's not working. But on their own, all week long, one-by-one, people made their way to church. Last Tuesday, we found a church, open all day, totally quiet. It exists for one purpose. People come in, sit down, and stare at the altar. For minutes, even hours. It's called "the Adoration of the Eucharist," Holy Communion, blessed by a priest, sits on the altar, the very presence of Christ, in Catholic teaching. And people sit there, a community of strangers, a family of strangers, bonded by the faith's love...or love's faith.

My last Bologna story takes you to a stranger place than you might expect from your Baptist pastor turned Congregationalist, with my New England pedigree and New York City cynicism. In a little church, off the beaten path, we found St. Catherine of Bologna, the patron saint of artists, a revered artist, writer, teacher, and mystic from the 1400's. A nice lady. But that's not what made her famous, although being nice is a good beginning toward being a saint.

Anyway, after a nice life as a nice lady, and a nice nun, Catherine died, and the other nuns in the convent buried her. No embalming. No casket. No vault. Just the old way: wrap her up, put her in the ground. Eighteen days later, the nuns noted a sweet smell coming up from the spot Catherine was buried, so they dug her up only to discover that Catherine's body was not decaying, not corrupting, and indeed there was a sweet smell. There are lots of stories and miracles around this mystery, over the course of 600 years, but the essence is this: No rigormortis, no decay, sweet as a rose. More proof of God's power over death we don't like to think about, so... the nuns in the convent lifted her up out of the grave, dressed her in the nun's habit, sat her up, yes, I said "sat her up," put her in a chair, built a chapel around her next door to the church.

And yes. I made Alida go with me, two times. You can go into the church and peer through a tiny window into St. Catherin's Chapel room or go straight into the room. We went straight into the room, saying our prayers for you, before the incorruptible 600-year-old body of St. Catherine, sitting up, looking nice.

On our second visit, the priest took special interest in us, especially when he learned Alida was a pastor. He launched into a very detailed story of Catherine's life, "there's so much more to her story than this," he told us, gesturing toward

the uncorrupted body. “So much more to her story: Her intellect, her writings, one of Christianity’s great scholars, her paintings, her leadership. So much more to her story.”

That, for me, is a big part of “Why Bologna,” and why all the other churches and places, and saints and miracles and mysteries that attract me. Yes, I love the hint of mystery and the wonder of the miraculous that leave me quizzical AND inspired. All those reliquaries of dead saint’s bones and pieces of Jesus’ cross and Mary’s garment and St. Peter’s prison chains, that inspire fervent and faithful prayer.

The odd, the peculiar, the hard to believe, hard to accept miracle stories that probably make you question my sanity – I like all that even while I question all that. They make my head spin, and my head often needs a good spin. But what I really get from such things is that “there’s always so much more to this story.”

There’s the priest at St. Catherine’s church proudly boasting about her leadership and intellect 600 years ago when women had little chance at leadership, and not allowed to show intellect. The biker from Germany finding his peace with Mary Magdalene. The cleaning lady at one church who made sure to mop the stone floor just before I knelt at that spot to pray. All these people we saw every day through whom God’s spirit shone brightly.

Bologna is just one more place where I found it incredibly easy to “sing God’s song in a strange land,” proof that wherever life takes us, God’s song sounds good. And I haven’t even mentioned that Bologna is the home of “Bolognese,” the best pasta and sauce this side of heaven. But that’s a story for another day!