

When I was one and a half, my family moved from the Washington DC area to Berlin, where my father took up his first Foreign Service post. After about six years in Germany, we moved briefly back to the States, and then on to Cameroun for two years, Congo for two years, Rome for six months and Switzerland for two and a half years, before returning to Alexandria when I was a sophomore in high school. I very much grew up as an American, attending English-speaking schools with American curriculum; celebrating the fourth of July wherever we happened to be stationed, coming back to the States most summers. And I felt very American – until I came back here and started attending an American high school. I was shocked to learn that customs like pep rallies and homecoming were not just old-timey things that happened in Nancy Drew books, in the 20s or the 50s – were very much alive now. I was American, but had developed an outsider outlook.

Never until this week did it ever occur to me that my story shares something with Jesus' story, experiencing his formative early years in another country. We don't know how old Jesus was when his parents fled with him to Egypt, but he was young. Just think of all the knowledge and responses and processes a child acquires in those early years packed with learning. Jesus spent those, not among his own kindred, but among people whom his kindred would have called foreigners, though to him they were just folks. He grew up among people who were not Jews, whose festivals and stories and foods were different. I've often thought about how Jesus and his parents were refugees, their own government having rendered life unsafe for them in their homeland. No one wants to leave their home, unless forced to for survival. But this story also tells us that Jesus grew up an expat.

And we don't know what age he was when he came back, but he came back to his homeland not quite knowing its customs. He and his parents and maybe siblings by then settled in Nazareth, where Joseph either started or resumed a carpentry business and presumably Jesus helped him. I wonder what customs he found strange; what opinions he considered narrow-minded. Because Jesus came back with an outsider's outlook.

Did that vision, of knowing how people live and think in other places, beyond your own community, forever color the way Jesus approached people? Was that an essential piece of background for this one who would lead his people out of bondage, not from Egypt, but from being stuck in sin and death? Was this why he was able to heal and interact with people outside the bounds of his own community, the Samaritans, the Greeks and Romans and Syro-Phoenicians, the lepers, the tax collectors?

Was this needed for the one who was to grow into his mission to be light, not only for “his people Israel,” but a light to the nations? One day he would say, “I am the light of the world.” And then he said to his followers, “You are lights for the world.” This mission he fulfilled is one he invites us to help bring to completion.

We need this outsider outlook as we live our mission to share the Good News beyond our own circles – not just the verbal message of it, but the living of it, the supernatural peace of it, the inexplicable hope of it, the extraordinary forgiveness of it, the overwhelming love of it; As we explore how to take that Good News across boundaries of difference, to cultivate relationships – real relationships with people who think differently than we do, who dress differently and work differently and believe differently and like different music. As Bill Hoxie distributes whatever blankets and clothing shows up in that unmarked magic box outside our food pantry building, he is beginning to get to know some of the folks who camp out in the woods because they have no home, and to learn what they need. He’d like more of us to join him, to go and talk, help fill out forms, go beyond sending blankets to building relationships. This is a big piece of Jesus that we carry. We need this outsider outlook piece of Jesus’ story as we go about our mission to carry God’s contagious love to people who are different from ourselves.

We worship a God who prizes diversity, who cherishes difference. Who, at the moment of creation, began to distinguish one thing from another, light from dark, day from night, sun from moon, land from sky, water from earth. And then made each animal made with its own distinctiveness, and then humankind, made in God’s image yet distinct – and ultimately male and female, both made in the image of God, yet wonderfully different, other. This thread runs through our sacred stories. God prizes diversity.

Difference is something to be cherished and celebrated.

And when difference is not cherished and celebrated, it can kill.

We are living in a time when the differences from one to another in this country have become toxic. So we are called to a ministry of bridging, bridge-building, becoming ourselves bridges across the chasms that have widened –
Between richer and poorer, urban and rural, white and black and brown,
college-educated and not, science-appreciating and science-fearing;
religious and suspicious of religion; faithful and fearful.

And how we approach that mission, engaging people who are different from us so that we can create bonds, braiding cables that will hold up the bridges – is what I believe what we are to be about in this next season of church life.

A vision has been growing in me for something I call “Circles of Difference,” where any one of us who’s willing to host would convene and online circle meeting regularly, on whatever online platform works for you, and would intentionally invite people you know who think differently, vote differently, react differently than you –especially ones who might make you uncomfortable.

There will be rules of the road, and structured discussion, topics and questions to guide our conversations...

The purpose will be to re-cultivate the capacity for conversation and relationship across boundaries of difference. I cannot think of anything more important to our particular time and place as Americans in the 21st year of the 21st century.

We don’t have to move to Egypt to get an outsider’s outlook – we just have to spend enough time with someone who comes at life from a different angle than we do, whose cultural norms, histories and grudges are different, whose attitudes and prejudices are different, whose idea of beauty is different; whose food is different. Originally I wanted to call this Eating With Strangers, and if we ever get back to gathering in person over food maybe we’ll morph to that. But we can certainly start it online, which is safer space right now.

If we want to learn to see the world with Jesus’ eyes of love, we just may need to acquire his outsider’s outlook. After all, we are outsiders to him.

Our great story celebrates God coming into our world to learn to see as we do, that we might learn to see as he does.

Just imagine how strange and even unsavory we might appear to one used to God’s presence. Yet Jesus came and forgave and loved and made us his friends. That’s a gift for us to pass along. Amen.

Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'