

30 April 2008

Dear Friends at FCC,

A thousand questions patter like ping pong balls in my head. The restless sounds of airport life bounce from wall to wall and rattle across sterile, shiny hallways. It's April 30; and today I fly to Israel.

Questions are relentless. Will today's flight be smooth and uneventful? Will I find the right taxi when I arrive in Tel Aviv? What about strange languages – Arabic and Hebrew? Will I figure things out, find my way from place to place? And what of the people I'll meet? Will I be too anxious to absorb all there is to absorb, too anxious to pay attention?

Looking over some poetry I've collected and enjoyed of late, I find this one from Denise Levertov, and it speaks like scripture to my jitters:

As swimmers dare
To lie face to the sky
And water bears them,
As hawks rest upon air
And air sustains them,
So would I learn to attain
Freefall, and float
Into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
Knowing no effort earns
That all-surrounding grace.

I sense today's pilgrimage has little to do with my effort and everything to do with patterns of grace; little to do with my smarts and everything to do with the Spirit whose peace sustains me and bears me, sustains us and bears us. I find myself praying now for the wisdom of surrender: may I trust God enough – completely, courageously – to simply accept the joy, concern, mystery and pain I encounter on this trip. Surrender. Breathe. Let it be.

I hope for the patience to let God be God. I'm so grateful for this opportunity and for all the conversations I'll have in the Holy Land this month. There will be conversation with a Sufi Sheikh in Nazareth on my birthday, an afternoon with Israeli journalist Yossi Klein Halevi (who wrote At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden, the book I've shared with many of you), visits with Archbishop Elias Chacour of the Melkite Church in Galilee and Pastor Mitri Raheb of the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. I pray only for patience: to listen carefully and well, to receive the gifts of wisdom and insight as they're given, to give thanks to God for each new day.

If there's a biblical text for me now, for this once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage, I wonder if it might be Jeremiah 18. God sits at a potter's wheel, lovingly and graciously working the clay into a pot. God is relentless and daring. Occasionally, the pot is broken, the clay is scooped and the process begins anew. I hope only to be some kind of clay, beloved and cherished, but clay just the same. And I hope God will do whatever she needs to do, or wants to do, to use and honor my life.

In other ways, Jeremiah seems like a worthy partner for this journey. He loved Jerusalem after all, and believed in God's blessing there. And he also insisted that God's blessing required a kind of courage the people resisted: the courage to make peace, the courage to put the poor first, the courage to love without calculation. It seems to me that Jeremiah might have something to say to our own time: to peoples of faith here in the US and in the Middle East as well. I start, simply, by listening.

With many of you, I've been disturbed, again, by the media criticism of my UCC colleague Jeremiah Wright. Like his namesake, Pastor Wright insists that the blessing of faith requires a kind of courage that official Christendom often resists: the courage to condemn war, the courage to reject revenge, the courage to name our nation's past. His is a hard word, a bold and prophetic word. At the core of it, though, is a thoroughly traditional Christian lesson: an eye for an eye is madness, nations that invest in violence reap what they sow. And it seems so clear, now, that mainstream American media wants none of it. I continue to hear Pastor Wright as an important Christian voice and an American prophet. Jeremiahs are on the loose in my mind, and in my imagination. And I think that's a good thing.

I turn my eyes to the Holy Land now, and wonder about the prospects for peace, for transformation there. Will violence lead to more violence, grievances to still more troublesome grievances? Or is there another way forward? Who are the visionaries of peace, the practitioners of reconciliation? Will we pay attention and take their lead? I wonder how mercy fits into this mess. I wonder how forgiveness stirs the possibility of reconciliation. Doesn't faith insist that there is no justice without forgiveness, no future without mercy? How do these very deep, but vague, commitments get fleshed out in a land of conflict and torment?

Again, the questions. Again, the unsettling questions. I turn back to Denise Levertov and to her reminder that faith means surrender and freefall. I pray for the courage to let this day be, to let this journey unfold, to allow the Spirit to direct my steps. I have a hunch that that's enough.

I'll keep you all in my prayers. And I know you'll do the same for me.

In the love of God,

Dave Grishaw-Jones