

**What is God Calling You to Do?**  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:51-23 & Mark 1:14-20

*Third Sunday in Ordinary Time/26<sup>th</sup> January 2003*

Well, let me begin with the earthquake – certainly one of the highlights of my trip to Guatemala last week. It was Monday night in Chimaltenango - a town that was completely devastated by an earthquake in 1976 - and the Baltimore Presbytery contingent was having dinner at the Hotel San Angel. We were sitting in an outdoor dining area that had a cement roof over us. It was Herb Valentine, former executive presbyter of Baltimore and former moderator of the General Assembly, who, being from San Francisco, first identified what we were experiencing. “This is an earthquake!” he said. Immediately, we ran, out from under the cement encasement around us, out into the open parking area. As we stood there the earth was still shaking, rolling, rumbling under our feet. About an hour later, there was an aftershock. The next day in the newspaper, *La Prensa*, we learned that the epicenter was about one hundred miles to the south and registered a 5.4 on the Richter scale. This was just a day before southern Mexico witnessed a 7.8 earthquake, which would have been devastating for us.

If there’s one thing we rely on it’s that the earth will not move, that it will remain still, solid, firm - *terra firma*. With the moving of the earth underneath, you realize that we are always vulnerable, that life is contingent, fragile. Yet, we do so much in our lives to cover over this reality.

The many women, men, and scores of children I met last week in Guatemala - these children and mothers and fathers of the Kalchiquel, these Maya-Presbyterians, these sisters and brothers in Christ - are vulnerable not only to the forces of nature (the sun, the rain, the moving earth, the threat of exploding volcanoes - they were all around us, some still active), but also are vulnerable to the political forces that have oppressed and dehumanized them for almost forty years. For them life is contingent and fragile. For many of them life has become cheap, and their children have become throw-away children by a government that doesn’t really care. *Why?* Because they are Mayan, the indigenous people of this part of Central America. For them the Conquistadores are alive and well today - they are Americans and Europeans and Latinos (the descendants of the Spaniards) who continue to rape their land and abuse their people in order to keep them in submission.

This past week was an eye-opening experience for me. It was not my first time in a Third World country, so it was without that initial shock when I went to Nairobi, Kenya, in 1996. This was different. But, then again, Kenya was once a relatively prosperous colony of the British Empire. For the Mayan people and many other native peoples of Latin America, they never had a chance in the face of the Spanish. In Guatemala, alone, two thirds of the Indians perished between 1519 and 1610, leaving wounds that are still evident today.<sup>1</sup> A Mayan poet wrote of the *dzules* or strangers:

*They taught fear.  
They came to wither the flowers.  
So that their flower might live  
they crushed and sucked the nectar out of ours.  
To castrate the sun!  
That is what the dzules came to do.  
The sons of their sons remain,  
here in the midst of the people.  
We taste the bitter gall.<sup>2</sup>*

In Guatemala, hundreds of thousands of people are gone, missing, brutally tortured and assassinated by the government, especially in the area of the Kalchiquel over the last twenty years. About three miles from where we were staying is an old military compound that just last year was recently converted into a school. It was the sight of torture and murder, including one of the ministers of the presbytery who was arrested, tortured, and his body thrown away at the side of road.

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<sup>1</sup>Jo Anne Englebert's Introduction in (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1996), p. xviii.

<sup>2</sup>Fragment of a Mayan text, the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* cited in Santos, *And We Sold the Rain: Contemporary Fiction from Central America*, p. xviii.

*Why was he arrested?* Because he was a meddler. Because Christians are supposed to be meddlers. Because he struggled for human rights, for the freedom and justice *demand*ed by the gospel of Jesus Christ for every single woman, man, and child oppressed, enslaved, despised, excluded, and ultimately dehumanized.

*Why?* Because, quite simply, the Bible told him so. It's there in the pages of scripture, in black and white; there's no room for theological debate. God *demand*s justice, healing, and mercy, especially for the weak, for those oppressed, for those enslaved, and for those chained by forces that kill, induce fear, and dehumanize. The Gospel of Jesus Christ offers and promises *liberación* (liberation) and extends *esperanza* (hope). Everywhere I went last week these two words kept appearing: liberation and hope. In our worship at the presbytery office last Sunday we prayed for Guatemala and for the world, *Ven, Espiritus Santo* - Come, Holy Spirit. And the Spirit is alive in their lives and in their world, in a way that we find so difficult to believe in North America, extending and making real for them the power of healing and forgiveness, the reconciling work of God to overcome evil with good.

There was no anger in them, but love and grace - extraordinary amounts of grace. On Sunday evening, one of the pastors of the presbytery joined us for dinner. Her name is Josephina. She's about 61 years old (four years older than the average life expectancy of Guatemalans). About two years ago she was ordained by the presbytery (one of the first women to be ordained in Guatemala). She goes out into the villages surrounding Chimaltenango - remote places left untouched by industrialization and economic development; poor places, very poor places; where children play in the streets beside open sewers; places where life is tough, so unimaginably tough to most Westerners that you have to go there to believe it, to see it; places where there are too many children, but children are needed (especially boys) to work in the fields so that they can care for you when you're old and dying. You see women everywhere with their children. The men are out in the fields. And when they come home they are mad and tired; they drink and then beat up their wives and so continues the endless of cycle of violence from one generation to the other.

Josephina goes into the villages and meets with the women, explaining to them that they have rights, that the work they do at home during the day matters, too. She's there to empower them, so they know that they are loved by God and that God does not require this of them. This is not the way the world is supposed

to be and that in Christ there is a way out and through. Reform can and will take place in the place of utmost despair and desperation. Josephina is an agent of grace.

But let me share something else about Josephina. She is a widow. Her husband died about six years ago. As a product of their love, they had four beautiful daughters together, and I got to meet all of them. Josephina and her husband, Lucio, worked for the rights of all people, especially the Mayans. And because of this the government put great pressure upon them to be silent. Their lives were threatened many times. They would not be silent because the truth must not be silenced. The evil must be named. But then the government did the unthinkable. The local chief of police raped their daughter, Anna, in the presence of Lucio. Lucio died of a heart attack not long after that horrific event. Anna became pregnant and eventually gave birth to a baby boy, whom they named Lucio. On Sunday evening, we ate dinner with their four daughters, and Lucio, now six years old, was sitting right across from me.

The family, amazingly, holds no animosity towards the police chief. There is no anger; they have moved beyond all of that. Lucio is a part of that family. *Conceived in an act of unspeakable violence, alive in the grace of God.* A child of God, the recipient of a whole lot of grace. Grace was all around that table on Sunday night. *You see, friends, there is a force at work in the world that seeks to reverse the evil inflicted upon us. Grace undoes the knots that try to bind us and suffocate us.* There was living proof of the power of Jesus Christ. They were witnesses to the power of love and grace, and we all listened, humbled and thankful.

Our presbytery is doing a lot with their presbytery. It is my hope that this church will become more involved with the partnership with the Kalchiquel Presbytery and that some of our members will seriously consider making this pilgrimage, including our youth. Last Sunday we reaffirmed our partnership with the Kalchiquel and, because I'm now chairing the Global Mission Committee, I signed the partnership agreement on behalf of Baltimore and received a beautifully carved cross and stole. We are hoping that some youth will be allowed to go in 2004, and it will be great if some of our high school youth could go along.

There is much to be done there. Last week we worked hard - painting a classroom in a school house that we built a few years ago in the remote village of

San Jacinto outside of Chimaltenango. We just started a scholarship program for the children of the outlying villages. Education is “free” in Guatemala, but, as is true in many Third World nations, you have to buy your own school supplies, books, and uniforms. Most cannot afford this amount; about \$150. We are setting up scholarships and already have seen the fruits of our efforts. At worship, some of the mothers (aged beyond their years) were there with their children. One woman stood up in worship and said to us, “Thank you for giving my child a future.”

We spent an entire day clearing away stone, breaking up cement and carting it off to the dump (where there were vultures flying overhead, as we watched two women and a child pick away at garbage). Within a month, the presbytery will be building a technical theological school that will train lay men and women to do community organization, push for justice and equal rights, and articulate a vision of the Gospel that seeks the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

We built a clinic and psychological center. People go to the clinic for medical help and for psychotherapy, primarily for stress. But the doctor, whom we employ, also goes out to the villages and takes care of the sick. We did that on Monday in San Jacinto; we joined the doctor as she examined very sick people - suffering from respiratory distress (due to cooking all day over charcoal fires with no exhaust), strained vertebrae (due to carrying jugs of water on their heads to their homes), gastro-intestinal disorders (due to parasites, amoebas, and bad water). There’s so much to be done there.

But, as is so often the case with mission trip experiences, we go expecting to help and make life a little easier only to discover that *we* are the ones who need help, only to realize that maybe it is *our* lives that need to be made easier, because right now our lives are hard. Last Saturday at the presbytery office, another pastor, Margarita, opened with a reflection. She was so happy that we were there to help them, to stand with them in the struggle against oppression. Her prayer for us, however, was that our hearts would be opened. It was her hope that Jesus would open our hearts to the movement of the Spirit in order for us to be able to truly love our neighbor. She said the Westerners have hard hearts and that our way of life hardens the hearts of God’s children. I was reminded of Martin Luther’s (1483-1546) definition of sin as the heart curved in upon itself, a heart that looks only inwards. Sin is an obsession with the self. It is narcissism gone crazy. It is selfishness. It is “Me first and everyone else second.”

What grace does is opens the heart. Grace *softens* the hardness of the heart in order to make us more human. Repression and poverty harden the heart and weigh down the human spirit. But so does greed, the struggle to achieve and the obsessive desire to accumulate wealth, these too harden the heart.

But the ongoing work of the Spirit, the work that Jesus called his disciples to work toward, the work toward which Jesus continues to call every single one of us, is the reformation of the heart, the opening up of the heart, of building up the human spirit and creating a community that is truly Christlike, that embodies love and kindness.

We all need our hearts opened. That was my prayer throughout the week, especially in very difficult moments when the sights and sounds - and even the smells - were too much to bear - "Open my heart, Lord." On Monday, I had a chance to walk around the village of San Jacinto and went to check on a member of our group who was sick. Our vans were parked in the village plaza, across from the Roman Catholic church. I decided to walk over and look at the church, especially three bells that were suspended by a wooden frame. One of the three bells was noticeably larger and on it I discovered an inscription. That bell was cast in 1685. Spanish missionaries lugged that big bell up to that almost Godforsaken place so that it could call people into the church to pray. One of the villagers, an elderly man who spoke no English, welcomed us and opened the church for us and invited us in. After our brief tour, I was back at the vans with two other people. As we were waiting for the rest of the group to return, I noticed this same man coming across the plaza to us, with a net bag thrown over his shoulders and a machete draped across his chest. He came up to me and started to speak Spanish. With the little Spanish that I know, it became clear that he was giving thanks to God for the sun shining upon all God's children, the sun was shining on the just and the unjust alike, that God was caring for all of us as equals. He moved his arms as if God were drawing everyone together into his embrace. He pointed to me and then to Karen and then to Trixie. Then he made the sign of the cross and said, "En el nombre del Padre, del Hijo y del Espiritu Santo," (in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) and he reached out his right hand and very slowly touched our shoulders, blessing us in the name of the Triune God. He turned around and walked away across the plaza. My heart was opened.

Whether its Jonah, the psalmist, all the disciples and every disciple - including the one standing here - we all need our hearts opened, because it's so

easy to have them shut tight in *fear*. This became very clear to me this past week. *Sometimes God's love is like an earthquake that rattles and shakes and causes our hearts of stone to crumble. It's only when our hearts have been opened by the love of God itself, by the voice of the One who has loved you from the beginning of time, who called you into being and continues to call you into being, only when God's life-giving, steadfast love softens the hardness of our hearts and turns us inside out do we come to discover who we really are.* And maybe it's only then that we discover the purpose of our lives, only then do we realize what God is calling us to do.

With our hearts open and our minds alive to the glory of God in our midst, the church – *this church, Catonsville Presbyterian Church* – is then freed to be an agent of reform, a community of people with open hearts:

hearts open to the presence of God,  
hearts open to one another,  
hearts open to the world;  
a community of broken, vulnerable, contingent, fragile,  
fallible and failing women and men and children,  
who yet know the *liberating power of grace*  
and the transforming power of God's *unshakeable* love.

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