

Christina Litwiller
Salina Mennonite Church
February 23, 2020
Scripture: Isaiah 19:18-25

Come Closer, Part 2

Today we continued to encounter Egypt through pictures and stories, finding connections to the places, people, and expressions of faith and experiencing the rich variety of God's creation and God's people. Last Sunday I talked about our first week in Egypt, when we visited places around Cairo and then traveled up to Alexandria. During that time we visited some historical places but also spent much time hearing people tell their stories of giving and receiving assistance, learning about faith-based organizations, and visiting churches currently used for worship.

During our second week in Egypt we flew from Cairo to Luxor and traveled on the Nile up to Aswan continuing by bus to within 40 miles of Sudan. During this time we visited many ancient temples. Temples to honor the gods who sustain life, built on the east side of the Nile where the sun comes up and day begins. Mortuary temples to house the bodies of rulers after they die, built on the west side of the Nile where the sun sets and day ends. All the temples made of huge stones, containing grand entrances, huge columns and statues, with most surfaces covered with carvings and paintings telling the stories of gods and rulers, demonstrating power, depicting daily life, keeping records of administrations and expeditions, spreading propaganda, expounding wisdom and philosophy, and praying for a good life in the present and the hereafter.

After two Sundays of pictures from Egypt, I can imagine you might be wondering what these ancient monuments dedicated to gods and rulers have to do with being an Anabaptist Mennonite Christian in Salina, Kansas in 2020. In answer to that question, I'll share some remarks made by Safwat Marzouk, an Egyptian man, a Christian, who is currently the Old Testament professor at AMBS, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, my alma mater.

Safwat describes the Bible as God's word written in human words. This is similar to our understanding of Jesus who is God in human form. The most faithful way of understanding Bible is not in a literal sense, but in understanding the cultural context and asking questions. How did these texts speak to the 1st audience? How do they continue to speak to us through the work of the Holy Spirit?

Many of the stories in the Bible, especially the Old Testament, cannot be corroborated by historical or archeological evidence. But these stories, preserved in writing after many years of oral tradition, helped to shape the identity of a people and how they related to God. The historical and spiritual core of the stories is that God delivers those who are oppressed. God the creator relates to all people. All humans had a particular relationship to God in a different way.

Egyptian Christians wrestle with how Egypt is portrayed in the Bible. Many times Egypt is portrayed as the enemy. Some Egyptians don't want to read those texts because they are offensive. But they do hold onto the passage from the end of Isaiah 19 where God promises to bless God's people Egypt. They also hold onto the story of Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus taking refuge in Egypt. How then should they approach the other stories? How should we approach the stories that make us uncomfortable or are offensive to us?

Looking at the ways the ancient Egyptians told the stories of their power, conquests, daily lives and gods helps me to approach the Bible with more humility. Seeing some similarities with

the ancient Egyptian stories and the way the biblical writers told their stories helps me to release the need to approach the Bible as a historical record. Instead, it causes me to ask questions about how I relate to God and to other people.

God's greatest desire is to deliver people who are oppressed, to release people from what's holding them back from being in right relationships with God, other people and all of creation. I need to be asking questions of myself. In the story of the Exodus, with whom do I identify most? The oppressor, Egypt, or the oppressed, Israel? Which whom should I identify? In what ways am I oppressed? In what ways do I use my privilege to oppress others? What do I do with my power? How do I use power to liberate? Do I think of myself as powerless even when I am the one in power?

I need to find opportunities to read the Bible with people who are different than me. How do they hear the stories in their contexts and with their experiences? The Bible isn't all about me or just for me, a white, middle-class, American woman. I hope by sharing some of Egypt with you, you can also experience a bit of what it's like to hear God's word and see God's ways through the eyes of someone different from you.

I'll end with a few sentences about perfection written by Timothy King in his book *Addiction Nation*.¹ Many times as Christians we strive to understand the Bible perfectly, have a perfect picture of who God is and God wants, and live a perfect life.

Timothy King writes: *One of the greatest dangers of perfection is that it fails to acknowledge that we see as through a glass darkly. We do not actually know what perfection is or what it looks like. Our limited and imperfect view of the world and ourselves means that all our projections of perfection are going to be distorted.*

Our desire to know needs to be paired with a humility that we do not know. Our learning comes with an acknowledgment that we have unlearning to do. The ways we learn to see will continue to reveal how much we do not yet see.

Giving up on perfection isn't giving up on progress. It is the acknowledgment that we grow more in widening circles than we do in straight lines.

I hope that our encounter with Egypt has widened our horizons and helped us come closer to God and to people around the world and across time and space.

¹ Timothy McMahan King, *Addiction Nation: What the Opioid Crisis Reveals about Us*, Herald Press, 2019, p. 192.