

Discovering the Wandering Jesus in Central Asia

The following is adapted from a presentation by "RH" at the Frontier Fellowship meeting at the U.S. Center for World Mission on April 15, soon after Easter.

I've been in Kyrgyzstan for ten years. Before going, I felt the Lord said to me, "Learn from these people." In the 1980s I had been very encouraged by Don Richardson and his book *Eternity In Their Hearts*, which set my mind in a different direction. I really believe that in the genetic code of every nation is Christ, and people cannot get away from him. No matter what tribe they are in, no matter what nation they are in, no matter what religion they hold, they cannot get away from Jesus. They keep burying him, and what does he do? He keeps rising. He's been buried once, and he's risen once, but I believe that every culture, every generation, every era in a sense tries to bury him, and he just keeps popping up again – popping up out

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of bogus graves and bogus lies and accusations. He just keeps coming back.

The Kyrgyz have in their culture a kind of Melchizedek figure, called the Wanderer. He's mentioned in Sura 18 of the Qur'an, talking to Moses. He's a traditional character who's existed in the DNA of the Kyrgyz culture from the onset, and one of the first things I heard about this Wanderer is that he has a hole in his hand.

One of the next things I heard about him is that he goes around incognito from village to village blessing people, and if you'll greet him well you'll get your

blessing, but if you don't greet him well you will lose your happiness. This belief has really infected the Kyrgyz in a good way and encouraged their remarkable hospitality.

The Wanderer is said to have a holy number of seven. He often comes riding into town on a donkey. Often after he gives his blessing he disappears; if you greet him, and you recognize that it's him, you should hold on to him and not release him until

you get his blessing. Often in sharing Scripture with Kyrgyz, I read aloud Genesis 32, where Jacob wrestles with God or an angel or a man (it's ambiguous) and where Jacob realizes that this is someone who could bless him and so (just like the Kyrgyz) he holds on to the angel until he gets the blessing. The Kyrgyz say when you shake his hand and you feel the hole in his hand, you're supposed to hold on to him until you get his blessing.

I read Genesis 32 to people, and by the time I read Genesis 18, 28 and 32 a Kyrgyz is hooked on the Bible because it so relates to their culture. The supposedly "Russian, Western, American" book all of a sudden feels like their own book. It's very, very exciting.

And I believe part of this has come simply because the Lord asked me to learn from the people – listen to their issues and to their stories before I started to open my mouth. I believe Jesus our Lord is right in the very DNA of their culture, of every culture, because we have been created for him, through him and by him. Jesus reigns, and there's no way you can keep him down in any culture, or religion, or nation, or era, or generation.

So then, I just show these passages in the Old Testament and a number of other passages that don't mention Jesus' name, and then I often go to Luke 19,



Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. There is no other prophet than Jesus in Islamic culture or Kyrgyz culture who rides a donkey and who weeps. Luke 19 is a very, very influential passage in Central Asia; Jesus comes into Jerusalem and says, "You did not know the time of your visitation." Jerusalem did not receive Jesus, and Jerusalem lost its happiness. This is exactly what the Kyrgyz say about the Wanderer: if you receive him you will be blessed, and if you don't receive him you will lose your happiness.

Also, the Kyrgyz often say, before someone goes travelling, "May your road be unobstructed, may your road partner be the Wanderer." This is wonderfully similar to Luke 24, where Jesus walks on the road to Emmaus. Jesus comes alongside the two men, he's incognito, they don't recognize him, but their hearts burn within them. Like a Kyrgyz, Jesus looks like he'll keep going, not assuming he is invited to stay. But the two disciples invite him to stay. Like a Kyrgyz, Jesus tears the bread, and like the Kyrgyz legends, their eyes are opened and they realize who it is, and then Jesus disappears, all just "by the book," which is so exciting.

My favorite story, the way I love to end when I am sharing about the Wanderer, is from John 20, where Thomas says, "I will not believe until I put my finger in the holes in his hand, in his hand and his side." Jesus appears and says, "Thomas, come; don't doubt, believe, put your fingers into my hand and in my side." The very identifying mark of the Wanderer in Kyrgyz culture, the hole or the soft spot in the hand, is the very thing that Jesus uses to prove his identity to Thomas. It's really powerful and exciting.

Don Richardson was brilliant in bringing out redemptive analogies in different cultures around the world. In the Kyrgyz culture there are hundreds of these analogies, and the Wanderer is one of the more powerful. 🌐

"RH," a native of the Los Angeles area, is a writer living among the Kyrgyz of Kyrgyzstan.

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