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Hope from Nuremberg

In May, Ted and I enjoyed a river cruise from Amsterdam to Budapest. For 16 days, we traveled on the Rhine, the Main Canal, and the Danube – 1,078 miles and we went through 68 locks. What an adventure, especially seeing we had never traveled on these waters before. The boat traveled at night, and each day we opened our eyes to a new city or small village. We signed up for all the walking tours to learn as much as we could about each place. As an art historian, I was excited to stand in some of the German and Austrian cathedrals I had studied in the past. It was as if I was visiting old friends. But our tour guides were not so interested in the art history, but major themes in all the walks was Jewish life prior to WWII, and how each city or town has worked toward making reparations for the Jews since the war. Another common theme was how much of the city or town was devastated in World War II, some cities experienced terrible destruction and others, usually smaller, less strategic towns, came out of the war unscathed. In past years, Ted and I have traveled to the former Allied countries, where the destruction caused by the Nazis was immense. It was a new experience for me to be in the land where the Allies destroyed these cities. I expected to hear an undertone of blame used by the local tour guides for this destruction, but there was none of that. Instead, there was a sense of regret, an understanding of the tragic history that unfolded, and a strong effort to reconcile with the past in a positive way. Remembrance of the past was tied with obligations for the future – a theme that we are familiar with in our lives and the work we do together in this church community.

Even though WWII was a theme for each tour guide, it was not until our visit to Nuremberg that I felt a strong and dark sense of the past. In 1933, Hitler claimed Nuremberg as the permanent convention site and rally grounds of the Third Reich. He chose this city because it already had a local party that supported his views, and there was a large public park perfect for his rallies and propaganda. The city had a vital rail and industrial center essential for Hitler's plans of indoctrination and unification of the German people. On our bus trip in the city, we visited the rally grounds and the unfinished Congress Hall that is taller than the Roman Coliseum. I recognized this area from black and white images of Hitler's rallies. Hitler's National Socialist Party offered a coherent vision of national greatness, and he promised to bring an end to the hardship of the great depression and to make Germany great again. In the beginning, most of the German's supported Hitler's movement.

Before the dark history of Hitler's Germany, Nuremberg was the city of artistic splendor and home of the German Renaissance of the 15th and 16th century. Albrecht Durer, one of the most famous German artists found his home there, and it was the first major city to accept the Protestant Reformation in 1525. Nuremberg is bound with mixed emotions: the spirit of artistic splendor and religious freedom and the horror of the Holocaust; an early home of the Lutheran faith and the home of a murderous criminal regime.

We visited a bunker, deep underground, where the artwork and treasures from the city and the regional area were protected from the bombing. There were 28 large bunkers in the city, originally for the storage of beer – 3 were used for art and 25 for people. Some bunkers were expansive with more than 20 rooms. The bunker we visited had many black and white photos

displayed showing each room filled with the beautiful large wooden sculptures, paintings, and artifacts seen earlier at the Lutheran St. Sebaldus Church, as well as artwork of all kinds from other churches, the castle, and museums from the region around Nuremberg.

In April 1945, in the last days of the war, the Allies dealt a devastating blow to Nuremberg. They wanted the defeat to symbolize to the world the death of Nazi Germany. In 4 days, Nuremberg was captured, and the center of the old city was 60% destroyed and the outer area, where Hitler's complex and the industrial war factories were located, was 90% destroyed. Because of the bunkers, only 2% out of the population were killed, compared to the average of 9% in other areas. No other city, besides Dresden, was so totally destroyed. One month later, Germany surrendered and 6 months later the Nuremberg Trials began.

By the end of the war, most of the people in Nuremberg regretted and were ashamed of their support of Hitler in the early years. After the devastation, much of the population in Nuremberg decided to stay in the city, even though many had to live in the bunkers for a while. I can't imagine the despair and regret the people must have felt after the war in those deepest darkest moments that followed. They slowly began to clean up the massive rubble and bury their dead. Proposals were made to rebuild a modern city, but the plans were rejected. They were proud of their rich heritage and the city was a symbol of the time prior to the Nazi regime's presence. Their plan was to rebuild the historic monuments using salvage wreckage – slowly and methodically, almost as a penance, they rebuilt their lives and their city stone by stone and timber by timber. They preserved even the narrow- crooked cobblestone streets that would have been familiar to Albrecht Durer. It took them 38 years. The old walled city today is beautiful, and one would hardly know that it once was a pile of destruction.

I was reminded of the prophet Isaiah as I thought about Nuremberg. Isaiah was writing during the time of the Babylonian exile and the return of the Israelites to Judah after 60 years to find their beloved city in ruins. The prophet writes, "they shall raise up the former devastations, they shall repair the ruined cities, and the devastations of many generations". The prophet connects this rebuilding with a renewed covenant that includes justice and righteousness to spring up before all the nations. In this vision, the physical rebuilding of the city and the recommitment to justice and righteousness are united as one plan. There cannot be one without the other.

I could see this reality in Nuremberg today. Walking on the cobblestone road in this beautiful city, I felt humbled, knowing how difficult it must have been emotionally and spiritually to face the truth of their past and to acknowledge their role in the devastation, to painstakingly rebuild their beloved city and their lives. I also felt hope. I was surprised by my feelings, but I have learned to pay attention to them and try to understand what they reveal to me. I realized that Nuremberg presented an image of hope that I could feel, see, and walk through. It was tangible. Seeing the past and present day in such contrast, I could feel God's presence in this transformation of the city as a victory, and I realized that God has a plan for our future as well. I am sure you, like me, have had times of feeling gloomy over the past few years as we face the challenges of our nation and world. We have gone through the Covid years together, we see a deeply divided and divisive nation with another election soon to come. We witness daily horrors as the Russian war on Ukraine continues, as Israel attacks Jenin in the West Bank, as refugee camps overflow with displaced families from war. We see unbelievable natural disasters as the environment becomes more unstable from global warming, and for those like Ted and me that deeply care about Haiti, the horrific gang violence that is disrupting and terrorizing Haitian life is deeply distressing. I am sure each one of you could add to this list for there are many problems in

the country and in this world right now, such as homelessness and race relations to name a few. The feeling of hope in Nuremberg at this time was like a tonic to my soul, a reminder that God walks with us, and participates in the transformation of evil into good, war into peace. Our present reality today during this difficult time is not God's final answer; God's answer is yet to come. Our role is participating in the work of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

For twenty years, Ted and I have been working in Haiti. Together with our staff and board, we have built a scholarship and education program in the Artibonite Valley that serves over 700 people of all ages each year. We have a staff of 40 Haitians, with whom I communicate regularly. But we have not been able to travel to Haiti in 2 ½ years. It is too dangerous now. The country of close to 12 million people is ravished by gang violence, with political corruption and unrest, paralyzing financial challenges, and roadblocks that stop the flow of food, medical aid, travel to and from work, and a paralysis of daily life. Farmers cannot travel to their fields and much needed produce rots on the ground, while the rise of starvation and malnutrition increases in numbers never seen in Haiti before. The U.N. has likened Haiti to the Sudan and has called once again for more international intervention with a peace-keeping force, food and medical aid, and a building up of the Haitian National Police that has only 11,000 members, 1/3 of their need. The worst area by far is Port-au-Prince, the capital of the city, and home of 3 million. The city houses most of the businesses, a major port for oil and imports from around the world, the best medical institutions, and 13 universities.

We have one staff member in Port-au-Prince and about 80 of our university and professional school students attend schools in Port-au-Prince. The city is dangerous and must be navigated with extreme caution. Some students have opted to take a sabbatical year from studies or go to a school in a different region of Haiti, but most stay and persevere during this difficult time.

The bulk of the work and our offices and education center are 3 hours away from Port-au-Prince in the rural Artibonite Valley, the breadbasket of Haiti. It is safer in this region, but not without danger. Our staff have learned to adjust their way of working during this time. For example, due to the roadblocks on major roads, we have purchased a motorcycle that can use the footpaths to travel to various towns to do business with the 80 schools in the 30-mile region where our primary and secondary students attend. Our education programs continue as we offer literacy and tutoring on a daily basis. We just finished a week of summer camp with more than 100 children. It is a miracle that our work in Haiti continues, and we are so grateful for our incredible Haitian staff. We could not function without them. But I worry constantly, and it hasn't been easy the last few years. Haiti never leaves my thoughts as I communicate with our staff and many students daily. I always try to build them up and encourage them. I tell them there will be a better time; we are waiting for international help along with you; we are praying for you; our church is praying for you. We will not give up, and we will return when it is safer. My words feel shallow, and despair is great in Haiti now.

When I walked along the cobblestoned roads in Nuremberg, I thought about Haiti with hope that their time of peace, reconciliation and rebuilding will come. I prayed for an end to the violence; for the gangs to put down their guns; for the guns to stop pouring through the US borders; for reparations to the nation that has been devastated from the last 5 years of violence; for the election of a new Haitian government that is not corrupt, but truly cares about the people.

While visiting the St. Sebaldus Church in Nuremberg, I saw a cross made of three large nails each about 3 feet long and learned that it is the Coventry Cross of Nails and symbolizes an alliance for worldwide reconciliation. The Alliance began in Coventry England as the Provost of

the Coventry Cathedral stood amidst the cathedral's ruins on Christmas Day in 1940 and made a commitment on British radio not to seek revenge, but to strive for forgiveness and reconciliation – to build a more Christ-like world. Shortly after his speech, during the clean-up operations, some large iron nails were found in the ruins and three of these 14th century nails formed the Coventry Cross that stands on their altar today as a symbol of reconciliation, new beginnings, and genuine efforts to strive for peace worldwide. In 1999, a similar cross was presented to St. Sebaldus in Nuremberg by the Provost of Coventry Cathedral, and the Nuremberg church joined as a member of the Cross of Nails worldwide. Each member Church has a similar cross, and the members read the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation every Friday at noon along with prayers. I was moved by this worldwide effort at reconciliation and wished we were there on a Friday to participate in the litany.

A vision of the reconciliation of the world was heard earlier in the letter to the Ephesians. The author writes of a covenant of promise for all people through Christ Jesus, “for he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...so that he might create in himself a new humanity... and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross.” The cross is a symbol of unspeakable violence, but at the same time, a symbol of reconciliation and hope for a new beginning. The tension between the violence and the hope in one symbol is where the meaning of the cross lies.

We must always strive to find hope, especially in difficult times. Often it is found in the most unlikely places, like Nuremberg, a ray of light shines when you least expect it. We must recommit our efforts to work together physically and spiritually for change in this world. We are all discouraged at times, and we have good cause to be, but there is hope. The hard reality of war and violence in our world today is not God's final answer; God's answer is yet to come with the participation of our hands and our hearts in the hard work of reconciliation, reparations, and forgiveness. It is possible. I witnessed it in Nuremberg.

I would like to end this time with you with a reading of The Coventry Cathedral Litany of Reconciliation that is read every Friday at noon by many churches around the world. Let us read this in unison.

For the hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class.

Father, forgive

For the covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own.

Father, forgive

For the greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth.

Father, forgive

For our envy of the welfare and happiness of others.

Father, forgive

For our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee.

Father, forgive

For the lust which dishonors the bodies of men, women, and children.

Father, forgive

For the pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God.

Father, forgive.

Amen.