

A Simple Ending and the Promise of Angels

A number of years ago my good friend, Archbishop Vicken Aykaizian of the Armenian Apostolic Church sent me a book about the Armenian Genocide called, *Burning Tigris*. It describes the long history of Ottoman hostility to the Armenian minority in Turkey, which grew uglier during the late 19th century, culminating in the deportation and slaughter of 1.5 million Armenians in 1915. This summer the author of that study published an English translation of a memoir written by his great uncle, Grigor Balakian, also a priest and hierarch of the Armenian Orthodox church. This harrowing tale recounts his arrest in Istanbul and the year long journey toward Syria. Countless companions died along the journey from the hardships of the road and the brutal savagery of their tormenters, scenes so horrifying it was difficult, at times, to read them. He survived the Genocide with the help of friends who aided his eventual escape, a good bit of luck, and undoubtedly God's providence.

At one point he describes a group of Armenian school children and their American principal from a Protestant school who brought them food during their stay in that town for a week. The students would come at night and pass food quietly through an upstairs window. This brave act of love sustained Father Balakian and his comrades, enabling them to survive the next stage of their deportation. This little vignette caught my eye, for undoubtedly these students were from a school established and run by our American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission, predecessor of Global Ministries. Certainly their principal must have been one of our missionaries, part of a vast network of schools, hospitals, and churches established by the American Board in the 19th century.

Many of the survivors of the Genocide found their way to Lebanon and we still relate to a small Armenian Evangelical community there and in Syria. About a year ago I worshipped in the Armenian church in Ashrafeyeh, a neighborhood of Beirut overlooking the Mediterranean. In the narthex of the church are two brass plaques, one in English, one in Armenian. They tell you as you enter that the church building, constructed in 1932, is dedicated to the memory of Emma Barnum Riggs, an American Board missionary who died in the city of Harpoot in 1917, a victim of the typhoid epidemic that followed the Genocide, as well as to her little daughter Annie, who also died in the epidemic. Obviously these missionaries did not flee to safety during the violence, but stayed with their students, to comfort and to protect. Today we speak of accompaniment; the language of mission is partnership and critical presence. While the phrases are new, the essential ministry is not, and how moving it is to see that presence, that accompaniment remembered, a legacy of global Christian community that sustained then and sustains still.

The Epistle of James is filled with admonition and instruction, much of it rather judgmental in its tone. The writer takes on all the vices of the early church: he begins

with doubt and doublemindedness, moves on to favoritism and partiality, exposes conflict and dispute, evil speech against one another, the vanity of wealth, and perhaps most famously, challenges those who are hearers of the word who are not doers, those who have faith without works. It's a pretty relentless indictment of the community, of the church, that sometimes doesn't feel all that old or dated!

But as the epistle draws toward its end, the tone shifts; the writer of the letter sets aside his relentless critique and all of his rather hard admonitions, and opts to conclude with a reflection on prayer and forgiveness, on those things which have the power to heal the community and bind it together. For the sick, the elders are to be called, to pray and to anoint. Sins are to be confessed to one another, so that healing may take place. Those who wander from the truth are to be drawn back from wandering. Even Elijah makes a strange appearance with a reminder of ancient prayers which renewed the earth with rain. Salvation, not judgment, is the last word.

It's an odd text. No memory verses here. Those are found earlier in the letter. No soaring benediction to bring it to a close. It doesn't reach for a grand finale; it just kind of ends. This is the sort of text that pops up in worship only because the lectionary proposes it. I don't think I've ever used it for a sermon before, and given the amount of sermons and speeches and lectures and keynotes heading to the archives this week, that's saying something! Martin Luther was so unimpressed that he questioned the letter's inclusion in the scriptures. You'd think the writer of a letter destined for the New Testament canon might have reached for language and rhetoric that soars just a bit more. After all, most of us want our last official word to sing with phrases and cadences and meanings that are memorable. James just kind of comes to an end. Not exactly a whimper, but no real bang either. Pray for each other. Heal each other. Forgive each other. Be forgiven. Sing songs of praise. At the end of the day, or at the end of anything, it really does come down to something this simple. You have each other; that's the gift God has given. Take care of it.

Grigor Balakian never tells us the names of the school children or the principal from our American Board school. Perhaps he never even knew their names. What is remembered is the food they brought, and their quiet courage. Emma and Annie died in Harpoot never suspecting their names would be remembered in a church hundreds of miles away and years hence. There were no final words recorded to be remembered and recited down through the years. Their legacy is simply the recognition that we have a responsibility for each other, and for each other's souls, so beautiful. And not just for those we know, or love, or work with, but for the whole community of God's faithful through time and space. In the end, and in this particular ending today, what matters is not the final word, but the enduring care – sharing the Good News with the spiritually homeless among us, salvaging something of our vision for health care reform, attending to the victims among our sisters and brothers in American Samoa. Last words ought really be merely reminder of what waits for us back at our desks or in the next chapter.

I've noticed over the years that Kimberly, who crafted this liturgy, likes to pair an ancient text with a contemporary one. At first blush today's is an odd choice. You'd be

hard pressed, I think, to find any one more different from me than Annie Lamott! The connection, if she even intended it, comes in the poetry she quotes, words that hangs on her wall. “What is the knocking? What is the knocking at the door in the night? It is somebody wants to do us harm. No, no it is the three strange angels. Admit them, admit them.” Those three angels used to hang on the walls of my office, too, not as a poem, but in the form of a Russian Orthodox icon. They come from Genesis, where strangers shared an angelic annunciation with Sarah and Abraham. They are remembered in the letter of Peter, where we are urged to hospitality for strangers, with the lure of entertaining angels unaware.

That Sunday morning in Beirut we gathered after worship on the patio outside the church overlooking the sea. The damage from the Israeli bombing the year before was still evident at the port. In the center of Beirut a political crisis held the Lebanese government hostage, literally trapped behind armed guards in their hotel rooms and the Parliament building. Rumors and suspicious accusations still flew through the air over the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri. Hezbollah was camped out in the main plaza, a months’ long protest and intimidating power play in the Byzantine politics of the Middle East. The Lebanese army manned heavily armed road blocks everywhere. For a city that remembers the very real and very recent horrors of civil war it had to have been a terrifying time. For the shrinking Christian community, it was one more ominous suggestion that their days in the Middle East just might be numbered, that the refuge their grandparents found after the Genocide could be taken from them. It was a sad and painful time to be with our friends in this little remnant community in a time that felt very much like endings.

An older man came up to me as we shared coffee. He was a retired mathematics professor from the American University. He took my hand, with tears in his eyes, and simply said “thank you,” repeating it a number of times. I was a bit flustered, unsure what to say. What was he thanking me for? For coming? For some recent gift of support from Peter Makari’s office? It soon became apparent, however, that the gift was really a long legacy. It reached back to those American Board school children and their principal, to Emma and Annie in Harpoot, to people like Dale Bishop who braved the Green Line during all the years of the Civil War, and in ways you might not fully know, to each of you who are there for others in the world when things aren’t seamless or safe, when hearts are broken, and our parents grow old. Angels, admitted. Thank you.

I wonder if James struggled to write a flashier, more memorable conclusion to his letter, deciding in the end just to let it close with a quiet reminder to, in effect, be angels to each other and to the world, and to allow other angels admission into our lives. Maybe he realized that, after all, it wasn’t about him, but the church and its ministry, that it’s about healing and forgiveness, not heroics, flash, or fame. Even the great Elijah was only a human being like us. I wonder if that’s what was going on with James when he penned the Epistle’s final words? I wonder.