

“Life’s Global Positioning System, Part 1:
Genesis 2:4b-8, 15
September 7, 2008

“The Map Keeps Changing”
The Rev. Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Yesterday, I returned from Lebanon. I was in Beirut as our denomination’s trustee on the board of the Lebanese American University, which we Presbyterians founded in 1835 as a girls’ school in the Ottoman Empire. For a few days before the meeting, our Presbyterian representative there introduced me to our sister churches and schools across Lebanon. Though small, the Evangelical Church (as we are called there) is a beacon of education and higher learning. Next week between services I will tell you more— and I am delighted to announce that I will have a very special guest with me. The President of the Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon, the Rev. Dr. Salim Sahiouny. He will be visiting his daughter in Chicago, and he is delighted to bring greetings to our church from his – *inshalla*, God willing.

This was my first time to Lebanon, but I have to say, it felt a little bit like home. The driving: it is *just* like Chicago, only without clearer lanes. Even non-Chicagoans compare the driving in Beirut to our fair city! But, oh, as an Armenian, it felt deeply, viscerally familiar. The faces, the accents, the passion, the laughter – and the foods – oh, the Middle Eastern dishes – the hummus and the kebab, the pastries and the yogurts! – it was as if I found myself back in my grandmother’s kitchen, and it was beautiful.

The streets of Chicago, our grandmothers’ kitchens: we all have places that evoke something deep in us that is familiar – that makes us feel like we are home. Today I want to talk with you about our need for place, physical or metaphorical -- the human need to be rooted and grounded in a secure identity. And today I want to talk with you about what happens when, as the Psalmist put it, “the earth should change, and the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, and the waters roar and foam, and the mountains tremble with its tumult.” Listen now to our second lesson: Genesis 2:4a-8, 15.

* * *

My friend Gail Ricciuti remembers with absolute precision the landscape of her childhood growing up in Washington State:

“I grew up at the foot of Mt. St. Helens. I was a child at her beautiful feet. ‘The Fujiyama of the West,’ they called her; and there were untold family trips to her forest campgrounds. My grandfather taking me for visits at Spirit Lake Lodge ... playing with ‘pummy stone,’ the floating rocks left from some long-ago eruption ... campfire nights at & camp, gazing across the lake at the mountain’s luminous shadow in the midnight By the time I was in college and director of our church’s summer camp, I had a spiritual relationship with that mountain. I hiked her surrounding hills, just as my daddy had in his scouting days ... the same trails, the same waterfalls, the same glimpses through shoreline trees. I thought of St. Helens as ‘my mountain’ and fervently learned the poem by Peter Marshall: ‘God gave all men all earth to love/but since our hearts are small/ordained for each one spot/should prove beloved over all.’ St. Helens was *my* spot, my most beloved place on earth.

“Early one summer morning, I swam the width of Spirit Lake’s icy waters, with my lifeguard friend Laura rowing ahead of me through the rising mists, joking and singing me across the three miles with lusty renditions of camp hymns while I side-stroked, glancing back at my encouraging mountain. And clearest in my memory after all these years is night upon summer night, when all the campers were finally in bed, sitting on a log gazing as the Orthodox gaze at the beloved face of their icons, praying ... to God, to Jesus, to the Spirit, all somehow ‘iconned’ in the glowing shape of that magnificent shadow in the darkness. In my memory even now, with Spirit Lake shimmering blue-green at her feet, it is still the most beloved and beautiful place on earth” (Gail Ricciuti, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Rochester, NY, in an unpublished paper presented to the Moveable Feast Study Group, January, 2005; portions shortened for oral presentation purposes).

We are, each one of us, formed and rooted in some *place* -- some *landscape*, current, or in memory. Not all of us are as attached to one mountain or one village, of course. But in the larger sense, we are, each one of us, particular people, incarnate in a particular time, embedded in a particular set of relationships, values, and social locations. We cannot live everywhere at once, or we live nowhere. Hence the sense of dislocation when the landscape shifts: we lose our job, or a loved one dies ... or even happily, when we get married or have our first grandchild. What we were no longer is; we are becoming a new thing. These changes, for most of us blessed with loyal friendships and a solid sense of self – these changes are difficult, but manageable. They can even be life-giving and stretching, if only in retrospect -- even the unwelcome life-changes.

But now and then, in the course of human history, a tectonic shift will shake the earth beneath us. Like the shifting plates of planet under the Cascade range that caused Mt. St. Helen to erupt in May of 1980, spewing fine coal over hundreds of miles and changing the face of the mountain ... or like the colliding mass of rock under the Pacific Ocean in December of 2004 that hurled walls of water over Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka – now and then, it feels as if the foundation of the earth is moving. And when it does, not only we ourselves, but everything and everyone around us shift as well, and the earth moves, and the people tremble, wisely, at what is being destroyed. Such is the force of globalization, the shifting earth on which we find ourselves precariously balancing today.

Globalization. What is it exactly? For me, this working definition has sufficed: *Globalization is every period of rapid, significant expansion, and its concomitant destabilization.* We are not the first to experience globalization! In fact, Adam and Eve's eviction from Eden may describe the first expulsion from the Garden of the Familiar, and the resultant work to make a life and build a new identity. Who knows how many times our human race has felt the ground shift so. But *every* period of globalization has felt to the human race as if tectonic plates were shifting. The result is inevitably a social volcano that

transforms our landscape, a tsunami that swamps the familiar and beloved, leaving a new reality in its path.

In times like this, it's not enough to unfold our well-creased maps to find our way. To find our way through this wildly shifting and unfamiliar terrain, we need a Global Positioning System. We need our faith – we need our God – now more than ever. That's why I've chosen, in the year ahead, to explore with you “Christian Living in a Global Age” – what it means to be living in a time of epic change, and how faith can help us navigate our way.

Next week we will be looking backwards to two other periods of globalization – the time around the writing of the New Testament, and the period of the Reformation – to look for God's presence in those changing times. Our last Sunday in our three week series we will look closely at our era, the period dubbed as Post-Modern. But for today, let's start by looking for the signposts of globalization.

Now, one of the ironic things about periods of massive change is that they emerge out of really stable periods. Volcanoes don't erupt out of molten rock – they explode out of massive, immovable mountains. So it is with social change. A period of social stability and political security is often the precursor of massive change. Why? Because it takes a stable environment to produce the next step in globalization: a new means of communication and/or transportation that connects previously unconnected peoples. I'll say more about this next week, but think about the Greco-Roman Empire, an empire that started with Alexander the Great and continued nearly unabated for centuries. That political stability allowed for the development of thousands of miles of roads that crisscrossed the Empire. Without a stable empire, those roads would never have been developed ... and those roads in turn made possible an exponential leap in the speed of commerce and travel.

So, first a stable empire, then, a new means of human movement and communication that connects unconnected people and connects them much, much faster. These are the hallmarks of globalization. The Roman roads did

it in that period ... and in the Renaissance and Reformation, the invention of moveable type and advances in ship navigation allowed an unprecedented flow of ideas. In our era, I don't need to tell you, the explosion of communication and travel started with the telephone, the airplane, the Interstate road system and now the most massive globalizing connection our earth has ever known: the Internet information highway.

Once begun, globalization manifests some predictable consequences. See if these don't apply to us now:

1. The introduction of "foreign" values and ideas as cultures both merge and collide. When I was in Beirut I enjoyed Lebanese dinners each noon-time, but for something different in the evening, one night I went out for Chinese food, and another night French. And who would have ever guessed the Deerpath Inn would feature a sushi menu?

2. A mixed reaction – the embrace of novelty in some quarters, and the defense of identity in others. Think about rising fundamentalism in all religions, and rising nationalism too – are these not a reaction to a perceived threat?

3. The shifting location of power and authority – an unprecedented democratization of the common person's voice, and predictable consequences like fear of anarchy, resistance from the powers that be, and the emergence of new authorities. In the Reformation, moveable type allowed Luther to nail 95 Theses to the door at Wittenberg, and countless tracts were printed to stir the masses, and people read the Bible for themselves for the first time. Today, the Chinese government can try all it wants to restrict speech, but with the Internet they will never be able again to control people's thoughts and opinions.

4. Finally, both immense anxiety and opportunity in response to such rapid, unpredictable change.

I wish I had more time to talk about these points! For now, let them be an *amuse bouche* – an appetizer for the next two weeks, when I'll spread before you the impact these changes have on us, on our faith, and on the world our

children will inherit. In the meantime, let me close with the rest of my friend Gail's story. "In the spring of 1980," Gail Ricciuti remembers,

"when Mt. St. Helens began to tremor and steam, I followed the story with fascination from my 'exile' [in New York]. And then one night, I had a dream. In my dream, I saw the mountain from my accustomed vantage across Spirit Lake; but instead of being graceful and snow-capped, she was low, gray, and ugly. ... It left me wondering – until a week later, on a Sunday morning in May, when the mountain exploded: blowing out some 1200 feet of her summit and destroying everything living on and around those slopes, burying Spirit Lake and the trails I had hiked and my father before me, burying them forever under 150 feet of mud and ash. The next day, I remember weeping inconsolably as I watched the nightly news, the first photos coming in from the blast area; until in mid-sob one particular aerial photo flashed for a split second on the screen. It was a distance panorama of the mountain itself – and what made me gasp was the shape – the exact outline I had dreamed a week before.

"Over the years I have made multiple pilgrimages up the new highway, slowly getting to know a foreign landscape. I watch it day by day now on my computer, gazing on the steam and ash plume that rises from the crater, watching the ever-changing skies. I do it to keep up on the weather 'at home' (even some 35 years separated from that place); but also, I think to contemplate that mystery of what she will do next – even though after the 1980 eruption she was no longer 'my' mountain in the same way. The relationship is different. [Yet] it's not the mountain that's the point, of course. What the mountain helped to give me – this ineffable relationship with a Creator God – endures."

The tectonic plates are shifting. There is no stopping them. And the place that we called "home" – it will never be the same. Yet there is one thing we can count on: God who made the heavens and the earth, and every living thing, and called them good: God hasn't given up on us. "Though the

mountains shake in the heart of the sea, and the waters roar and foam” – the love of God endures forever. And this – this will never change. Amen.