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Jesus went about all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness, and they all lived happily ever after... not!

Our Gospel of the day starts out sounding like good news, but it does not take long before it gets pretty dicey, with Jesus counseling his disciples that if, on the mission of preaching and healing he is sending them on, they run into any one who will not welcome them or listen to them, they are to shake the dust of that town from their feet. And then there is the part about being flogged and dragged before political authorities, and the social unrest that will ensue in which even brothers and sisters and parents and children to betray each other to death. And lastly he tells them, *“and you will be hated by all because of my name, but the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next...”* Good news, but not of the Hollywood ending sort.

I watched the one hour PBS History of the Jewish People on Monday evening, and it was then that I made the connection that Jesus was not prophesying for his disciples something would seem strange to them. Even in Jesus day, the Jews had a significant history of being persecuted and hated. And since that day persecution of the Jewish people has been a recurring theme in their history. Living as we do, still in the shadow of the holocaust we are very aware of what anti-Semitism looks like and can lead to, but the holocaust of Nazi Germany is not the only significant persecution of the Jewish people.

The PBS History of the Jews noted that one result of these recurring persecutions was the development of Judaism into a religion that did not depend on a physical location for its continuation. This was cemented by the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews from their holy land in the 6th century BC and then again in the year 70 AD. That is when Judaism went from being temple centered to being Synagogue centered.

There was only one site for a temple that was Jerusalem, but synagogues and rabbis could move with the people wherever they wandered or were forced to go.

That is the context Jesus speaks from when he sends his disciples out. Jesus, a Jew, is speaking to Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Thaddaeus, Simon and Judas, all Jews also, and he is recalling the combined wisdom of generations of Jews before them. Those who have wandered and been forced from one place to another. In that context he counsels them to depend on the hospitality of any who welcome you, but be prepared to move on at a moment's notice. Travel light - don't take money or a bag, no extra clothes or even a walking stick – nothing to weigh you down. But there are two things Jesus does give them for the journey - the good news that God's kingdom is drawing near, and the authority to cast out unclean spirits and to heal diseases. Both came to them through him, from God.

Not unlike the Jews who had been persecuted and exiled before them, and those who have been since, the disciples took with them nothing but the internal connections to God that meant they could find home anywhere they went. That was what would ensure their endurance. At the core of their identity was a connection with the Holy One who had sought them out and claimed them as his, that his love and mercy might reign in the world through them.

How fortunate most of us have been in our generation not to have known persecution, the destruction of our homes and places of worship, exile from our land and division from our kin. But as fortunate as we are, we are part of a world in which this happens still, every day. Not just to Jews and Christians, but to people of many nationalities, races, tongues and religions.

Just last week Bishop Shaw returned to us from Zimbabwe, where our sister and brother Anglicans are experiencing the kinds of things Jesus described in the Gospel. Bishop Shaw was sent to Zimbabwe by Presiding Bishop Jefferts-Schori to express the support of our Episcopal Church USA and to gather first hand impressions of what is going on there. He interviewed 49 priests a good number of lay persons, human rights lawyers and the US Embassy staff there. He

heard stories of beatings, jailings and intimidation by police using dogs and batons. One priest told Bishop Shaw that he had to sleep in a different home each night because of threats on his life. Bishop Shaw heard the story of a 9 year old boy beaten by police in a church because he and his family refused to leave. All of this within the context of extreme economic suffering – the inflation rate in Zimbabwe is 1 million percent and unemployment ranges from 80-90%!

In the midst of these extremely tragic and perilous circumstances, where church properties have been seized and closed down by the government, faith endures. Bishop Shaw led Sunday worship while there. He told the Boston Globe:

“I went to this really poor township and over 400 people were worshipping in this yard of this person’s house, spilling out into the road. It was an unbelievable experience. The enthusiasm, the joy that the people had is pretty profound.”

Despite their own poverty those worshipping there that day took up a special collection to make a donation to a summer program for underprivileged children here in Massachusetts. Those who have been persecuted are preaching God’s kingdom! They are enduring and reaching out to us to help heal our disease! They know God has not left them and Jesus has not abandoned them! May their faith strengthen ours, and may we reach back to them!

May we reach back by letting our elected officials know that we want them to support the United Nations in addressing the crisis in Zimbabwe now. May we reach out by contributing to a special collection that our bishop has suggested, to help finance offices for the diocese of Harare which has been locked out of their headquarters by the government (there is a box to put contributions in on the table in the entry way as you are able). May we reach back to our sisters and brothers there through fervent and frequent prayer as they approach their run off election on June 27th. That the resulting political situation may bring relief to their suffering. And may we pray for them, that their faith may hold and grow so that they may be a testament to the power of God to raise up that which has been cast down, and to bring new life even from the grave. Amen+

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