



Desert Discipleship

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O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Ps. 63:1)¹

“You’re Going to Africa”

I received the phone call in mid-August 2012, and my head was whirling. I was being mobilized to active duty and being sent to Djibouti, in northern Africa. Even though it was a mystery to me why I hadn’t been recalled to active duty during the eleven years following 9/11, and even though I was fully prepared and committed to carry out my duty as an officer in the Navy Reserve, I was still struggling to accept the fact that I might have to leave home for nearly a year. I was a relatively senior officer with more than twenty years of service, operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were winding down, and fewer guys like me were being called up. I was newly married to my wife, Colleen, and we were hoping to start a family. Furthermore, my friend and mentor Jim Phillips, city director for C.S. Lewis Institute (CSLI) Annapolis, had asked me to help him coordinate the Year 1 Fellows for 2012–2013. In short, I couldn’t help but wonder if the “threat” of active duty was some kind of distraction or spiritual test, especially in light of my upcoming new responsibilities with CSLI Annapolis. I just *knew* that God had ministry plans for me at home.

As I prepared for the increasing likelihood of having to leave Colleen and put my professional life on hold for a year, I realized that if my orders were not cancelled, I would have to do some serious

praying and soul searching. If God didn’t cancel my orders, wouldn’t that imply that He had something else in mind, completely different from what Colleen and I and our friends in Annapolis originally anticipated?



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Arriving in the Desert

I arrived at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti on December 20, five days before Christmas. Prior to my arrival, I’d heard that Chaplain (Commander) Brian Weigelt, formerly the Senior Protestant Chaplain at the U.S. Naval Academy Chapel and husband of CSLI Annapolis Fellow Rosslyn Weigelt, had also been deployed to Camp Lemonnier, arriving a couple of months prior. Although I hadn’t personally met Chaplain Brian, we had many common friends in Maryland. Jim Phillips connected us. Over coffee, Chaplain Brian graciously welcomed me to Camp Lemonnier, and we immediately hit it off.

Djibouti is a predominantly Muslim desert nation in the horn of Africa, at the mouth of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The country has no rivers; it is purported to have the hottest average recorded temperatures on the planet. I saw very few plants or other living things that I’d taken for granted in comparatively lush Maryland. Only the heartiest animals, such as camels and black African crows, thrive in the extremely harsh environment: dry, rocky, dusty, and dirty. The indigenous people of Djibouti are even tougher. In

camp the natural environment is complemented by a strictly functional, military, so-called expeditionary infrastructure: nondescript, utilitarian shipping containers converted to living and working spaces. Seeing photos of the camp, Colleen noted the barrenness. Indeed, beauty seemed to be scarce in the harsh desert environment.

After a few weeks, I concluded that the overall spiritual landscape in camp paralleled the desert landscape. There seemed to be an ongoing struggle with discipline among the troops. There was great disparity between the large camp population and the modest weekly attendance at worship services. Despite the challenges, the chapel community was vibrant and enriching. Furthermore, Chaplain Brian and Father (Lieutenant Commander) Mark Reilly, the camp's only Roman Catholic chaplain, worked well as a team, planning joint Catholic-Protestant events whenever possible.

“That They May All Be One”²

Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF HOA) is a joint command, meaning that members of all branches of military service (army, navy, air force, marines) work together. That kind of working environment requires each service member to deprioritize his or her own service-unique culture and way of doing things in favor of doing business the *joint* way. Whether we liked it or not, all of us had to give up part of our professional identities, which can be challenging as well as humbling.

In a sermon on Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17, Chaplain Brian drew a similar comparison to the body of Christ in camp. He noted that there on base all of us worshipped in a way that was different from what we were used to back home. With only one Camp Chapel and three Protestant services on Sunday, the options were not nearly as diverse as they might be state-side. The 2012 Christmas Eve Protestant worship service was a perfect example. Contemporary and traditional praise music, praise dance, and Holy Communion were all incorporated into a memorable celebration of Jesus' birth. For all of us there to worship together in unity in that particular way and at that point in our lives, God had to gather us from across the United States and around the world, remove us from our homes and *comfort zones*, and set us together in the desert.

During the Exodus, didn't God remove the distractions of Egypt and place His chosen people in the desert to teach them how to trust Him completely? Didn't St. Anthony and other Desert Fathers and Mothers flee to the desert to minimize distractions that would hinder their relationships with God? Similarly, isn't C.S. Lewis best known for being a proponent of *Mere Christianity*, where traditional and denominational differences are put into proper perspective for the sake of core unity in the fundamentals of the Christian faith? Could it be that God placed me and other disciples of Jesus at Camp Lemonnier in the desert in order to remove distractions and draw us closer to Himself and to each other, even across traditional and denominational lines?

Heart & Mind Discipleship

In the first weeks of 2013, I spent many off-duty hours more focused on devotional and quiet time with the Lord. I also participated in a chapel-sponsored Experiencing God (Henry Blackaby) study group led by Kentucky National Guard Chaplain Mark East. Throughout the winter study, I prayed for the Holy Spirit to show me how I could serve the Lord's kingdom in camp; toward the end of the study, I reread Jesus' Great Commission:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:18–20)

That is when it hit me. To describe it in navy terms, the Great Commission is what is referred to as a *standing order*. In other words, as followers of Jesus, each and every one of us is commanded to make disciples, to baptize them, and to teach them all that Jesus commanded in Holy Scripture. We don't need to ask God's permission to make disciples, because He has already commanded us plainly to do so.

CSLI's Heart & Mind Discipleship curriculum immediately came to mind. Our friends and CSLI Annapolis Fellows David and Betsy McPeak had approached Colleen and me in late August 2012 and asked if we would consider helping them facilitate a Heart & Mind Discipleship group at Bay Area Com-

munity Church, Crofton, Maryland. Despite the preparations for my deployment, the timing seemed perfect. So Colleen and I joined David and Betsy, and the Lord greatly blessed us and the Heart & Mind group.

With clarity and renewed focus, I asked Chaplain Brian if we could meet for coffee. Before I could directly ask if he could partner with me in facilitating the Heart & Mind Discipleship group, he offered his full support. Someone had just asked him for this very type of discipleship opportunity. Chaplain Brian recommended starting Heart & Mind Discipleship after Easter. We were on our way!

March in the Desert

Every year during Lent, Bishop Giorgio Bertin, Catholic bishop of Djibouti, leads many of his parishioners in a day-long March in the Desert, followed by Holy Communion. Thanks to the fruitful relationships that Father Mark and Chaplain Brian had nurtured with Bishop Bertin and other local religious leaders, Camp Lemonnier Catholics and Protestants were invited to participate in the spiritual retreat. March 8, 2013: the desert walk deserves much more description than what I can provide here. But there in the desert quietness I felt like the Lord telling me to share Heart & Mind Discipleship with the Camp Lemonnier Roman Catholic community. Consulting with Chaplain Brian, we made the Heart & Mind materials available to Father Mark, who reviewed the materials and wanted to advertise it to the Roman Catholic congregation.

When I sought out Father Mark to give him his own copy of the Heart & Mind Study Guide, he told me that he had once used C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* as a primary text for a class on Christianity and World Religions for high school seniors. I assured him that the C.S. Lewis Institute strives to be ecumenical in its programs and practice. With a smile he said, "If the C.S. Lewis Institute is true to its namesake, I would expect it to be."

Mere Christian—Mere Disciple

The Heart & Mind Discipleship Group—Protestant and Catholic service men and women from all branches of the military and civilians—gathered in the chapel meeting room and averaged ten to fifteen participants on any given Monday night. Both Chaplain Brian and Father Mark attended faithfully, and the Holy Spirit blessed our group tremendously! As

with any small group, our dynamic was unique. Like me, most of the participants had not planned or even desired to come to Djibouti. Yet we strove together to draw closer to the Lord in our shared desert experience. Although each Heart & Mind lesson is a gem in its own right, the standout topic for our group seemed to be, fittingly, *humility*.

So what *lessons learned*, if you'll pardon my military jargon again, might be worth passing along?

- **Embrace the desert experience.** We probably shouldn't be surprised if our Father dramatically alters our best, well-made plans, and we suddenly find ourselves in the desert, metaphorically speaking if not also literally. We should strive prayerfully to accept desert seasons as opportunities to be humble before our Lord and before others. Will we lament our desert experiences as did the disgruntled Israelites during the Exodus and cry for a return to the delicacies of Egypt? Or will we trust our Lord and draw nearer to Him in the desert seasons of life?

- **Practice Christian ecumenism.** We can no longer afford to be blasé about unity in Christ! A place of unity is also a place of loving humility for every one of us. I am by no means advocating abandoning core doctrinal truth for the sake of a "phony unity." Nor am I in favor of abandoning treasured worship practices. I am encouraging standing shoulder to shoulder with our sisters and brothers in Christ across traditional and denominational lines and together being God's agents for His kingdom in the world. Defending the sanctity of life, feeding the hungry, and easing the suffering of the sick are just three endeavors where all disciples of Christ can join together.

- **Make disciples!** The Great Commission is our King's *standing order*. For those of us who have been blessed with the Fellows, Journey, or Heart & Mind Discipleship Programs through CSLI, are we partnering with other disciple makers and using those blessings/gifts to bless others? Are we joining in actively making disciples in our local churches, homes, small groups, and wherever God places us in the world? Or are we sitting all alone on the sidelines, content with our own personal spiritual-growth programs?

The desert can certainly be a very challenging place, but with a clearer focus on God and a realization of His abiding presence with us, we can experience a renewed sweetness of His grace, both individually and with fellow disciples of Christ. Desert experiences can facilitate our concentrating on the basics—drawing

closer to our Lord and drawing closer to our sisters and brothers in Christ across traditional and denominational lines. C.S. Lewis famously advocated a position of Mere Christianity—essential, core, shared beliefs for all believers for all time. Perhaps that is also the place where we can focus our discipleship efforts—*Mere Discipleship*, if you will. The C.S. Lewis Institute is just one tremendous resource available to us. Will we obey our King’s standing order to go and make disciples—*Mere Disciples*?

*Remember not the former things,
nor consider the things of old.
Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert. (Isa. 43:18–19)*

Notes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version*.
2. John 17:21.

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