

FEATURES

The force of silence**Uneasy holiness in the Sinai desert**

Apr 01, 2016 by Sara Maitland

Every year I lead a weeklong “adventure into silence” in the South Sinai—something between a retreat and a seminar in the deep desert. Each year when I return I get two sorts of comments. The first, uttered in a variety of tones between loving concern and indignation, is along the lines of “were you safe?” This year that question had some reality behind it, for ten days after I flew back from Sharm el-Sheikh a Russian plane that took off from that city exploded, and the group Daesh–Sinai Province claimed responsibility.



St. Catherine's Monastery in Egypt. Photo © Benny Marty.

The second comment I get is “I envy you that peace.” (Sometimes I get both comments from the same person, which is very odd.)

The answer to the first question, this year as every year, is simply yes. I would not go if I did not feel safe—in the sense of safe from terrorism, jihad, kidnap, decapitation, or other mayhem; I certainly would not take a group with me. I feel safe because I trust the locally connected tourist organization I travel with. And in fact until the airliner crash, South Sinai (unlike North Sinai) was peaceful. I feel safe and I have been safe. I will go again next year if nothing changes.

The other comment is harder to respond to and therefore much more interesting. I think it assumes that silence and peace can be simply harnessed together as though a nice bit of silence acts like Xanax for the soul. In small doses there is something to this: for those run ragged by the incessant din of modernity, a brief time out in a quiet place can indeed restore calm and peace—and be very nice too. But that's not how deserts work—and particularly not how Sinai throughout its long history of holiness has worked.

Originally Sinai was formed in seismic violence. It lies on the very edge of the Arabian tectonic plate, which was ripped off of Africa and pushed slowly northward, pulling the little Sinai peninsula up from under the sea, draining it off, and then, as often happens at the edge of tectonic movements, shattering it with volcanic eruptions. Later in Sinai, Moses encountered a God of fire who sent him back to Egypt with a political mission that promised no peace. When the Hebrew people received the law on Mount Horeb they received it with trumpet blast and terror. Elijah endured storm and earthquake on the same holy mountain before he heard the “sound of sheer silence,” rediscovered his courage, and returned to his fierce prophetic task.

After being alone for years, many of the great hermit monks and nuns seem to have found a deep serenity. But they too were expected to wrestle with their demons and themselves in a silence that was more about heroic warfare than about peace and tranquillity. When St. Anthony was living in total solitude inside his ruined Roman fort toward the end of the third century CE, those outside could hear the violence of his struggle. Athanasius tells us everyone was surprised when he eventually emerged healthy and sane. And one of the Desert Fathers, Abba Theodore, responds to a younger monk who is complaining that he can find no peace, “I have been in this habit 70 years and not for a single day could I find peace; and you want peace in eight years.”

My group visited the Orthodox monks in the Sacred Monastery of the God-trodden Mount Sinai—better known as St. Catherine's Monastery. The desert monks are still there, as they have been at least since Egeria visited them in the late fourth century. At that point most of them lived as hermits in dispersed cells. Their situation became so dangerous and unpeaceful that the Byzantine emperor Justinian built them a fortress monastery in the mid-sixth century. Until the 20th century, the only way to get in or out was to be winched up the wall in a basket.

Inside the monastery walls is a mosque, its minaret visible from outside, and the monks treasure the *Achtiname*, a letter of protection from the Prophet himself. These are not signs of enviable peace.

The threat continues. The monks are probably more vulnerable now because during Israel's occupation of the Sinai peninsula (1967–82), the Israelis built them a good road—they are no longer hidden inaccessibly deep in the arid mountains. St. Catherine's may have UNESCO World Heritage status, but so did Palmyra. The monks just have to get on with it. And they do.

So what do these heirs of the Desert Fathers do about their vulnerability? They restore the library. The monastery library is perhaps the oldest working library in the world; its collection of early Christian texts is second only to the Vatican's and includes the oldest extant copy of the Gospels, the Sinaiticus Syriacus.

We had the privilege of being taken into the enclosure by librarian Father Justin to see the work in progress. When completed, the library will be fully equipped with state-of-the-art technology for conservation and access (see Father Justin's blog). The renovation job is not easy; the main back wall of the library was built in the eighth century, and the monks feel they must conserve it. Putting up a modern structure is expensive, disruptive, and noisy, oddly incongruous with an eremitical lifestyle and very far from contemplative serenity. The whole project felt to me like a brave and generous attempt to take the ancient past into a useful future. The monks will be sharing the treasures of the monastery with scholars as they already do with tourists and pilgrims, though it entails compromise and personal sacrifice. The new library is more about hope and trust than about peace as normally understood.

In the Sinai desert, and from the monks who have been there so long, I have learned that silence is not a little thing, not a sweet or gentle rest cure for weary spirits. It is a huge force; it strips you down and makes you face your own smallness, fretfulness, and vulnerability. It is not about peace (woe to the false prophets!). It is about radical self-transformation—about grace, kenosis, beauty, and awe.

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