

Snapshots of Christian Egypt

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Ephesians 4:1-6 (Good News Translation)¹ I urge you, then—I who am a prisoner because I serve the Lord: live a life that measures up to the standard God set when he called you. ² Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. ³ Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope to which God has called you. ⁵ There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ there is one God and Father of all people, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all.
- Matthew 2:13-15, 19-21 (Good News Translation)¹³ After they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph and said, “Herod will be looking for the child in order to kill him. So get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you to leave.” ¹⁴ Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and left during the night for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until Herod died. This was done to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet, “I called my Son out of Egypt....” ¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go back to the land of Israel, because those who tried to kill the child are dead.” ²¹ So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went back to Israel.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Christians are united in spirit and mission wherever we are in the world.

I have to *tell* you the title of my message today. That's because I didn't know exactly what I was going to say when we had to print today's bulletin on Friday morning. My recent ten-day study leave involved a trip to explore the religious and cultural landscape of ancient and modern Egypt.

This trip was organized by Cinda and Steve Gorman, a Presbyterian clergy couple here in Cleveland. You've probably seen them. They've been guest preachers and teachers at our church in recent years. For three years before they retired a few years ago Steve and Cinda were Presbyterian mission co-workers in Egypt. They organized this trip to introduce others to Egypt's incredible ancient culture and also to the long-standing and ever-growing Christian presence there.

Of the nine people on the trip, three were from our church—Elizabeth Richmond and Karol Hoeffler also went. We left after the worship service two weeks ago and returned this past Wednesday. After a final day of touring in Egypt and then traveling from Luxor to Cairo to Paris to New York to Cleveland, we all had been up for about 46 hours. I'm confident that I speak for all of us when I say that I was a “jet-lag zombie” on Thursday, and a bit better on Friday when I had to have today's bulletin ready for printing. Maybe once or twice a year I find myself in the undesirable position of having to write my sermon on a Saturday. Hence, as of yesterday morning the unprinted title is “Snapshots of Christian Egypt.”

Let me decipher that title. First, if you've never heard the term “snapshot,” it's another word for photograph—what today's cellphone users think of more often as a “pic” or “.jpeg”. I chose the word “snapshot” to indicate that the observations I'm sharing today are quick, brief overviews gleaned by a traveler, not detailed, all-encompassing portraits carefully crafted over years and years of study. After all, nine days in Egypt does not make one an Egyptologist.

The other part of the title that may need explaining is the term “Christian Egypt.” When one hears of Egypt, who thinks of Christians? We picture pyramids and asps and hieroglyphics and mummies, but not crosses and churches and Bibles. After all, while Egypt is on the African continent, it is included in the vast region called the Middle East that we know to be overwhelmingly populated by adherents of the

Islamic faith. Egypt's population of about 100 million¹ is 95% Muslim and 5% Christian.² Those are the only two religions recognized by Egyptian law; your national ID card states whether you are a Muslim or a Christian. Still, those percentages mean that there are about 5 million Christians in Egypt today.

Egyptian Christians are proud and honored that their land played a key role in the life of Jesus, as we heard from the gospel of Matthew this morning. The gospel tradition tells of paranoid King Herod seeking to eliminate what he perceived as the threat of the child Jesus. Herod ordered the massacre of all of Bethlehem's boys age two and younger. Heeding God's guidance from a dream, father Joseph escaped with Mary and Jesus to Egypt. For two to three years Egypt provided hospitality and safety to the political refugees.

The Bible provides no details of the Holy Family's Egyptian travels and stays. But there are other writings—documents that didn't make it into the Bible—that describe details of where they traveled and stayed in Egypt, miracles that young Jesus performed there, and words of blessing and wisdom that he spoke. Egyptian Christians cherish those picturesque accounts even though they are "extra-biblical," that is, outside the Bible.

Another source of pride for Egyptian Christians is that the Christian faith was brought to them by the gospel-writer Mark around the year 48 A.D.—perhaps only 15-20 years after the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Though not one of the twelve apostles, Mark was among the larger group of disciples who followed Jesus very closely. That means that the Coptic Orthodox Church (and Coptic, by the way, means "Egyptian") descends from one of the first Christian churches to be established anywhere. The Mother Church for the Coptic Orthodox is there in Cairo. It's called St. Mark's Cathedral, a soaring, modern, spectacularly beautiful church with an enormous worship space (or "nave"), and underneath, several large chapels and a shrine containing some relics of St. Mark.

My "snapshot #1" involves the Coptic Orthodox Church. We've all heard of monks choosing to live apart from society in monasteries. The monastic movement got its start from the Coptic Orthodox Church when individuals chose to go out into the desert and live hermit-like lives. They felt this was a way of answering the call of Christ as we hear in Matthew 19:21: "Jesus said to him, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me'."³

When we visited the Monastery of St. Bishoy in the desert of El-Natroon the monk told us that since the end of the third century there have been monks in the deserts of Egypt praying for the world. Praying for you and me. Praying to the same God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—that you and I worship and serve. They started before the year 300 A.D. and are still doing it today.

A second "snapshot" involves the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The country of Ethiopia is located maybe 600 miles southeast of Egypt. Christianity came to Ethiopia in the Fourth Century, but Islamic military conquests about 300 years later served to cut off Ethiopia from the rest of Christianity. The result is that for the last fourteen-hundred years Ethiopian worship traditions have been relatively unchanged by outside influences like the evolution of Roman Catholicism or Europe's Protestant Reformation.

We were able to spend a brief time experiencing the worship of a congregation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. They were worshiping in one of the chapels underneath Cairo's St. Marks's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral. The chapel was packed, and dozens of people worshiped while standing in the vestibule looking in through the doorway. Every worshiper was dressed with a lightweight white gown over their street clothes, and the women wore matching white bonnets. In the middle of the chancel, in front of the altar, were two men standing facing each other, energetically beating out a rhythm on long drums. The congregation was singing, clapping and swaying to the music. You could not ignore the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in the joy that filled that room.

"Snapshot #3" actually begins with the photograph on the cover of this morning's bulletin. That was taken while we worshiped last Sunday at Heliopolis Evangelical Church in Cairo. In Egypt,

¹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=EG>, accessed 2/22/2020

² Conrad Hackett, "How Many Christians Are There in Egypt?" Pew Research Center, February 16, 2011, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/2011/02/16/how-many-christians-are-there-in-egypt/>, accessed 2/22/2020

³ "Desert Fathers: Christian hermits" at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Desert-Fathers> accessed 2/22/2022.

Evangelical is the name given to churches started as a result of the arrival of American Presbyterian missionaries in 1854. So in Egypt when you hear "Evangelical", you can think "Presbyterian."

What I want you to know is that the worship at that service was very much like what you're familiar with here. Hymns. Bible readings. Choral anthems. Minutes for mission. Prayers by the pastor. An offering. The only difference was that it's all done in the Arabic language. Oh, and the offering was collected using velvet bags on the end of poles: the usher extends it out to you and you stick your hand down into the bag to place your offering so no one knows what you gave or *if* you gave.

After the service the ministers greeted at the door leading to the patio. That's where refreshments were available and tables were set up promoting that Sunday's mission project. But many people lingered quite a while in the sanctuary visiting with friends. Our tour leaders Steve and Cinda were greeted by friends from their days in Cairo, and many people came up to talk with us. Their English was much better than our Arabic!

I chatted with one of Steve and Cinda's Egyptian friends named Nashat, a mechanical engineer and long-time member of that church. As we talked I learned that he has two daughters: one is studying in Minnesota and another one is working to be a screenwriter in Los Angeles. I told him my father lives in Los Angeles. "Where?" he asked. "Long Beach," I replied. His smile got even bigger. "My daughter lives in Long Beach!" he gleamed. Then he asked, "She hasn't found the right church in Long Beach yet. Perhaps your father could help?" And with that Nashat and I have begun an email conversation—just like we make connections after worship or at coffee hour.

There's so much more to tell, and Karol, Elizabeth and I will be offering a show-and-tell program about our tour of Egypt in a few months. But I wanted you to know that the strongest impression of our time in that predominantly Muslim country was the strength of the Christian Church in Egypt.

Although it is illegal in Egypt for Christians to try to convert Muslims, the church is growing, especially in the smaller villages and towns. Why?

- Because Muslims in Egypt see Christians providing medical services to the community regardless of whether one's government ID card says "Christian" or "Muslim."
- Muslims see Christians offering preschool programs that bring Christian and Muslim children together, learning to work together and play together and respect and enjoy one another.
- Muslims see their Christian neighbors providing food programs for the poorest of the poor.
- Muslims see Christians offering day camps to supervise and educate children and youth during their long four-month summer break.
- Muslims see Christian women or Christian men gathering to study and discuss the Bible and enjoy one another's company and pray together.

And then from time to time, some Muslims will ask their Christian neighbors, "Tell me more about your Jesus." Christians can't push their beliefs on Muslims, but Muslims can ask. And then Christians can share the gospel of God's generous, inclusive and unconditional love. Christians share the good news through verses like the one we heard from the Letter to the Ephesians: "⁶there is one God and Father of all people, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all."⁴

That's what they're doing in Egypt. That's what *we're* doing in Egypt. Because we are one in the Spirit, because we are one in the Lord, we're sharing the good news in Egypt right now, just as we can do in our own neighborhoods and communities, too. Let's be sure that our words and our actions proclaim who guides us in serving God. As the sign hanging above the chancel in Heliopolis Evangelical Church proclaims, "His name is Jesus!"

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⁴ Ephesians 4:4-6 Good News Translation