

Association for Theological Field Education
Friday Morning Worship – January 23, 2015
Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño, Preacher

Isaiah 35

I cannot come to this space of God's creation and not think of Juanita. She was an immigrant and I was a pastor. I had been sent forth by my bishop to minister to immigrants in the southern quadrants of Albuquerque, NM. Juanita had arrived before me. I assumed that she had come there to survive. I assumed too little.

Juanita lived right in the middle of the immigrant community; an area called the War Zone by the local police because of its violence. The police would only show up in the day time. If I happened to be making pastoral calls and stayed beyond dusk, the immigrant women would insist that their sons or husbands accompany me to my car. It's the only time in my ministry when I've had to duck and run to my car carrying guilt as I left because my lack of sense of time had put someone else in danger's way.

It took all my seminary training and all the practice of ministry I had under my belt and then some to begin that ministry. It was Juanita, however, who made it blossom and bloom.

After weeks of knocking on doors I met Juanita. There was something different about her. I quickly learned that even at her young age she was a matriarch in the community. I asked her if she was part of a community of faith and when she said that life's demands had not allowed her time to seek out a church, I asked her if I could bring the church to her home. She smiled and opened wide the door of her home. We agreed that she would invite others and I would prepare to share God's good news with them.

I prepared prayerfully. I would be sharing with the unchurched so I chose what I consider a basic life text of scripture, the 23rd Psalm.

When the day arrived to initiate our home church I found Juanita particularly happy. Her small apartment was warm and welcoming, the aroma of strong coffee wafting through the air. Others arrived and when it was time to begin our spiritual sharing I asked Juanita if she was ready. She was busy being a good host to us so she waved her hand and told me to go on ahead and start. She wanted to bring the coffee and cookies out and besides she'd be just a half wall away in that small room that served as both living room and kitchen. She could hear us from there she insisted.

I welcomed everyone, led us in prayer and some songs of faith, and then began to read the 23rd Psalm...."Jehovah es mi Pastor, nada me faltara.....The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Did anyone know this good shepherd, I asked rhetorically, as I was about to delve into my prepared bible study/meditation. I expected no response but it came from the kitchen behind the half wall.

“I know the good shepherd. Oh, yes, I do. I wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for the good Lord, my shepherd.” Just then Juanita came around the wall into the living room with her tray of coffee and cookies and what seemed to be an aura of light all around her, her joy was so great. I knew better than to just keep going with my planned bible study/meditation so I asked Juanita to tell us about her experience of the Lord our shepherd. I had expected to bring the good news that day, but God had anointed Juanita for that task.

I knew that Juanita had come from poverty, having left her children behind with her parents and having come to this country to seek work and a means to help them all survive. What I did not know was what her journey had been like.

Everyone had said it would be easy to cross into the United States, but when she got to the border Juanita found herself all alone. She asked someone how far it was to Albuquerque. Oh not far, they said, just go North and you’ll be there in no time. With her plastic jug of water Juanita started to travel North, expecting to see Albuquerque over every hill she went, but all she saw before her was sage brush and desert.

The water was soon gone. She’d already eaten the food her mother had lovingly sent her with, food that meant that there was that much less for her children and her parents. Consuming that little pouch of food made her all that much more determined to get to Albuquerque and get a job and feed her family. But it would not be as easy as she had thought. Days in the desert had almost swallowed her up whole, but the good Lord her shepherd was with her.

The days in the desert had scorched her body and parched her throat making her long for the night, but the night was so cold that she prayed for the sun of day. The first day and night came and went, then the second, and then the third; a suffering so unbearable that she began to commend her beloved children and parents to God’s care as she prepared to die. On that third day she fainted on the desert floor thanking God for its relief in that moment that comes right before the darkness when death becomes a friend. But death was not the friend who was accompanying her that day.

Juanita didn’t know how long she had been unconscious when she found herself waking up, not in some celestial place but right there at that same place on the desert floor. It was as if someone had nudged her awake. She fearfully thought it was a desert coyote about to eat her, but as clarity came to her eyes she saw no coyote or any other creature. What she did see was something shining in the sand right ahead of her.

Forcing herself to move, she crawled toward the shining object before her. It was almost completely buried in the sand so she began to dig it out. Lo and behold it was a mason jar full of water. She opened it expecting the water to be hot, filthy, rancid, but it wasn’t! It was cool, crystal, delicious water. “You may doubt,” she said to us, “but I know that it was the Lord, my good shepherd, watching over me, giving me water in the desert, and saving my life.”

We believed with her! The Holy Spirit was so very present for us as Juanita had taken us through the landscape of her life and shown us the very presence of God. Surely the Lord is our shepherd and we shall not want!

It is what the people of Judah experienced in the desert places of their life. Out of nowhere but in the midst of tremendous human struggle and desolation comes the voice of the prophet Isaiah with good news:

...the desert will be glad,
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom....bursting into bloom.....
joy will erupt,
and we will know that we have seen the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.

we of feeble hands will be strengthened,
our weakened knees will be steadied,
our hearts will lose their fear
because our God will come to save us.

All around the sacred text in this 35th chapter of Isaiah there is nothing but fear of war, ecological destruction, devastation and despair. All around Juanita there was little more than violence, the cruelty of poverty and hopelessness and the long dark shadow of colonization and economic injustice. Yet for the people of Judah and this immigrant sister comes the mighty word of God's faithfulness. A word of the healing of the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute; the healing of all who are crippled by the inhumanity of the world we have built.

Can't you hear it? It's.....

like water unexpectedly gushing forth in the wilderness,

like streams suddenly bubbling up through the dry barren silence of the desert.....

And can't you see it? It stretches forth before us like a broad and safe highway free of all danger.

It is God among us ready to redeem us and set us on the Way of Holiness. It is a real word not some passing fantasy.

Those who first heard the prophet's words sat in bondage, real bondage, under the oppression of foreign rule. They heard the prophet's word as the promise of their coming freedom from political captivity, and they believed; believed that soon, very soon they would be journeying back to the sacred landscape of Jerusalem, their holy land.

Juanita heard her Lord whispering life and love into her in the deadly desert place of her life and she believed; believed that she was not alone; believed that on her journey God walked with her, believed that someday her suffering would be overcome.

I have never known more faith or hope than the faith and hope I felt that day in Juanita's presence, in God's own presence.

In the midst of our present-day landscape of human sin and suffering may we hear God's faithful word of redemption, and with the people of Judah and our sister Juanita, believe.....believe with faith and hope and even joy.