

A Path in the Darkness

—Ascent of Mount Sinai

As we celebrate the Feast of Light in these times of incredible darkness, I want to share with you my reflections on climbing Mount Sinai in early December. Capacitar team member Fr. George Horan and I had worked two weeks in the Middle East offering trainings in Israel and Palestine (Jenin, Ramallah and Bethlehem). We then took a week off to visit Jordan and Mount Sinai. The following was our experience in this ancient and Holy Land.



We meet Hadi, our Egyptian guide, in the courtyard of St. Catherine's Monastery. This ancient site dating back to the 3rd Century AD has been home to countless monks and desert hermits in search of the Holy. Currently about 25 Greek Orthodox monks from Mount Athos live at the monastery, supported by the labor of local Bedouins. St. Catherine's, at an

elevation of 5,150 feet, was built at the base of Mount Sinai or Jebel Musa, the Mountain of Moses. This is where traditionally Moses encountered God's presence in the bush that burned but was not consumed and where he received the commandments to guide his people.

Hadi introduces us to Mohammed, the Bedouin guide who will care for us on our journey up the Holy Mountain. At 2:30am in the chill of the pre-dawn, with a nearly full moon lighting our way, we walk to the camel path where we meet Awad and his camels. I will ride Obama, a 15 year-old slightly capricious white male camel. George will ride Abdula, a 25 year-old camel who is strong and steady on the rugged course. Male camels are specially trained to ascend Mount Sinai, starting their work at 6 years of age and often living to 40.



Our ride up the base of the Mount takes about an hour. It is magnificent in the bright moonlight under a deep azure sky. It would be a treacherous ascent without the moon. The camels are sure-footed climbing up the rocky path. As we accustom ourselves to the rocking rhythm of the ride, Mohammed chatters in Arabic with Awad. The peak of Mount Sinai rises over us at 7,500 feet. It is a rugged mountain of striking red granite and black volcanic rock. Most people walk or ride the winding camel path with its ascending switchbacks. A few strong souls take the Penitential Path, 3750 steps straight up from the monastery (some steps are 3 feet high), hewn into the mountain by monks in the 6th Century AD. Our camel path is rugged enough, and once we reach the base of the mountain, we will leave our camels and climb the final steep 750 steps on foot.

This is a time for prayer and surrender to the journey. The path up God’s mountain is rugged and challenging, each step demanding faith and surrender in the darkness. As in life, often it is better not to know what we are going through or what lies ahead, but just to trust the process.

Many people are with us on this journey. I pray for our Capacitar teams who bring hope and healing around the world. For refugees at our US/Mexico border and in so many places—now 60 million according to the UN report for 2015. For the survivors of the massacre in San Bernardino. For the traumatized, the tortured, the Families of the Disappeared in Mexico and Latin America. For women and children battered by gender violence and trafficking. For our new groups in Afghanistan and other areas of violence. I pray for George and the prisoners and people he works with in his restorative justice ministry. I surrender in prayer and hand all these people over to God. It’s as if we are making this ascent all together.

After an hour we arrive at a Bedouin teahouse built into the rocks and we dismount our camels. Awad will wait for us with Obama and Abdula to see if we need a ride back down the mountain. Several other people are already in the teahouse, drinking hot sweet tea, warming themselves with blankets to ward off the cold. We listen to different languages—Russian, Czech, French, Arabic. We notice that we are the only Americans. Because of the recent disaster with the Russian airliner, there are very few tourists coming to Sinai. We notice that everyone is resting, gathering strength for the uphill climb that will take another 2 to 3 hours. Our common goal is to reach the summit for sunrise around 6:15. George and I also notice that everyone in the teahouse looks at least 30 years younger than we are! I turn 75 in January, and George will be 70. For just a moment a thought pops into my mind: “How did I get myself into this—at my age!”

It is now 3:30am and we need to move along if we are to see the sunrise. Mohammed leads the way and asks if we have a flashlight to guide us over the rocky terrain. I am happy that I didn’t know what was ahead of me. The path is stony and the “steps” are a variety of sizes, throwing my body off balance. George has done a fair amount of mountain climbing in his life, so he walks along with confidence. I have done nothing to prepare me for this! As we start up the 750 steps, Mohammed becomes very aware of my ineptness at climbing. So he gently says: “Take my hand.” His warm comforting hand feels strong and dependable, and my courage awakens. So Mohammed, a Muslim Bedouin man, and I hold hands most of the way up Mount Sinai!



With Mohammed leading me my fear and vulnerability slowly dissolve. In the dark I know I am being held and encouraged to take on the ascent to God’s holy place where pilgrims have journeyed for thousands of years. The ascent is arduous and demands blind faith in the darkness. As we climb higher my strength and lung capacity frequently wane and I am frustrated with muscle pain as I gasp for breath. Mohammed comes to the rescue as my Bedouin coach, psychologist and spiritual guide. Tactfully, each time I am ready to give up he says: “Just a few more steps and there is a ledge over there where you can rest.” Gratefully I pause for a moment on the ledge to

catch my breath, renew my strength, and again take his hand. This pattern repeats itself every 30 to 40 steps, when Mohammed again says: “Just two more minutes and that ledge up there is half way! It will get easier then.” I think, “Just 375 steps to go! Can I really make it?”

Along the way I joke with Mohammed: “Tell your wife and son in the village that you carried a granny up Mount Sinai!” I later find out from Hadi that last year Mohammed had led two women in their mid 80s up the mountain. And in the past, Mohammed had often taken two trips per day up the mountain. And with Birkenstock-style sandals on his feet! The last part of the steep ascent is agony, but Mohammed keeps pulling me upward, saying “Inshallah!” (God willing!)



Suddenly as we look out over the vast panorama of the Sinai, the darkness gives way to the first signs of dawn with rosy fingers of light spreading across the azure sky. The sight of this first light fills us with energy and hope. “Those who have walked in darkness have seen a great light.” And we pause in awe of the beauty of the moment. With one last push we reach the summit and find about 18 men and women—Romanians, Czech, Malaysians, French—huddled in the cold, resting, sleeping, awaiting the sunrise.

Some are leaning against the walls of a small church built and rebuilt over the centuries, dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Others are perched on the walls surrounding a 12th Century mosque erected over the cave where Moses was said to have lived for 40 days and where God spoke to the Prophet Elijah. Some of us peer over the precipitous edge of the mountain looking down onto the path we had just ascended. In all directions is the glory, the fierceness of the path to God. Only the stalwart, or the foolish, or those who can risk discomfort and surrender can make it to the top.

At last the first intense light of the sun appears and its energy awakens us huddled around the walls. This is a moment of awe and adoration as the light fills us and warms us. The clouds are multi-colored in their glory. The surrounding mountains are splendid with light—Mount Horeb, Mount Catherine. One Malaysian pilgrim asks me to take his photo on his iPhone. Cameras are out trying to capture the splendor that we are feeling in our hearts.





“Take off your shoes, for this is holy ground.”

“Then Elijah went into a cave and spent the night there. The word of God came to him saying: ‘What are you doing here, Elijah? . . . Go out and stand on the mountain before God.’ But God was not in the hurricane, the earthquake, or the fire. After the fire came the sound of a gentle breeze. And Elijah stood in front of the cave and covered his face.”



After some moments of awe on the mountain, it is time to begin the long trek downward to the monastery for breakfast. As I take my first stumbling steps on the rocky path, I am glad that I didn't know what I was climbing up in the dark. Truly the path is treacherous! As in life, darkness and some denial can help us get through a lot! Mohammed again gives me his arm and I follow him with confidence. The path takes us past many historic places and vistas that we could not see in the dark. After the 750 steps we

reach Awad, faithfully waiting for us with Obama and Abdula. I decide I rather enjoy riding a camel, and besides, my tired body is ready to be carried! So I happily mount Obama for the last part of the journey. As the sun rises higher in the sky, the vast stretches of mountains and wadis surround us. Recent rain has brought new life to seemingly desolate places. Amid the volcanic black rocks and within crevices of the red granite, green plants and flowers emerge—signs of life and hope in the region.



At this time of global conflict, especially in the Middle East, this holy mountain is home to Jews, Christians and Muslims. At the summit we prayed to the God of Moses, surrounded by a Christian church and a mosque. On the grounds of St. Catherine's Monastery, near to Moses' well and the burning bush, stands a mosque, testimony of the peaceful and living relationships among Christians, Muslims and Jews.

As we await a new year with the hope of new beginnings, may the darkness of our times awaken within each of us the light and wisdom to guide our vulnerable steps toward peace and healing in our world.

With love and blessings,

Pat Cane

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