

January 9, 2011

Dear Friends,

We enter a new year as we have completed another cycle of celebrations and reflections. Our lives have patterns, traditions and rituals that help us to structure our existence. The church has a liturgical calendar that marks and commemorates how God has been with us from the beginning of creation, what God has done for us through the life of Jesus Christ, and what God continues to promise to us today.

Recently I visited Ethiopia wishing to learn more of the country and of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is part of the Eastern Oriental Orthodox or non-Chalcedonian Christians, which includes the Armenian, Syrian and Coptic Orthodox Churches. During my first night in Addis Ababa, I was awoken by the sound of chanting, though at first I thought it to be the Islamic call to prayer. I could not figure out why the call to prayer was so early and then realized that it was different. The chanting from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church went on for hours during the otherwise quiet of the night. The chanting became a familiar and comforting sound over the next days as we headed toward the major monastic center at Lalibela. Religion permeates the lives, culture and routines of these Ethiopian Christians.

The Eastern Church with its liturgies, rituals, icons and traditions, tells the Christian story in great aural and visual detail. As I gaze upon the newly revealed face of an angel in Hagia Sophia in Istanbul or into the hauntingly compelling eyes of the saints portrayed in the Ethiopian Orthodox iconic art, I am drawn into the sacred and the profound. The bell rings or the call to prayer is sounded and the faithful gather whether physically or just within the mind. I can hear the Islamic call to prayer outside my window and the church bells ring from our neighboring Armenian Christian Church. They have become so much a part of my life that I find it empty and too silent when I am where I cannot hear them.



For much of the Christian world, Christmas is celebrated at Epiphany, January 6th, which commemorates God's revelation in Jesus Christ, as revealed during Jesus' baptism. The Greek Orthodox Church in Istanbul celebrates this event with the Blessing of the Waters, when a cross is tossed into the sea and the young and hearty dive in to retrieve the cross. This symbolic act demonstrates God's redemption of all of creation as part of the plan to save humanity. The Prime Minister of Turkey issued a statement saying that he was celebrating all of Orthodox Christians of Turkey who commemorate Christmas on January 6. He emphasized that Turkey is a whole regardless of religious beliefs or ethnicity. "It is a pleasure for us that our non-Muslim citizens celebrate their festivals in tranquility, security and happiness."

Perhaps the Turkish Prime Minister was alluding to the recent killings of Coptic Christians in Egypt or the Syrian Orthodox Christians in Iraq or the killings of Christians that have occurred in Turkey over the past few years. News of bigotry, intolerance and violence abounds in our world today, and these stories do not emerge only from the Middle East. Yesterday a Congresswoman in the USA was shot along with others who were around her. What kind of hatred leads a person to kill someone they do not even know? Whatever happened to constructively disagreeing with others or respecting other's rights to be different? Why has fear come to dominate the hearts of so many people throughout the world?

Blessed be the Peacemaker. May we all strive to understand what is different from us. When need be and we cannot agree with another, may we learn to disagree remembering that we are all created by God. Hatred only embitters our heart and restricts our ability to truly love. This is what the season of Christmas is all about, God manifestation in our midst.

Selam / Shalom / Peace be with you

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