

Standing on Sacred Ground

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Exodus 3:1-15

Three weeks is not a very long time, but it has been long enough to stand on holy ground. Before I left, one of you asked me: So what is this with Brazil? It seems like a good time to report to you on this trip to Brazil, while it stays fresh in my memory and thoughts. It is a good thing to share, because, while I have not been in the wilderness, I have for these weeks been walking in what is for me a pilgrimage, and have witnessed again the fiery spirit of the God of liberation that moves thoughtful and passionate people of faith. The same God who sent Moses to speak to Pharaoh moves these Brazilian friends to speak words of liberation and hope to the poor, and to women, and to gay folk, in that country. The same spirit moves them to speak words of truth to power, although their own power is tiny.

Through the Alliance of Baptists, a progressive Baptist group, I have been in touch these past three years with a group of progressive church leaders, principally in Northeast Brazil, who have banded together to form the Alianca de Batistas do Brasil (the Alliance of Baptists of Brazil), to offer an alternative to the status quo of conservative Christianity—to offer a version of the gospel that speaks to the condition of a struggling people. I returned for a second trip to be with them this year as they met for their biennial meeting, and to add to this some personal visits with my new friends. After an iffy beginning (the airline left me stranded twice and lost my bag) I landed in the city of Salvador, where two young civil rights lawyers from the Brazilian Black Movement spent the day with me, showing me the city from their side—and the side of the poor folk of that city, once home to the world’s busiest slave market. Laina and Tarcito and their baby were wonderful hosts!

That was the beginning. Two nights later I was invited to preach in a favela, a crime-ridden slum, in the city of Maceio. Off an almost invisible unmarked side road are hundreds, perhaps thousands of tiny dwellings piled on each other in a neighborhood with an incredibly high homicide rate and thriving drug-traffic. I searched for ways to find common ground with the small group worshiping there in Alegria, which means Joy. We sang “Oh Freedom” and the pastor there reminded us to pray for the people of Missouri in the aftermath of the killing in one community. Oh yes, the world has been watching Missouri on television. The people in Alegria understand racism, and police violence, and suffering, all too well. And they were so open to learning of churches and communities in the US that do not fit their stereotypes of wealth and arbitrary power.

My high octane vacation continued with a church convention in Rio De Janiero marking the fiftieth anniversary of Brazil’s bloody dictatorship and a celebration of the resistance of people of faith at that time.

In the weeks that followed, I visited with my friends Wellington and Odja and their daughters Andrea and Alana, back in the city of Maceio and then on to the city of Aracaju, where their families live. We worshipped last weekend in a more traditional Baptist Church where

Wellington had been invited to preach. I was received so warmly by Odja's and Wellington's families, that I feel I have new brothers and sisters.

Finally this past week, I got to preach at the Wednesday evening service of the Pinheiro Baptist Church in Maceio, with the help of interpreter-theologian-philosopher-friend Paulo Nascimento, another Afro-Brazilian. The last time I had stood before them as pastor of a partner congregation; this time I had to explain that I was no longer at Binkley Church in North Carolina! It was humbling to stand in the same pulpit my friends Wellington and Odja so often speak from with words of conviction and faith. But I gave it my best. I brought greetings from Emmanuel Friedens church! I spoke out of Exodus chapter 3. This morning I want to share some of my words from that evening.

SO, pretend now that you are Brazilians, listening to a foreigner with an interpreter—.

Over the past few weeks I have been reflecting a great deal on what it is that ties us together as companions of Jesus, in Pinheiro, in North Carolina and in Schenectady New York. Driving many miles with Pastors Wellington and Odja, visiting with Alianca churches in Rio De Janeiro and with the Santos and Barros families in the beautiful city of Aracaju—all this has given me the space to step back and reflect on what it is we are called to do and be in the Church of Jesus.

One of the conversations I have had was with the brother of Pastor Odja, a man named Cicero. He wanted to ask me some questions about what I do and what my past has been. At one point I said to him, "I am just a pastor." At this point, Pastor Odja stopped being a good interpreter and started adding some commentary...kind words I think. But in that moment as I listened it occurred to me that what we do as "just pastors," in churches like this one ... is an enormous privilege. And in that minute, sitting on the back porch of her parents' home, my mind flew as she and her brother spoke. Churches like yours and mine are one of the most beautiful things, in this life. I am so pleased to be just a pastor—to share in the hard and lovely work of helping to create intentional communities—communities that create an alternative to the status quo—communities filled with love. Communities that give witness! For we do try in our stumbling way, to give witness with not only words but the way we treat each other and the people around us.

This past week, a very good pastor—just a pastor-- died in the city in which I live Father Michael Hogan, a Roman Catholic priest, was the pastor of the church across the street from mine. Since I only just recently arrived, he and I have only visited twice, each visit for one hour, but both very memorable conversations. The second visit was the week before I left for Brazil, when he told me about his impending death from cancer—a matter he dealt with openly and yet with humor.

Now why do I mention this man? Because for the last [many] years, in our city he has organized and prayed and cared for people. He has befriended those with mental illness, worked with young adults who are addicted to drugs, adopted youth with no homes, opened a neighborhood center that will provide presence and love for those who struggle most in our poor city. He has worked ecumenically with Methodists and Baptists. Oh, and for better or for worse also he persuaded me into coming to that city. This is how he did it. He told me a story of how

the people in the community saw a police officer taking money from drug dealers. He explained there was nobody but the pastors willing to take the situation on.

You and I live in very different situations, but we are trying to do the same thing. We are trying to create communities of resistance: we resist the assumptions of a world order built on profit, greed and using people as means to ends. We resist the kind of false faith that talks of heaven while it ignores the poor on earth. Jesus of Nazareth called his followers to a different way, as he said in his story of the rich man and poor man Lazarus, lying at the gate. The only “prosperity gospel” that Jesus wanted was the one that shared and shared alike, from each according to our ability, to each according to their need.

For too long, we ... have taught that faith is only individual commitment to Jesus. I agree that an individual commitment to follow Jesus on the way of life, the way of the cross, the way of revolutionary love—this is the place where each of us starts. However what I love about this Pinheiro church is the collective consciousness of what it means to follow Jesus—to be a community that is an alternative, a community that resists institutional evil and lives hope. You believe in a new way of doing business, a new way of being humans, men and women of various races sizes shapes and orientations, all bound by costly love. In Christ, Paul reminds us in Galatians, we are a new creation, no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. In the Body of Jesus, there are no distinctions between Catholics and Baptists, men and women, rich and poor, nor any other arbitrary social status.

We know in our bones what it means to follow Jesus. We know that it means to share a message of liberating love, with our minds, with placing our bodies on the line, and with our collective witness and actions.

I have deep regrets that one of my newest best friends, Father Hogan, had to die before he and I can work together. But the wonderful thing about the Body of Christ is that our witness is communal, and that no matter what happens it goes on—in Christ it goes on. One Catholic priest dies, another Baptist minister who shares his concerns shows up. And in our local churches it is so as well. One church member is called home, another comes forward. After two thousand years, the revolution of God is only beginning.

[I finished by saying to them:] Your congregation is a light bulb, where the switch has been flipped on. Do not underestimate the impact of a little light in the darkness. The liberating love of God shines through in your willingness to be in solidarity with your neighbors, and with people in rural communities and favelas. Your willingness to discuss hard issues openly and to be open to changing in faith--- these things shine. This light, this resistance, this witness, this prayer, this hope—this is what we share. A single light may not seem like much. But once the Jesus switch is on, it cannot be turned off. It can be seen, even when we think nobody is watching.

Thanks be to God for this congregation here in Maceio and throughout Alagoas. Thanks be to God for the sacred fires that burn unceasing in the wilderness, signs from God for a deliverance of the people.

These are the words I spoke in Maceio, but a few days ago. As they worship there this morning and tonight, I am grateful to be with you here—for this too is community of resistance, wonder and hope. When we are truly in community, when we speak out for love, when we say

no to arbitrary power and yes to communities of hope and joy—we stand together, on sacred ground. We are together witnesses to the light of God, burning undiminished, burning with love for every single human being, and all creation together.