

## The Seekers

December 25, 2004

It took some time to get our tree this year. We had a couple of abortive attempts, but one or the other of us was just not in the mood.

Finally, a few weeks ago, we made the trek down to Home Depot and almost immediately found a beautiful Noble Fir. While the other shoppers in line were tense and edgy, repeatedly looking at their watches and checking their list of things yet to do and gifts yet to purchase, the two workers cutting the trees to size were cheerful and full of holiday spirit.

The Hispanic cutter, with little but his happy eyes and beaming smile showing through the sawdust, said a heartfelt "Merry Christmas" as he handed our tree to us. It was a good omen.

Steph had an idea for the tree. A simple design of lights, single color balls and ornaments made from things we'd collected in our exploration of the world this year. It was brilliant.

The lights went on quickly, followed by a background of gold balls. Next came the ornaments, carefully wrapped in tissue and carried back from the far corners of the world.

As I placed each ornament onto the canvas of fir, light and reflective gold, I was swept back to the places we'd been, the experiences we'd had, the adventures we'd survived, the people we'd met and in the spirit of this season, the many times we'd been touched by seekers of God.

This star reminded me of the Sundays we rode across Africa. Along the dusty dirt roads stood families patiently waiting for the sporadic mini-bus taxis to arrive to take them to church. Ignoring the blazing sun and the buzzing flies, they maintained their vigil at the roadside.

As we approached, the adults smiled warmly and waved heartily. Their young children jumped and danced and shouted greetings. As our motorcycle passed by, there they remained, in their Sunday best of crisp suits, brightly colored dresses and the children in blindingly bright whites.

Having visited their dirt floor, stick hut homes, this wardrobe was a mystery to us. We knew there were no dressers, no closets, and no wardrobes. We knew there was no electricity, no running water and no washing machines. Where did they keep these clothes, and how did they get them clean? It was a modern miracle for these seekers of God.



Zulu beaded hand craft. KwaZulu Natal, South Africa.

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This tiny prayer wheel, no larger than your fingernail, reminded me of the holy places of the Himalayas, the highest mountains on earth. The roads and pathways there host a steady stream of pilgrims visiting the holy places, seeking the blessings of holy men and bringing food to fellow believers isolated in remote mountain meditation caves.

One beautiful day we were in the upper floors of a monastery admiring a hand built model of heaven, the life's work of a monk. As we viewed this vision of the afterlife, two women appeared around the corner of the massive construction.

They lay prostrated, their faces pressed against the floor. Slowly, they pulled their knees up to their chest, paused, then pushed their upper bodies out. Moving in this manner like inchworms, they made their way painstakingly around the shrine.

I stepped past them as we walked around the circumference of the raised model. At the rate they were going I calculated it would take them at least an hour to complete the lap we finished in a carefully studied fifteen minutes. When I remarked on this, the local businessman who brought us said "They have traveled in that manner all the way from their homes. It has taken them more than three weeks to make the journey, prostration by prostration."

Their devotion, sacrifice and fortitude were humbling, these seekers of God.



Miniature prayer wheel. Sikkim, India.

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This carving reminded me of Bhutan, a small kingdom held aloft by the towering peaks of the highest Himalayas. Its people demonstrate perhaps the world's best balance between their deeply held faith and the pragmatic demands of their daily lives.

For each of life's challenges, there is a corresponding article of faith and a complementary pragmatic tactic or strategy. For each of life's stages and chapters, there are parables of holy wisdom and matching practical guidelines.

We spent a day traveling with a young woman, a successful entrepreneur, on her way back to the capital city from a visit to her grandmother in the Eastern mountains. Since the majority of the population lives one to five days walk from a road, any visit requires extended hiking, along with



Wood carving. Bhutan.

overcoming the challenges of long climbs over 12,000 foot high mountain passes with storms of fog, high winds, rain and snow. She had overcome all of these obstacles to pay a visit to her elderly grandmother, which she felt to be an honor rather than an obligation.

We spent several hours at a roadside café learning about her culture's day-to-day expectations, guidelines, and mandates. In doing so, we learned that their faith is interwoven throughout every aspect of their lives. From birth to death, every step of the path is covered with the comforting and familiar carpet of their beliefs.

When I asked her of her goals in life, she said, "First, to honor my faith, second, to honor my parents. It is only by accomplishing these goals that I can ever find fulfillment. All else, the money, the material goods, the professional success, is meaningless if these two goals are not realized."

I nodded, in awe of this wisdom articulated by a woman so young, no older than her mid twenties. She was an accomplished, beautiful, articulate, and brilliant seeker of God.

These tiny mittens took me back to Turkey, a land so steeped in history no twenty volumes could begin to tell it. There we literally walked in the footsteps of the Macedonian Emperor Alexander the Great, multiple Roman Emperors including Hadrian, countless Ottoman Sultans and the Christian apostles John and Paul.

Turkey, like no other place among the 35 countries I have visited, brings forth the realization that history is not an intellectual abstraction. History was real. History was formed by real places and by real people. Their actions led to direct effects that formed their world and continues to shape ours.

Until I walked there, I never felt the direct presence of history. Standing in the theater at Ephesus, in the spot St. Paul used to deliver his message to the Ephesians, I could feel history resonate. (Paul was later driven from the city by the idol vendors who were losing business because of his rabble rousing message.) In Turkey, the history of the Ephesians is alive.

History is also alive in the many faithful you see around you. It lives in the pious believers walking to market, mouthing their prayers as their fingers count their way through the 10,000 verses. It lives in the common workers who pause their labors to say their prayers, with passers by in reverent and respectful silence. It lives in the pilgrims making once-in-a-lifetime visits to the most holy places.



Minature knitted mittens. North central Turkey.

At one of these, a collection of holy relics in an old Ottoman palace, we were the lone Westerners in a swirling sea of the faithful. While we were curious and interested in the holy relics, for them it was the culmination of a lifetime of faith.

Many, especially the elderly, were in tears. Fearing the power of the relics, they approached hesitantly, but drawn like moths to a flame, they could not resist coming as close as they could to these items that linked them to the most holy prophets of their faith. With trembling hands, they lovingly touched, then caressed these pieces of living history that gave physical manifestation and confirmation to that which they held only as belief before entering this room.

I asked our guide and interpreter about the chain of evidence of the relics. How could we know they were indeed the possessions, and even the physical parts, of the prophet? He replied, "To the true believer, no explanation is necessary. To the non-believer, none will suffice."

His words filled my thoughts as I watched an old woman, quietly sobbing out her prayers, tears streaming down her face, as she softly stroked a relic. Indeed, no explanation was necessary for these seekers of God.

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This tiny wood carving carries memories of Syria, a land of vast deserts, ancient Roman ruins, massive medieval crusader castles and a polyglot population of perhaps the most welcoming and happy people we have ever met.

Throughout this land filled with a variety of tribes and religions come regular reminders that it is the living crossroads of history. Traders of ancient times left behind thriving colonies, functioning as small community capsules of their cultures, values and faiths.

Today you find peoples of multitudes of religions and sects living side by side, market stall by market stall. To a Westerner, arriving on these shores with the usual boatload of prejudices and preconceptions, it is a mind-opening event to see a Christian church bulletin posted in the village square written entirely in Arabic.



Wood carving. Syria.

When we can, we visit local churches during our travels. One Sunday in Aleppo, Syria, we walked the labyrinth of alleys in the old city to a local Church where we attended a portion of the four to five hour mass of the local Armenian Catholics.

Filled with song and ritual, we felt the comforting warmth of community as the congregation ebbed and flowed through the various segments of the service. Familiar faces greeted each other with nods and smiles, a heartfelt hand on the shoulder of a parishioner as another made their way down the aisle, quiet celebrations of new babies as they arrived wrapped in cocoons of blankets, creased faces of the elderly bent upwards in smiles, twinkling eyes showing through the weathered folds. Each was known, each was accepted, and each was loved.

We understood not a single word, yet the message was clear, distinct and unmistakable. Their love for each other, for their traditions and their faith, was palpable. Without doubt, these were seekers of God.

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This ancient coin, no bigger than a dime, is from the site of ancient Petra, in modern day Jordan.

Like Turkey and Syria, Jordan is part of the holy lands. It is filled with sites that are precious to the three monotheistic religions centered in the region. It is also littered with the history of these faiths, and around nearly every corner is a place that marks an important event in their pasts.

Among these is Bethany Across the Jordan, along the banks of the Jordan River. This is the spot where John the Baptist maintained his ministry. It is also the site where Jesus of Nazareth was baptized, and thus a very holy site in the Christian faith.

It is a spot where, if you seek it, you can feel the spirituality that pervades the place. I have noticed this phenomenon in special places all around the world. There are certain places that are different, where you feel closer to God. As a testament to their authenticity as spiritually differentiated, they are usually the site of ancient pagan temples later replaced by modern temples, synagogues, churches, mosques, and shrines. Some, like the monasteries of the Himalayas, are remote, quiet and fit the stereotype of a deeply mysterious and moving spiritual place. Others, such as St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, are viscerally spiritual in spite of shouting tourists, megaphone-enabled tour guides and boisterous, running children. Similarly, Bethany Across the Jordan, despite the irony of ground shaking explosions of Israelis blowing up Palestinian homes across the river, still felt spiritual.

As I stood over the place of Jesus' baptism, I said prayers for all my Christian friends and relatives who I knew would probably never have the chance to visit this place so central to Christianity. I could feel the presence there. Like the other spiritually special places of the world I had been, it was a place for seekers of God.



Metal Coin. Site of ancient Petra, Jordan

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This exquisite hand made ornament is from Japan. During our visit there we had many occasions to explore the history and modern expressions of faith and devotion in the Japanese society.

More than any other culture I have ever visited, the Japanese live a life of duality of faith. Almost every holy site contains a Buddhist temple and a Shinto shrine. Buddhist principles are combined with Shinto beliefs. Buddhist life-passage rituals are interwoven with Shinto practices. In a beautifully balanced way, the Japanese guide their present life with Shintoism while practicing Buddhism to address not only spiritual growth today, but the afterlife tomorrow.



Wood and fabric heat-driven animating ornament.  
Japan.

All the while, the Japanese are pummeled by the hustle-bustle demands from the hyper-velocity of the most developed society on earth. Most live in ultra-dense, massive megalopolis urban environments. The intensity of the pace of life and the ever increasing speed of technological development and implementation are inescapable. Every second of every hour of every day of every person's life is filled to the brim with stimulation, demands and time-gobbling responsibilities.

And yet, still they come. At every temple and shrine we visited, even the most remote on lonely rural roads, the faithful come. In the center of crowded cities and at the ends of small fishing villages, the Japanese come. In every shrine, incense burns. In every temple, fresh offerings are laid. Despite the smothering demands of their ultra-modern lives, in every holy site, the faithful come.

Even in Japan, a society moving at light speed, with indescribable pressures and with not a millisecond to spare, they still come, these seekers of God.

This porcelain bell is from China, a land of over 1.2 billion people. It is a country that is developing so fast they are building urban infrastructure the equal of Houston, Texas every month. It is a country that is adopting capitalism, along with the darkest aspects of its materialism, with unrestrained gluttony.

Very little of the history of the country remains, most of it bulldozed for haphazard development. Even recent history can be hard to find, with anything prior to the victory of the Communists in 1948 having been cleansed from the society.

Typical of this has been the elimination of religion. Viewed as a frivolous bourgeois extravagance and an inherent threat to the omniscient and omnipresent totalitarian power of the state, religions of all types have long been suppressed.

In the 1950's when China took Tibet, nearly every Buddhist monastery and temple in the country was methodically destroyed by the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army. During the cultural revolution of the 1960s this process was repeated across China when Mao's supporters systematically destroyed every Buddhist temple and monastery in the country. The only ones that remain today were protected by a few powerful government officials.



Porcelain bell. China.

But amazingly, religions of all types have survived. Despite the daily indoctrination of the population, brutal repression by the government, physical destruction by the military and social shunning of believers, faith has survived.

On one of our last days in China we visited a Catholic Cathedral in central Beijing. Although the doors were locked, the walls of an exterior passageway were lined with posters and messages. I watched as individuals and couples read each one, methodically progressing down the line. I could tell by the illustrations that the posters contained the story of Christianity, meticulously written in Chinese, and somehow slipped between the strictures of government censors.

I was amazed at their bravery. In China, one never knows from day to day when today's allowed activity will become tomorrow's treason. Each of them, couples clutching each other's hand and individuals stoically standing tall in their independence, steadily moved from poster to poster. Even here, risking political repression, career termination and social rejection they came, these seekers of God.



## The Seekers

In today's world, it is often hard to know what to pursue. What is most important? Will gold bring me what I desire? Will relationships fill the yawning chasm in my heart? Where can I find that which I seek?

While I don't profess to have all the answers, our travels taught us many things.

From the poorest of the poor, who were the happiest, we learned that those who have the least have the most.

From them we learned gold is not the answer.

From the seekers of God we learned that there is a more rewarding way.

A way that truly enriches.

For this we owe our thanks, our eternal thanks, to the seekers of God.

On this day we wish you all that life can bring.

