

Ordinary People

What do Isaiah and Paul and Peter all have in common?

And for that matter, what do Mary, the mother of Jesus, Martha, the sister of Lazarus, and Mary from Magdala have in common?

They are all ordinary people who have extraordinary encounters with the creator of all that exists.

Those encounters can take the form of angelic visits like the ones Isaiah and Mary the mother of Jesus had.

Or they can appear in the most mundane activities of ordinary life.

Like cleaning fishnets.

Or taking a chance on a strange preacher who says: "Throw those nets over there!"

Sometimes, like Paul, these encounters knock us on our backside and even blind us for awhile.

Until at last we are given the grace to see that which is truly real.

We so often think of biblical people as fictitious characters or at best long dead historical figures with whom we have nothing in common.

But in fact, the grace and beauty of all of scripture is that God takes ordinary folks, folks like you and me, and through the grace of God, these ordinary folks end up doing extraordinary things in this world.

Strangely though, what helps us enter the world of the extraordinary is a willingness to become an exile.

Someone set apart.

Someone who is, in a sense, cut off from the way things are.

In the truest sense, every follower of the Source of all that is, is an exile from the thinking, the hopes and dreams of the world as it is.

While the world is consumed with power, fame and financial success, those in exile seek to bring to this world compassion, kindness, justice and mercy.

It is a setting apart that each and every one of us have endured, because our own baptism does that to us.

And if we can re-discover that sense of exile, and live it out, why, the adventures of Isaiah and Paul, Peter, Martha and Mary, those adventures can be ours as well!

Here's a story that may put some meat on those bones.

It's about an ordinary fellow, who did extraordinary things.

Perhaps you've heard of the story of Paul Gruninger, who grew up in a small Swiss town close to the Austrian border in the early 1900's.

He was an average student who served honorably in the Swiss army in World War I, and then taught elementary school kids.

He was a churchgoer and he eventually married another teacher.

Later, he took a better paying job as a police officer.

He was a regular Joe.

A typical, mid-level bureaucrat whose days were spent filling out forms.

In 1939, going to work one morning, Paul's way is blocked by a younger police officer.

He's immediately suspended from his police duties, because, it seems, he was secretly altering documents for Jewish people so they might enter Switzerland and flee Nazi occupied Austria.

Entries the Swiss had forbidden about a year earlier to Jews.

With a few strokes of his pen, Paul predated passports to get around a law designed to keep Jewish refugees out.

And with that pen, he saved hundreds of lives.

A few days later, he was suspended from his job, and then, they fired him.

After that, he was prosecuted.

The authorities took every opportunity to spread ugly rumors about him.

They claimed that he insisted upon sexual favors and money from the people he helped escape.

Later interviews with these same people proved that the rumors were in fact, vicious lies.

But nevertheless, the lies were effective.

Dishonored and shamed, Paul ends up selling umbrellas and animal feed for the rest of his life.

33 years later, he dies.

In poverty.

While there is little to distinguish this man (his own daughter struggles to explain her father's actions); he quietly saved the lives of hundreds of people at great personal risk.

A risk that ripened into punishment.

A punishment that caused the rest of his life to be lived as an exile.

Why did he do it?

The truth is, you probably can't talk yourself into being that kind of person.

It really isn't a decision of the conscious will.

It's more a consequence of who you are.

As one fellow says:

"Whether people serve themselves or serve others is not in one's power to choose.

This is decided wholly in terms of the world in which we think we live.

In New Testament terms, we live or die according to the king that holds us.

And the kingdom to which we belong." Arthur McGill.

Today, on this fifth Sunday of Epiphany, the question Jesus asks each and every one of us is simple:

"To whose kingdom do you belong?"

It's the question Isaiah is asked.

It's the question put to Paul and Peter and Mary and Martha.

The same question is put to you and I.

God's kingdom exists in stark opposition to the kingdom of consumers, celebrities and military power.

The Kingdom of God exists in stark contrast to the kingdom of the world that says "follow the rules," even when those rules kill, maim or destroy.

The kingdom of Madison Avenue, the kingdom of fat wallets and nine course meals, well, that's the world we are lured into each and every day.

And yet, here's Isaiah, engulfed in the fearsome glory of God.

As this ordinary man raises his hand and declares: "Send me!"

Paul is blinded and knocked to the ground, recognizing his utter lack of merit to serve God's Kingdom.

Yet out he goes.

The "least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God, yet working harder than any of them, by the grace of God."

Jesus shows up at the lakeside today, grabs a seat on Peter's boat, and offers a different way.

And ordinary Peter and James and John leave everything to follow the Way.

This, unsettling Way.

This, frightening Way!

Unsettling and frightening precisely because it leads to the shocking revelation that God loves everyone.

Which exposes our vain efforts to categorize and stigmatize and ostracize other people — as not only pointless — but utterly anathema to God's glorious kingdom.

There's a price to be paid by the ordinary people who accept the extraordinary invitation that Jesus offers.

We don't need to go back to Paul Gruninger's World War II to see the cost of that invitation.

We see it today as immigrants flee the hell holes of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Hell holes that our own nation helped create when our giant fruit companies invaded the fertile lands of those places.

And removed the indigenous people.

And installed repressive governments to ensure the displaced never complain.

And if they do, they are immediately and viciously silenced.

What Isaiah and Paul, Peter and John, Martha and Mary finally come to see, finally come to experience, is this.

It is by water and blood that we are saved.

Always, there is blood.

Paul Gruninger and his wife are buried together near their home town.

"Years later, a plaque is placed at the foot of their grave.

It reads: 'Paul Gruninger saved hundreds of refugees in 1938 and 1939.'

"At his funeral, a choir sang.

And a Rabbi said:

'He who saves a single life, saves the whole world.'"

Will we accept the invitation of Jesus?

Shall we join with one another and become builders of the Kingdom of God?

And if so, can we develop the eyes to see a whole new world being born?

One that provokes a whole new way of encountering life?

Of encountering each other?

As exiles from the old world of alienation and distrust, of racism and violence, might we too say "yes" to the invitation of Jesus — and fish for people?

Because in that "yes" are magnificent wonders — unfailingly revealed — to ordinary people.

People like you.

People like me.

+amen

Gruninger story by Long, Christian Century, 5/2/12 at 47.