

Reid Moody, The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera, Andrew Stephens-Rennie
Deut. 25:1-11; Ps. 91:1,2,9-16; Rom. 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13
NOLA Reflections – Feb.21, 2010 – Lent 1.

Reid Moody - Reflections

At some point early on this week, I found myself lying on a mattress in the attic of a three story home in New Orleans, staring at a yellow ceiling two feet from my face. To be plain straight and honest, our group got off on the wrong foot and we had a bad start. I was tired, and frustrated, and I was asking myself what I was doing here. And from that, I found myself praying.

I basically asked God to help put everything behind us and to start fresh. And not too long after, I felt better. It wasn't rational and didn't really make sense at the time, but I trusted, and expected that things would get better through God, and they did.

I'd like you all to ask yourself a question. What are you doing here right now? How many of you have found yourself sitting through a church service and getting nothing out of it, or how many times have you not received results, or not experiencing God's presence when you need it the most? I can tell you right now that being a Christian is not the easy route, and faith is definitely not an easy thing. One thing that I learned at the church of All Souls in New Orleans is that you have to be expecting results, and you have to have patience. And God will always pull through.

From that one experience, from just lying on that mattress, I found myself praying throughout the week, for all sorts of different things. I prayed that we'd be able to finish our task in Mr Hammond's unit; I prayed that our group would grow stronger together, and I prayed for our safety. I even found myself praying for small things like a stomach ache to go away, or fixing Linda's camera which she happened to break. And all of my prayers were answered, because I expected, and I believed.

One of my favourite poets; his name is Anis Mojgani, has a line in one of his pieces which says, "beliefs are like naps; you leave them behind when somebody touches you." I think that faith can be seen in this way as well. Sometimes we excuse our answered prayers and replace them with something that seems easier to understand, or even forget that we were praying in the first place.

On Friday, I was lucky enough to meet Tommy, the crew chief from last year. He basically said that we're all spiritual beings, and I couldn't agree more. Every single one of us in this room is a spiritual being, and there is more to us than just a shell. And we're all capable of doing great things through God. What I've learned this week is how truly powerful prayer, hope, and expectance can really be.

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera – Feb. 21, 2010 – Lent 1

The Deuteronomy passage speaks of the return of the exiles, marking an end to all that they had endured, worked and sacrificed for. Certainly in New Orleans some of the exiles have returned. But not all is finished in restoration.

Mr. Hammond is 72, has worked for over 35 years as a truck driver who was able to buy some housing units before Katrina hit; he had to climb into the attic and carve a hole in it to breathe and to be spotted by a passing boat for rescue. He survived by collecting cans until the price of aluminum fell. (His story in the NYTimes and the Washington Post can be read on our blog: www.jeremiahproject.tumblr.com) All that he had worked for had to be gutted. His magnificent garden which could feed many was also

partially destroyed by a recent freeze. We worked on the tile floors of his three units cleaning the thin set mortar and then grouting the four rooms in each unit.

I am going to focus my reflections this morning on the Romans passage where we are reminded that the word is very near us, on our lips and in our hearts. That was my experience this past week. When we arrived we were met with generosity, with red beans and rice and fresh cornbread prepared by Rich and Cinda Clark – Rich is the diocesan youth officer in New Orleans. Actually the cornbread was prepared by a volunteer from Maine who spends her retirement helping others – she will be in New Orleans for a month. Usually we prepare all our meals ourselves; this time we shared the kitchen space and the house with a team from Toronto. We fed them pizza and potato pancakes; we were fed by stories from community activists and casual encounters with those at the parade. We were fed by the people of God at All Souls parish in the lower Ninth ward where we worshipped on Sunday morning.

There is a temptation when you are in the city (where they know how to throw a party) to focus on the feast and not the fast; there is a longing to look away from the pain and just catch a few more beads for ourselves. One young man, a waiter at the House of Blues, told me he had come back to the city the week before the SuperBowl; he had been living in Washington for four years. He said that the football team, known as the 'aints because of their failures, was not expected to win. The whole city, he said, felt forgotten by God; they were not being blessed at anything. But when the Saints won there were no murders that day; there was only love, like a true rising, a resurrection of hope that God had not forgotten their struggles. Blessing and thanksgiving were on their lips and in their hearts. And we saw some of that spirit everywhere. One night we were fed by a deacon who drove several hours to bring us food – she has no paid work right now and no health insurance, she said. But she still had made a choice to give, to be generous to us; to be on the receiving end of such kindness is humbling.

At All Souls they pray for those murdered each week, their names and ages, and they pray for the perpetrators of violence. They look for an end of despair and gangs and hopelessness. When we had finished the liturgy we were welcomed into a small room where boxes of donuts had been opened. We hovered, a little shy about reaching for treats, when the children clearly indicated that they could not eat unless we did; more generosity and hospitality from those who had little but made it a priority to share.

Pat Gill prepared a few objects in a magic bag for us to use as worship starters – two texts we reflected on were these: surely God is in this place...and do this in remembrance of me. When we had a brief few minutes with Mr. Hammond he was mighty pleased about the tiles; he hadn't wanted bamboo floors but tiles that would survive another flood if need be; he had been ill and a little sad lately we were told by last year's crew chief, Tommy. So I gave him your notes of support and told him that he had some mail from Canada to open when he got sad. I want him to know that God has not forgotten him and neither have we.

There were things in New Orleans that we didn't like and things we did. The work was not about us and our tired knees or the struggle to make ourselves a community; we were there because of Mr. Hammond. We had a little bit of wilderness wandering and our homecoming is sweet. We have not forgotten that it is God who accompanied and blessed us with opportunities to serve. The word is very near us, on our hearts and on our lips.

Andrew Stephens-Rennie - Reflections

This past week, our group of ten was led by God's Spirit into a different kind of wilderness. It was there, in the wilds of Louisiana that we were shown a few different visions of our world, and were presented with some choices.

We were presented with tempting visions of beads and floats and excess. All of this contrasted against the starkness of the 7th Ward where we spent our time scraping and grouting tile at Mr. Hammond's previously flood-ravaged home. Another citizen who'd slipped through the cracks.

Carnival excess and hurricane scarcity held in tension. Lived side by side.

And yet, it would be hard to know that a hurricane had ever visited the city if you'd never left the quarter or the downtown core. Café du Monde and the House of Blues are fully operational. And there's some hope in that too.

That's just the tempter's side of the story. That's the side of the story that tells us that everything's fine.

But the city, the real city, the majority city doesn't look that way. The real city will only come back with hard work, determination, and the goodwill of men and women like Nell, and Erin, and Tommy, and Alice and Rebecca.

The city will come back when people like Reid and Linda and Adam and Lauren and Cam and Joshua and Dexter and Kira and Jackie return. Or tell their story, and others go in their place. The return from exile isn't a one-time shot. It takes determination and hard work...no matter what messages you get from Mardi Gras excess.

Reading my experience in light of this week's gospel, and reading this week's gospel in light of my New Orleans experience has helped me to enter deeper into Jesus' story.

There is a temptation to say that I can do things on my own. That nutrition can be found in rocks, that true glory is found in absolute control, and that God digs it when we recklessly test him and those around us.

And yet Jesus resists temptation, and he calls a community of twelve to join him. The temptation is to go it alone. To exercise singular power. And yet Jesus' life, death...and when Easter arrives...his resurrection prophetically flips all these things.

Even through betrayal and upset, God has chosen us...for whatever reason...to live and work amongst us.

For me this week, carrying some of my own burdens, that was a comfort. While my temptation might have been to recede from community, the challenge was and continues to be, to embrace it.