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COMMENT - Follow Jesus into the neighbourhoods

“It’s pretty hot for camel hair right now”, Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori said in her sermon at the opening Eucharist of the Episcopal Church General Convention in Salt Lake City last week.

You may not have had locusts for breakfast, but I can tell you where to buy protein bars made from cricket flour. And I saw honey for sale in the exhibit area. This may be an Episcopal convention, but we are all supposed to be John Baptists and Jane Baptists. Our task is to build that straight road, knock down the privileged heights, fill in the sloughs of despair, and make the road flat enough for all God’s people – and that includes Baptists, Episcopalians, Jews, Hindus, and “nones.”

We’ve been baptized into Jesus’ baptism as well as John’s, and called to the kingdom work all the

prophets proclaim: to be light in the darkness, strength and comfort for God's people, gathering the lambs and leading ewes to shelter, and showing the healing power of forgiveness. That is the road to the peaceable kingdom.

John was a pretty edgy dude. Like those who dwell on our streets and sleep in our parks, he wasn't terribly welcome in the palaces of his day. And like them, John scratched out a living in the desert. Locusts and honey were probably luxuries, for lizards and carrion are likelier sources of protein. In the desert water is always scarce and frequently alkaline. We are sitting here on the edge of a desert where death is ever present. Many died by violence [2] before the trek to this oasis began, and others were murdered or died of disease and exposure as they sought their destiny even farther west.

We live in a world filled with deserts of death – wars in the Middle East and Africa, racial and ethnic strife almost everywhere, and exploitation of human beings and the whole created order.

The song is more than 50 years old but it's hauntingly current:
They're rioting in Africa, they're starving in Spain.

There's hurricanes in Florida, and Texas needs rain.

The whole world is festering with unhappy souls. The French hate the Germans, the Germans hate the Poles.

Italians hate Yugoslavs, South Africans hate the Dutch.

And I don't like anybody very much!

It ends even more tellingly:

They're rioting in Africa, there's strife in Iran

What nature doesn't do to us, will be done by our fellow man.

We are grieving nine African-American Christians murdered while at Bible study. Women and girls are being raped and kidnapped as spoils of war in Central Africa. The Dominican Republic is expelling people of Haitian descent some of whose ancestors have been there for generations. Brazil has seen vicious attacks on Candomblé communities recently. An 11 year old girl was stoned by militant Christians as she left a worship gathering last week, and a 90 year old priestess died of a heart attack when her worship space was invaded.

We can help to build a different kind of road. One with light bearers rather than death dealers. The

good news is there are forerunners at work in all the places of the world's conflict and hate – forerunners pointing to the Prince of Peace. Members of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston made their light-filled witness at the arraignment of the young man charged with shooting their fellow parishioners. They stood up and said, 'we forgive you, even in the midst of our nearly boundless pain; hate must not win.'

Their statements echoed the forgiveness offered by the Amish community whose daughters were slaughtered at school in 2006. The Anglican Church in DR Congo is leading the work of healing and reintegrating women struck down in war. In the Dominican Republic, Bishop Holguin and other religious and civic leaders are moving mountains to address the growing injustices meted out to people with darker skins. In Porto Alegre, Brazil, an interreligious group of leaders stands in solidarity with all.

We are gathered here to let our own light shine, to foster the work of peace everywhere, to stand in solidarity with people struggling to survive in the desert. On Sunday I met a group of young people in the Birmingham airport, whose T-shirts said "the Road." They were on a Methodist

mission trip, coming to work somewhere in an Alabama desert. What Road gear will you put on for the way to the Reign of God?

This convention is about road-building in the desert. That kind of work that has always required teams of people, usually poor, often enslaved, sometimes a chosen vocation. Building a road home into the kingdom of God requires solidarity with those who are dragooned into construction work without compensation for their labor as well as those who cannot find a road. It's one reason Jesus called himself a road warrior, with no place to lay his head. There are many roles –you can join the chain gang, the litter crew, the Good Samaritan posse...

Our conversations about structure, mission, and marriage can prepare us for the journey, but they will not build the roadbed. They are a necessary prelude, a community-building exercise to get us focused and moving. The longer task is to build a road that will accommodate wheelchairs as easily as feet, that will gather the little ones and the ancient ones together into an ever-increasing company taking the road for home. We're bound for a world without predators, with plentiful food and water for all, where all God's children are

greeted with dignity reflecting their divine image, and the gifts of creation are shared and available to all, as each one has need.

We won't reach our journey's end unless we go together in company, in solidarity and partnership, trusting that God has provided what is needed – if we share the work and the gifts. That is the deepest meaning of forgiveness of our sins, which are always bound up with self-centeredness and selfishness. Remember that in the heat of debate! God has given us a variety of perspectives, and the body needs those gifts. This road will be built by the bruised and broken, imperfect body of Christ. We're in transit in this world, on our way to the beloved community and the peaceable kingdom. Stony the road may be, it's built by blood, sweat, and tears, and bound together by the solidarity of countless feet, marching upward to Zion.

Follow Jesus into the neighbourhoods. Travel light.

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