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Good Friday Three Hours #1

April 18, 2014

When we arrived at the church, halfway through our pilgrimage, I was—admittedly-- getting tired of churches. I was a little saturated and beginning to have a hard time telling them apart.

From its exterior, St. Photini's, the Greek Orthodox church built over the site of Jacob's well in Nablus in the West Bank of Jerusalem, is nothing to write home about. It is pretty in an average sort of way. It has a small garden inside the walls. The church has been built over the well where Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman, revealing everything she ever knew and offering her living water. The well still offers cool clear water for pilgrims to drink.

We were introduced to Father Justinian, the priest of the church. He is a diminutive man, head-to-toe in black, in the Greek tradition. He did not speak English.

It was only after we entered St. Photini's that we learned the recent history of the church. Everything in Jerusalem happened hundreds or thousands of years ago, so to hear a story that started "In 1979..." was unusual.

Thirty five years ago, Father Justinian and his friend and mentor Father Philomenous were brutally attacked by Zionists that believed that they had the right to take control of the church. After they stabbed Justinian, they tied him up so that he could bleed to death while he watched them torture his beloved mentor. The torture was, as torture always is, brutal, dehumanizing, intended to humiliate and break the soul of both the one being tortured and the one forced to watch. When Father Philomenous finally died from the torture, they threw his dismembered body into the well and left Justinian for dead.

But he didn't die. He managed to free himself and find help. He survived his 16 stab wounds. After being released from the hospital, he returned to the church.

Let me say that again: after being released from the hospital, he returned to the site of the brutal atrocity that nearly ended his life.

It is then that he began to write icons. Icons, as you may know, are not painted or drawn, they are prayed or written. Father Justinian began to pray and the icons began to come forth. And this is how St. Photini's Greek Orthodox Church stands out among the hundreds of beautiful churches and holy sites in that holiest of lands. The walls, ceiling and floor are covered, quite literally, with the most beautiful icons I have ever seen, thirty-five years' worth of prayers of pain and forgiveness and healing and anger, prayers of love and admiration and confusion. Justinian prayed into being the interior of the dome of the church for six years. He prayed icons

that depict his friend's martyrdom and prayed icons for strength and for protection.

It is, without exception, the most beautiful collection of holy art I have ever seen. It is breathtaking.

Judas had already put the wheels of his plan into motion by the time Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with the disciples. Jesus had been betrayed. He was preparing to be arrested, tortured, humiliated, whipped and murdered by the state. He knew those wheels were rolling. He knew death was at the end of the story.

Jesus had every right to be filled with ire and vengeance. Even if he had resigned himself to the fact of it, he was fully within his rights and the emotional scope of most every other human being I know to want to rage about is plight.

Instead, he had dinner. And he didn't just have dinner, he created something holy out of a piece of bread and a cup of wine. He created an institution that has brought people of disparate backgrounds, opinions, generations and theologies together for two thousand years. He started from below nothing, from a place of pain and sorrow and created an institution of sanctuary, of forgiveness, of togetherness.

It is easy to write this off as the movement of God, to believe that holy-from-abhorrent can only come at the hands of the living God, the Messiah, the Christ. But the witness of Father Justinian turned that on its head for me. I had the privilege of bearing witness to the transformative power of faith when it is channeled through a soul that has been wrenched, rent, torn and left to die.

We will not all experience a pain as profound as the betrayal Christ suffered or the brutality experienced by Father Justinian. But some of us will. Some of us have.

And while none of us will institute the Lord's Supper, some of us will find a deep well within ourselves to forge beauty where there appears to be only horror, to force goodness into a world that has only offered up evil. Some of us will make diamonds where there appears to be only the deep, hard darkness of coal.

I do not believe that extraordinary beauty or exceptional goodness can only be minted from situations of intense wickedness. I also reject the idea that God creates painful situations in the world in order that we might be pushed into opportunities to create beauty. That is to say, I don't for a minute think that God forced Justinian to witness Philomenos' murder in order that the church might stand as a testament to God's greatness.

I do, however, believe deeply and wholeheartedly that when we are able to dig deep, when we are able to tap into the grace that resides inside of us, when we are able to descend through our grief and our anger and our pain, the fruits of what we can create when we choose beauty over all for the other emotional output we have available will astound us and will change the world

around us. Every time.

The Bible tells me so and I have seen it with my own eyes.