

From That Great Cloud of Witnesses

Mark 8:31–38; Hebrews 12:1-2

Ken Bechtel, February 25, 2024

Our Scriptures this morning speak about our taking up the cross, about the encouragement we can garner from that “great cloud of witnesses” as we focus our attention on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

For the last year and a bit, I have had the privilege of serving as the editor for the Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian. As a Swiss derived Menno, these stories of Saskatchewan Mennonites and their faith forebears are, for the most part, not the stories of my own biological forebears. But I have the privilege of gathering and being the first reader of stories about people who have taken up the cross, people now a part of that “great cloud of witnesses” pointing us to the example of Jesus.

Our library now has a subscription, starting with the Christmas 2023 issue, and I have placed copies of the other 3 issues I have edited on the counter beside the mailboxes. Those are now being read by someone who will, I am sure, return them for others to read.

I would like to share some stories from this next issue. Last November, my Swiss Info journalist nephew was touring Uzbekistan with his wife and daughter. In the Muslim city of Khiva, their tour guide asked them whether they had ever heard of a people called Mennonites. She promptly walked them over to Khiva’s Mennonite Museum, a collection dedicated to the memory of the contributions made by the Mennonites of Ak Mechet, Uzbek for the White Mosque. Dale does not consider himself a Mennonite, though as a Swiss journalist he has reported on the rich Anabaptist Mennonite history in his adopted country. Dale sent me a short article and a rich trove of pictures from that museum, some of which will find their way into the next issue.

Last Sunday, we talked about starting the Lenten journey. These Mennonites en route to Uzbekistan knew more about difficult cross bearing journeys than any of us would dare imagine. Five wagon trains set out from southern Russia, now Ukraine in the early 1880s, on a many months long perilous journey. Their trek was triggered by the Russian Tsar’s relinquishing Mennonite military exemption and some end times thinking about Christ returning in the east. Their trek took them over deserts, mountains and wide rivers, and the scourges of disease and murderous bandits. The first wagon train of ten families buried 11 children en route.

Audrey would say that I have become obsessed with tracing Saskatchewan connections to this story. Thus far, I have found 6 families with descendants who came to this province, and 14 who themselves were children or youth on that trek. Among them were David Toews, the Mennonite Moses for the 1920s migration from Russia, Lois Klaassen’s grandparents Jacob and Katherina Toews Klaassen, and Elizabeth Unruh Schultz, a fourteen year old who noted her vivid observations in her diary. Elizabeth’s descendants have been leaders in both Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren circles.

One of the remarkable stories Elizabeth Unruh recorded was about John Drake, a young German with serious psychiatric and ethical issues who attached himself to their wagon train. But Elizabeth tells another Drake story. There had been a robbery, a murder and the attempted kidnapping of the dead man’s wife. To quote Elizabeth, “When (a group of villagers) rounded the mountain, there were all the bandits, dividing what they had stolen. Our men went towards them, with my Uncle Peter Unruh in the lead... He called out: Your thieves and murderers, what are you doing? They had called out in surprise, and surrounded Uncle Peter, fifty men...

They ordered Uncle to kneel down, and pray to God if he wished to, for they were going to shoot him right away, because he had called them thieves and murderers....

Ours all stood in a circle and begged them to let Uncle Peter go, but they would not listen. Uncle had been on his knees praying to God for help (and begging) them to let him go, for he had a wife and children who needed him. They had said "no" and raised their rifles to shoot, when John Drake stepped out of our group, picked up Uncle, put his arms around him, and said "Brother, I will die for you." He turned to the thieves and said, "If you do not have enough in the death of one man, then take me in place of this man. For there is no one who will miss me or cry for me. My parents are both dead. I am alone, and I am willing to die for this man, for he has a wife and small children who care." They said "That we cannot do for our religion does not allow it, and it is also against our conscience. Go away and let us quickly kill this man who called us thieves and murderers."

Drake kept Uncle in his arms and said "My life for his." The band were surprised. Drake did not waver in his decision. The bandits murmured to each other, lowered their guns, stepped apart and said "We grant you both your freedom and your life." They got on their horses and rode away."

In the next issue we tell a bit more of the story of that Trek and about Ak Mechet, the White Mosque, a story about Mennonites who lived for half a century among the Muslim majority in Khiva Uzbekistan. They are remembered with gratitude for their contributions to agriculture, photography and cinematography, their fine parquet floors. The Muslim Imam goes out to the Mennonite cemetery each spring for the annual blessing of the seed, for these were the people who taught them better ways to farm.

As Ahmet Şeyhun, Professor of Islamic/Middle Eastern History, University of Winnipeg, wrote in a review of an important book on this story, it "demonstrate(s) how the peaceful and industrious Mennonites established, while remaining true Christians, a mutual understanding with Muslims and built exemplary relationships with them."

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, ... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."