



Marks of New Monasticism

Locating Our Lives in the Abandoned Places of the Empire

Everything in our society teaches us to move away from suffering, to move out of neighborhoods where there is high crime, to move away from people who don't look like us. But the gospel calls us to something altogether different. We are to laugh at fear, to lean into suffering, to open ourselves to the stranger. Advent is the season when we remember how Jesus put on flesh and moved into the neighborhood. God getting born in a barn reminds us that God shows up in the most forsaken corners of the earth.

Movements throughout church history have gone to the desert, to the slums, to the most difficult places on earth to follow Jesus. For some of us that means remaining in difficult neighborhoods that we were born into even though folks may think we are crazy for not moving out. For others it means returning to a difficult neighborhood after heading off to college or job training to acquire skills — choosing to bring those skills back to where we came from to help restore the broken streets. And for others it may mean relocating our lives from places of so-called privilege to an abandoned place to offer our gifts for God's kingdom.

Wherever we come from, Jesus teaches us that good can happen where we are, even if real-estate agents and politicians aren't interested in our neighborhoods. Jesus comes from Nazareth, a town from which folks said nothing good could come. He knew suffering from the moment he entered the world as a baby refugee born in the middle of a genocide. Jesus knew poverty and pain until he was tortured and executed on a Roman cross. This is the Jesus we are called to follow. With his coming we learn that the most dangerous place for Christians to be is in comfort and safety, detached from the suffering of others. Places that are physically safe can be spiritually deadly.

One of the best stories of community in the United States comes from the backwoods of

Georgia. In the 1940s, long before the civil rights movement had begun to question the racial divisions in the South, white folks and black folks came together to start Koinonia Farm — a “demonstration plot” for the kingdom of God, as they called it. Koinonia survived attacks from the Ku Klux Klan in the '50s and '60s, tilling the soil and sowing seeds for God's movement in the least likely of places.

Suggested Reading for the Month

Sayings of the Desert Mothers and Fathers

Jesus and the Disinherited by Howard Thurman

The Beloved Community by Charles Marsh