



THE PASTOR'S PEN

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“Jesus is On the Mountain”

While I was in deployed to Bosnia during the Balkan Conflict, I often had to go out to remote locations in the country to see troops and conduct religious services. Some of these sites were only ten or fifteen miles down the road, while others were six or more hours away by four-wheeled drive vehicles.

When my assistant and I would pull into a base or a fenced-in compound, we would of course be subject to security checks. Our Pajero (a SUV that belonged to the US Army) had several big “SFOR” markings on it. These markings showed the gate guards that we were a part of their force and supposedly friendly. However, that was not enough. Security was very tight in some locations and our vehicle had to be searched inside and out for booby-traps, explosives or other threatening devices. Once the SUV was checked out and cleared, then we had to show our I.D. badges, our security badges, our passes for admittance into the base, and so on. Sometimes it took as much as twenty minutes to move from the front gate, through the checkpoint and into the compound.

One of my regular stops for weekly services was a very secure area. It was so secure in fact that no one on the regular staff wore uniforms or other identifiable markings. The guards at the outpost were changed weekly between the different supporting nations. The staff was not even allowed to talk to the guards and the guards could not talk with the staff. Anyone who violated this rule was subject to immediate dismissal from the site.

On top of these precautions were other more detailed security measures. Perhaps the most obvious one that stood out to me was the fact that no one on staff used their real names. Everyone was given a radio and a code name to use while they served here at this isolated location. So it was not uncommon to hear the people talking about Smurfette, Bad Dog, Mini-Me, Batman or Gonzo when they were talking to and about each other. One real interesting note to add here. The names were not picked by the individuals to use. Rather, they were “awarded” by other staff members.

For example, Smurfette was a short blond girl of German descent. Mini-me was a round faced fellow who shaved his head bald. He served as the officer-in-charge of the base and was named by the base commander.

With this in mind, picture me and my assistant. We drive up to the gate in our brightly marked Pajero. Both of us in our full camouflaged uniforms with name tapes, rank and insignia attached. Needless to say, we were not very subtle nor did we blend into the group of people wearing non-descript blue jeans and sweatshirts very well. Still we were always warmly welcomed and we always had good attendance at services. People would call out to me “Hey Padre,” “Hello Chappie,” “Good Afternoon Chaplain” and so on whenever we finally got into the outpost. Of course I would return their greetings calling them by name, code name that is. In fact, out of the fifty or so people that I met there, I think that I only learned the real names of about a dozen or so folks during my tour and that mostly came from counseling and dealing with their family issues back home.

Anyway, as I stated earlier this was a very secure site and if you did not need to know something, you were never told. You can imagine my surprise when, after visiting here for seven months, I accidentally found out that I too had been issued my own code name. However, since it was used to refer to me in messages and notes within the compound, no one ever thought it necessary to tell me about it. So here I was one Sunday afternoon, sitting at the checkpoint being admitted to the base when I hear the guard radio in: "Jesus is on the mountain." Needless to say, I was totally shocked! I know me, and I know that I am no Jesus in many ways. Was this some "off-beat" attempt at military humor, I wondered?

After services were over and I was getting ready to leave, I asked the officer-in-charge (Mini-Me) about the code name. He flushed a little and smiled. Then he spoke and said "Yeah, we all got together and decided that fit. So we gave you that code name to let people know when you came up here on the mountain." Again I was speechless (hard to believe, isn't it?).

As I left the outpost that evening, I began to think about what Mini-Me had said. Then I began to think about what the Apostle Paul wrote to the early church when he told them to be imitators of him as he imitated Christ. Had I been able to let the Light of Christ show through my actions and my ministry to the men and women who were stationed at that mountain outpost? If so, it was no doubt in spite of me rather than through me that Christ had worked. Yet, is that not true about all of us?

At this time of year we celebrate Advent: the coming of Christ into our world and into our lives. It is a time that we should stop for a moment in the midst of all the decorating and celebrating to see if we are living the true spirit of Advent in our daily lives. Many people around us see us and see our actions. They know us and know our attitudes. If they know us as Christians, do they see the Christ that is in us? Can they see the Light of Christ in our actions, our attitudes, our language and our lives? Advent is a celebration of the coming of Christ. It is also a reminder that we too are the bearers of Christ to a world in need. Are we taking Christ with us as we should?

It has been said that as Christians, we may be the only Christ that some people may ever see. My experience on the mountain proved that to me very dramatically. As Christ comes into the lives of people this Advent, is He coming through you? He should be. Then people everywhere can say Jesus is in my church, Jesus is at my office, Jesus is in my home, Jesus is at my school; but first Jesus must be in your heart before you can carry him anywhere you go; including up on the mountains of Bosnia.

Blessings from the mountain top this Advent Season,

James