

Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church

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“Life Forever Changed”

Pietro Salvatore Colombo was born in 1922 in Milan Italy. He was called at a young age to service as a Catholic priest. When he was 24, he was assigned as Priest at the Mogadishu Cathedral in Somalia. This was no surprise, as Southern Somalia was occupied by Italy and there were many Italians in Mogadishu. He was appointed Bishop in 1975.

The Somali government of President Siad Barre did not tolerate proselytizing but was comfortable with the humanitarian aid dispensed by the Catholic Church. Bishop Colombo was well regarded by non-Catholics, both Muslim and secular, for his pragmatic oversight of aid projects, making sure that aid projects could operate after the foreign aid workers went home.

I used to work there with the Mennonite Central Committee. We had 5 North American workers providing services to in refugee camps. On a balmy Sunday afternoon of July 1989, I was at my home in Mogadishu when I received word from my neighbor that Bishop Colombo was gunned down on the steps of the Mogadishu Cathedral following Sunday prayers. He had served faithfully for 43 years.

President Barre blamed radical Islamists and jailed 4 prominent Muslim leaders. Tensions increased over the next few days and rumors spread that there would be protests following prayers on Friday in response to their detention.

On the following Friday, civilians and government soldiers clashed throughout the city. Over the next two days human rights observers documented that over 400 people died, 1000 injured, and 48 men executed on a public beach the following day without trial or due process. The violence of July 14 became known as “Black Friday” and it marked the first

serious violence since independence in 1960. Our own refugee projects were disrupted and looted and the safety of our Somali and North American workers threatened.

Our North American team flew to Nairobi Kenya where we met with our area director to discuss the future of our work Somalia. After much deliberation, we returned to Somalia to officially close the projects, with the intent that someday a team could return in some capacity of peacemaking.

I share this story because Father Rob encourages us to find our story in scripture. When I observe passion week, my thoughts go to that one week in July, where life in Somalia changed in a matter of 5 days and for me personally.

When I read this gospel in John, I see my story and I relate to people in Jerusalem who found themselves in political turmoil and religious crossroads, as I experienced in Somalia.

The prophecy in our Old Testament reading, Isaiah 54:8 "By a perversion of Justice, he was taken away" was about the manner in which Jesus would die.

The military government in Somalia carried out a miscarriage of justice, defined by the failure of the judicial system, especially one in which a person is convicted of a crime for which they are not guilty.

Finally, I learned that life's direction can be forever changed in a few short days. Father Rob reminded us a few weeks ago in his sermon how COVID shut down our nation in a matter of days and altered our lives for months. And today, many of us find ourselves living in a rapid rate of political and cultural change, challengin our ideas of what it means to be a nation and a Christian.

When I think of lives forever changed, the first person I think of in today's Gospel is Peter. Jesus predicts that Peter will deny him 3 times. Peter can't conceive of a situation where that would be and yet he does deny Jesus three times. And Peter wept bitterly. And yet Jesus fulfilled his promise to

Peter in Matthew 16:18, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church". A life forever changed.

I think of the women who accompanied Mary his mother to the place of the cross. I imagine they felt helpless but they took the brave step to accompany their friend to sit with her to mourn with her as she watched her son pass into glory. A few days later, the women went to the tomb, only to find it empty, among the first people to know of Jesus' resurrection. Lives forever changed.

Recorded in the book of Luke is the story of a criminal sentenced to die with Jesus, he knows that Jesus is the son of God. He turns to Jesus and says, "remember me when you enter your Kingdom". Jesus responds, "I tell you this day, you shall be with me in paradise". Life has forever changed.

As for me, I returned to the United States, without a job, and not knowing where I would live or what I would do next. With the help and encouragement of family and friends, I forged a new path, and along that path, I married, Paul. My life forever changed.

If you find it challenging to focus on the passion story, or if you find that your own personal story in scripture eludes you, I invite you in these last few hours of Lent, to meditate on a time when your life was forever changed.

Whether you view it through a theological lens or a personal one, there is something meaningful to pause amid a busy day and look back at the mountains you've climbed and the valleys you've walked through.

A life forever changed is not defined only by loss or crisis, though those are often catalysts. A life changed is defined by awareness. Looking back, it is easy to beat ourselves up mentally, and only see our failures, self-doubt, or guilt. In my situation, I can now remember that Somali experience by circling back to that time, and I now look at it with a new level of awareness. Rather than giving in to sadness, or second guessing the decisions of our team, I have expanded my capacity to hold the past.

A life forever changed is not a ruined one. It is a rewritten one. Life's turning points—both the triumphal entries and the heavy crosses—transform us.

When life changes us—through loss, growth, suffering, or awakening—we are no longer who we once were. There's strength that comes from knowing that the difficult chapters weren't the end of the story.

God's desire is not for our perfection, but for our presence. God longs to meet us as we are now and continue the journey with us.