

But Why?

Exodus 32: 1-4



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Swarthmore Presbyterian Church
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The work of CEPAD began with an all call over the only radio station still with signal in Nicaragua after the earthquake in December of 1972. A shifting of the earth's plates had devastated the capitol city of Managua and left a people already suffering under the deep weight of poverty in even more dire straits throughout the countryside. At that time, people representing eight denominations gathered, and within five weeks had organized daily food distribution for 3000 children in the city. In those early days, the goal was emergency response for six months; yet upon arriving at that mark, they knew there was more to be done and they had learned the power of organizing.

With a slight name change that I will not do a disservice to say in my broken, né non-existent Spanish, CEPAD shifted from emergency response to development work. Through the civil war in the 80s and 90s, CEPAD entered into the work of peace and reconciliation, finding opportunities to foster dialogue between revolutionaries and the government authorities, and was invited to serve as a part of the conversations to negotiate disarmament; though they never forgot that at the heart of their mission was the people, particularly the poorest among them.

On Wednesday of this past week, Tom Stephenson and I sat in the sanctuary of the First Baptist Church of Managua, where we had traveled to join local leaders, pastors, and staff, as well as international partners from the US and UK, to celebrate the 45th anniversary of CEPAD. 45 years from the incident of their inception, we heard Psalm 90 read

“Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands.”

Today CEPAD remains at work alongside the poor; in programs of sustainable agriculture, economic development for women, psychosocial attention, community organizing and training, strengthening pastoral leadership, refugee support, and exchanges between delegations and partnerships; this last part is where SPC comes in. Or it is where we came in ten years ago, with the introduction of Tom and Tara Stephenson, with the support originally of Mission Co-Worker Doug Orbaker, who had come to know seven communities in the mountainous 2 region just outside of Matagalpa.

Since then, many of you have offered your prayers and your financial support, and some of you have made the trip that I made this past week; to put faces to names, to share rice and beans (and more rice and beans), to stay in homes, to dig for latrines and install filters for fresh water, and to learn about these people who, after the commitment of so many of you, we have the great honor to call friends. Do know that they certainly call you by this name.

It was among these friends that the story of the Israelites and Aaron, of God and Moses, of a mountaintop and a golden calf and fear and rage and remembrance and grace lived and spoke in me

this week. The Israelites, fresh from slavery in Egypt. They'd seen the seas parted, Miriam dance and sing with joy, bread appearing from heaven in just the right measure, and Moses heading up the mountain to talk with God. They'd trekked to this mountain where Moses ascended, now 40 days ago.

We are often shocked that they failed so significantly and such relatively quick time; we want to wag our fingers at their impatience, their unfaithfulness. John Bell, a member of the Iona Community in Scotland, calls this early group the "back-to-Egypt-brigade". Egypt was certainly known. In Egypt it was the case that the devil they knew was better than the one they did not. And they knew Pharaoh, but what about this God of Moses? Their freedom legs were not yet quite under them. Their necks were a bit stiff from trying not to look back. Perhaps what the Israelites wanted was not necessarily another god, but certainty in the God who had promised them so much that they did not yet realize. They wanted certainty that they could see and touch and worship and revel in; certainty that would allay their fears that this was all just one gigantic misbegotten experiment. A people with no place. A people with no possessions but what they could carry. A people with, it seems, little knowledge of what was happening around them or if they had any decision-making power at all. They were afraid. We can understand that.

And fear is a heavy burden to carry on any journey. It weighs us down in our hearts, in our minds. It causes us to ask uncomfortable questions. It makes us yearn for something, anything that is certain. Certainty that can easily serve as a mask for those anxieties we hold—this is the appeal of the dogmatic and further, the fundamentalist. There are answers in these. There is clarity and certainty that first appears to assuage fear, but often only serve to heighten it.

Light is good and dark is bad. We are safe and they are scary. God is here or God is not here. Our desire to rest in easy answers, quickly becomes our fault. Our necks grow stiff in certainty born of fear.

Just look at God further along in this story. Almost as if in split screen, God sees the people down that mountain and is enraged. How could they do this?, God petulantly asks Moses, "the people YOU brought up from Egypt".. God doesn't want to claim them, nor the scarring effect of their short-sighted actions. This is no turn-the-other-cheek lesson on God's part. Moses is invited to pull a Noah and board the next ark, leaving the people to drown in their own apostasy. And it is here that something becomes clear.

The relationship between God and the Israelites is not yet fully formed. Surely, on God's part this love was written on the divine heart back to the days of Abraham; yet with the people, with the people there is still time to be spent. There are still assurances to be made. There are still habits to break.. And in these still early days, there are mis-steps—even by God. True relationship takes time. It takes time, and it takes grace.

It's been ten years now that SPC has called friends, the people of the seven communities outside of Matagalpa. These communities are represented by an association which we came alongside CEPAD in equipping. Ten years is quite some time to be in relationship with mission partners, particularly overseas; particularly with the intensity that we have devoted. When we talk about developing our relational mission as a congregation, the good news is that this is not entirely new to us.

In these ten years this congregation has seen enormous changes, many of these in leadership over the past several years. In these ten years in our partner communities they have also seen significant changes: roads have slowly been built up and access to clean water expanded and

leadership too, has changed. In fact, this was one of our main questions as we met on Thursday morning with Damila and Francisco and Antonio and Dom Valerio. Of the seven leaders who began this association and drove much of its good work, only four sat with us. What was the plan for building back the leadership? Could the association continue? We were not the only ones with questions. They came with their own as well. Damila, not one to mince words I learned, spoke from and directly to the heart. Did we still want to be partners? Aside from our most recent trip down, communication had been sparse for a while, had we forgotten them?

These were challenging questions on both sides, but tough questions can be asked in honest relationship. In fact, they must be for it to be any relationship of meaning. And surely, grace can be offered. Of course we had not forgotten them, but a season of change here at SPC took a lot of focus. Of course they wanted to continue on as the association for there was so much more to be done in their communities, but family and personal struggles taxed the time and the energy was low. I'm happy to share that with assurances that we would bring a renewed energy, and Damila's ability to preach even to the local preacher about his responsibility to serve as a leader for his community; our relationship continues and I trust it is also strengthened.

My college roommate, at that time still in training to be a teacher, would come home at least once a week to tell us what became coveted, and hilarious, stories of one particular kid. He was a curious kid then, and I hope he still is. Each time she would recount just another way that he used is key phrase, which was, "But why?". "But why?" Ms. Allaire, "why do we have to raise our hands?". "But why?" Ms. Allaire, "why do you only come on Tuesdays?" Each question to be followed up with another, "But why?".

The questions that we ask in relationship to one another, ought to be as probing as insistent and as earnest. But why, why would you be so angry at them, God?, asks Moses. But why, why would you not want us to see you? ask the Israelites. But what, what can we do for our people? asks CEPAD. But who, who will stand up with us? asks Damila.

Being in relationship changes us. This is the gift and challenge of it. As Christ's body in the world, the church, we know that we are called to go and be disciples in all the world, led by the Spirit to seek after God and to proclaim the good news. We know that we are to be in mission. Fortunately, we have also learned as understandings of what it means to be in mission have shifted over time, that we learn the contours of God in new ways from those who are different from us, who see and experience the world from a different perspective. Our minds have the capacity then, to be changed.

This is why we are in mission, as much as anything else. It is to learn about who God is and what God is capable of and how God moves in our relationship to one another that ties our hearts more closely. Thanks be to God for this gift and this challenge, for all of the tough questions and even the mis-steps; for relationship like this truly brings us near to the kingdom of God.