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Icons: Yesterday and Today

Exodus 24:12-18, 20:4-5

Have you ever come across something you never knew about in your chosen field? It's a new discovery that fills you with excitement. That happened to me recently, twofold. I became aware of both a place and a person, learning that they have played a significant role in the history of our faith tradition.

You heard in the Old Testament lesson that God called Moses to the mountain to receive the tablets of stone. *"Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days."* At the foot of that mountain in Egypt, the oldest continuously operating Christian monastery sits built upon the site believed to be the place where Moses encountered the presence of God via the burning bush. Saint Catherine's Monastery has a long and colorful history, one that I want to draw upon today as a way for us to reflect upon our own faith journey.

The geography of the place looks like a lunar landscape. It's far removed and desolate. Yet early on in the history of Christianity religious hermits began to inhabit the surrounding caves as a way to meditate on the Spirit without the influence of the outside world. They built crude shrines to commemorate Moses and the Ten Commandments. As the centuries passed one of the Byzantine empresses named Helena ordered a small church built in the early 4th century. Eventually, because of the number of hermits coming to Sinai, a bishop was appointed as an overseer and organized the hermits into a monastic community. They built their monastery around the little church.

By the 7th century the monastery faced a threat from a new religious movement sweeping across Egypt called Islam. The monks requested the protection of Mohammed himself who granted them immunity. For a period of time a Muslim garrison was stationed there and a small mosque that exists to this day was built inside the walls of St. Catherine. Perhaps because of its location the monastery has remained relatively untouched by the religious and political turmoil that has transpired through the generations. Beyond that it was even protected and supported. When Napoleon conquered Egypt in 1798, for example, he placed the monastery under his protection.

St. Catherine's became a popular pilgrim destination beginning in the 14th century. It took eight days from Cairo by foot and camel. Today there is a paved road through the

desert that makes it possible for people to make the visit in a single day. It's now on my list of things to see.

The monastery got its name from the daughter of a governor of Alexandria. She was educated in the finest schools of the city and must have been the valedictorian type. When she was eighteen she told her parents that she'd only marry someone who surpassed her in reputation, wealth, beauty, and wisdom. Catherine's mother was secretly a Christian and sent her to a hermit living in the caves near Mt. Sinai. He told her of a special man who surpassed her in everything, *"His beauty more radiant than the shining sun, his wisdom governed all creation, his riches spread throughout the world."*

Catherine was converted and at some point was granted an audience with the Roman Emperor Maxentius. She condemned both his persecution of Christians and his worship of pagan Gods. Maxentius, furious because Catherine's debating skills were greater than his own, sent for pagan scholars and philosophers to take her on. She was so eloquent that they were also converted to the faith.

Bribed with the promise of a royal marriage if she would recant, Maxentius then sent his wife and a Roman general to convince her to accept. But again, her eloquence was so convincing that both were converted to the faith. With that Maxentius made several attempts to execute Catherine and was finally successful. She is known as one of the most beautiful of martyrs and is identified as the patron saint of preachers. It is said, *"Before preaching, studying, or writing she was besought to illumine minds, guide pens, and impart eloquence to words."* I wish I'd known that years ago for there have been plenty of times when I've needed the help of St. Catherine.

The monastery and the saint came into my awareness while visiting the Getty Museum and its current show called **Icons from Sinai**. *"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God."* How odd that the greatest collection of icons...graven images...can be found in the very place where God gave the commandment to Moses, *"You shall not make for yourself an idol."* And yet one of the results of its isolation has been that through the centuries the Monastery of St. Catherine has amassed one of the truly great collections of religious art in the world.

With all that as background we're going to spend some time looking at the idea of icons, yesterday and today with the understanding that they may have something to say to the faith we try to live in our present lives.

If you ask a child about an icon they will say it's a small picture on a computer screen. Someone a generation back may describe it as an object of cultural devotion...an American idol. But the origin of the word comes from the Greek meaning for image. It

was originally associated with religious images. A theologian in the 7th century named John of Damascus put it this way: *"When I walk into a spiritual hospital – that is to say, a church...and see before me the brilliance of the icon, I am refreshed as if in a verdant meadow, and thus my soul is led to glorify God."* My take on this is that God would have no problem with images of this sort because they weren't "graven" or idols to be worshiped. They are tools that help point individuals to God, not away from God. They are images that as John of Damascus said lead us *"to glorify God."*

But there were those and continue to be those who don't believe that at all. About the time of John of Damascus, a faction of the church called iconoclasts with the "You shall not make for yourself an idol banner" set out to destroy any and all religious symbols with the exception of the cross. We can only imagine the number of religious art masterpieces that were lost forever. We saw something similar to that several years ago in Afghanistan when the Taliban issued an edict against all un-Islamic graven images. As a result two colossal Buddhas cut into the sandstone cliffs near Bamiyan 1500 years ago were destroyed by explosives.

One of the lessons we may learn from the monks of St. Catherine is that of religious tolerance...a mosque in a monastery...icons used to point people toward rather than away from the Eternal. These confluences of difference are things we all confront in our own faith journey. They have always been and always will be. Perhaps a healthier mind set is to see that many of the differences we encounter along the way provide opportunities to walk into the *"verdant meadow that will lead our souls to glorify God."*

Another intersection of the icons of yesterday with today comes from the most famous and valuable icon from St. Catherine's Monastery: the legend of King Abgar. It falls into the category of Christian mythology, but as we've said before, folk tales and mythology are designed to reveal truths about life.

Evidently this king had heard about the miracle powers of Jesus. Having health problems, Abgar wrote a letter to Jesus with a special request. (And why would this seem farfetched? Even today people will send correspondence to supposed healers asking for help. Might that have happened in the time of Jesus as well?)

"Abgar Ouchama to Jesus, the Good Physician Who has appeared in the country of Jerusalem, greeting: *"I have heard of Thee, and of Thy healing; that Thou dost not use medicines or roots, but by Thy word openest (the eyes) of the blind, makest the lame to walk, cleansest the lepers, makest the deaf to hear; how by Thy word (also) Thou healest (sick) spirits and those who are tormented with lunatic demons, and how, again, Thou raisest the dead to life. And, learning the wonders that Thou doest, it was borne in upon me that (of two things, one): either Thou hast come down from heaven, or else Thou art the Son of God, who bringest all these things to pass. Wherefore I write to Thee. I possess but one small city, but it is beautiful, and large enough for us two to live in peace."*

King Abgar has his secretary Hannan deliver the letter to Jesus. He was also an artist and drew an image of Jesus...the first icon...for his king to see. Jesus said to Hannan: *"Go thou, and say to thy master, who hath sent thee to Me: 'Happy art thou who hast believed in Me, not having seen Me, for it is written of Me that those who shall see Me shall not believe in Me, and that those who shall not see Me shall believe in Me. As to that which thou hast written, that I should come to thee, I will send thee one of My disciples, who shall heal all thy sufferings, and shall give (thee) health again, and shall convert all who are with thee unto life eternal. And thy city shall be blessed forever, and the enemy shall never overcome it.'"*¹

When it comes to our own health, both body and soul, we do look for that which will "refresh as if in a verdant meadow." We need that type of icon today as much as yesterday.

Finally, another of the treasured icons of the monastery is one of St. Catherine herself. She is an object of devotion. She must have been quite special in life, for she is treated as someone extra special in death. Catherine was branded as one of the 14 most helpful saints in heaven. In contrast to that we have what appears to be the veneration of Anna Nichole Smith as an American icon. Her image has been blasted over the airwaves in the two weeks since her death. And now it seems that she will have a cult following built upon story and myth. The icons of yesterday and today; whose image will we allow to adorn our walls and reside in our hearts? I hope it's those that *"refresh as if in a verdant meadow and thus lead our souls to glorify God"*

¹ The Legend of King Abgar, The Catholic Encyclopedia.