

Three Hundred and Fifty-five Days

Lisa Baroodly Culpepper

St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, Hemingway, South Carolina

It was just ten days out of my 365 that I served in the Moria Refugee Camp in Lesvos, Greece. Yet, those ten days felt like an eternity. Having followed the Syrian War closely since it began, I stepped on to Moria where I found the people for which my heart had already broken. At Moria I met the children with their parents, bold young men and desperate fathers, young widows of war and their infants. I encountered men and women who held within their ice blue and umber eyes the secrets of war, the pain of abuse, the fear of death, and the courage to hope.

I found the people that I had read about and whose photos stopped *Time* in a magazine's glossy pages. I found the people who from desert sands and sandaled paths stepped into a rocking rubber raft where midnight waves offered safe passage for some and for others an eternal asylum in deep unforgiving waters. I found the weary souls and calloused feet of those who had exchanged their sea drenched garments for a stranger's dry goods and waited in line for a bottle of water or a hot meal.

In this, the greatest migration of peoples since WWII, 65.6 million people are presently forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, or human rights violations. And Moria, one of several refugee camps in Greece, is a former prison installation, a setting of contrasts where babies and barbed wire keep company together. Those who enter her gates are shocked to find yet another imprisonment and since the past two years have saturated Europe with refugees. To them the camp seems more of a residence than a hoped-for pass-through.

During my seven days in the camp, I joined dedicated volunteers from Euro-relief, who served meals, monitored gates, assembled tents, processed paperwork, wiped away tears, and listened to pleas for help. The smiles of playful Syrian children, the courage of Congolese men, and the long suffering of Afghani mothers and fathers turned my heart into water and my tears into puddles of humility, for in these people, I saw the face of Christ.

Each day at Moria was both the best place I had ever been and the worst place I could ever imagine. As I prepared to depart, my 50 pounds of North America had been replaced with bubble wrapped olive oil and a few Greek pastries, yet my heart had also been replaced with the faces and stories of unspeakable trauma.

After my ten days at Moria, I returned to spend my remaining 355 with a 22-member congregation in the rural South. Upon my return, these fine folks who had prayed me up and down steep hills in searing heat now sat attentively before the flicker of my power point and an emotional monologue. "So that's all," I said, "Any questions?" All was silent except for my own unrelenting interrogation. How will my experience in Moria inform the war-torn congregations on this side of the pond? Where is the face of Jesus under the steeples split by denominational snipers, demolished by institutional self-fulfillment, and ravished by age? Where is Christ to be found in congregations who are left traumatized by unprecedented acceleration of cultural change, those for whom the church is no longer a home, whose ecclesial loyalties are displaced by a leisurely cup of Sunday morning coffee or career-shaping

grade school soccer practice? How does the church, shaped by cultural Christianity, live out a redeemed life in its own familiar yet ever so foreign culture? How does a cross-cultural mission experience inform the preaching and pastoral ministry in the local worshipping community?

The challenge before us calls forth the development of a *mission*-shaped ecclesiology in which a much broader view of God's Kingdom work in the world is embraced.¹ This paradigm shift entails a change in identity of the church from a "place where certain things happen, and a vendor of religious services and goals," to a "body of people sent on a mission."² A mission-shaped identity is one which is formed each Lord's Day as the people of God gather for worship. In worship, Christ is encountered in Word and Sacrament. And in worship, we are sent out into the world beyond our walls and across our property lines into the neighborhoods where our Lord is waiting. As the Son was sent by the Father, so Christ sends us out with the Holy Spirit's power to do far more than we could ever ask or imagine (John 20: 21; Ephesians 3:20).

When touched by the suffering of people an ocean away, the small, aging, and childless congregation of St. Paul's responds to the call of Christ with eyes and hearts open to the face of Christ in our local community. This two-fold hermeneutic, one which relates Biblical truths to the church as well as to the social order, inspires the church to reach out in ministry beyond our walls. We have done this through a Community Vacation Bible School (which serves up to 100 children) and through a partnership with a private school in which we welcome 30 students each Wednesday for Bible Study and fellowship. These students, battered by academic pressures and social malice, find in St. Paul's a refuge from the unforgiving waters of the world and a safe haven for faith to grow and flourish. And in turn, we are infused with the new life that comes from the vision and purpose of the call of God to mission and outreach. Informed by the global experience, our worshipping community bears witness locally so that through *daily* experiences, we encounter the face of Christ in the world.

In many ways, worship wakes us up to a new address. We may be in the same dwelling, but by God's grace, our neighborhood is global and our calling more expansive than we ever imagined. In worship we discover that we have new neighbors, a new love, and a new calling.³ Now, while I am counting the days until I can return to Moria, I am also *living* the days in which the transformation of my local worshipping community will bring forth a congregational missiology and the embrace of *Missio Dei*. In these days of daily ministry and Lord's Day preaching, may the displaced, the homeless, and the traumatized hear Words of healing truth, and may we not miss the face of Christ as it appears in our own stories as well as in the stories of others.

Notes

1 Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 47.

2 George Hunsburger, "Defining the Church," in *Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, ed. George Hunsburger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1006), 287.

3 Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God's Call to Justice* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity, 2007), 78, 80.