

Two churches: John 17:1-11; Acts 1:6-14

## **I kept losing track of what I was going to say next. Yet it may have been my best sermon.**

by [Michael W. Spangler](#) in the [May 5, 1999](#) issue

Two churches in Moscow. One Baptist, one Orthodox. One buried in an inner-city neighborhood, one sitting out in a muddy suburb. Neither one with any exterior beauty. Yet both are indelible chapters in my faith story.

As an American Protestant chaplain, I was a guest at the Baptist church many times. On one of my first visits I attended a small midmorning prayer service for the pastors and other staff. At one point they turned to me and asked me to preach on the text which had just been read. For a manuscript preacher it was a homiletic free fall. The memory of it still dampens my palms.

Part of my panic was a certain humility, probably a false humility. How could a privileged American Christian have anything of value to say to those who were suffering for their faith in God? But I discovered that they did not dwell on their suffering; rather, it was Christ's suffering that they placed at the center of their prayers and their community life. They were inviting me to join them in the joy of sharing in that suffering.

My few words that morning are forgotten--though perhaps they do live on in some KGB tape archive. But from that visit and other visits I began to see the great joy of faith. These Baptists never wanted worship to end: there might be four sermons, several anthems and innumerable hymns. Sometimes a large group was presented for baptism. After more than two hours, still they lingered. And they did this six times a week.

God was centering them in Christ, crucified and risen. Centering them thoroughly and often. Beset by anxieties I could not even imagine, they accepted the invitation to cast their anxieties on God. Many years later I still am learning from the fierce joy of their worship and their humble and disciplined sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

I also hear the echoes of their responses to a brief sermon I preached in their church just before my three years in Moscow ended. It was during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and I, along with the American Roman Catholic chaplain and a priest from the Russian Orthodox Church, had been invited to speak and worship with them. This time I was finally able to string a few Russian words together and didn't have to depend on their pastor to translate for me.

In a remarkable way, there was no distance between preacher and people. The love for their Lord Jesus was so vibrant, shining in their upturned faces, and their eagerness for any word I might bring in his name was so intense, that we were "one in him."

And no rhetorical questions hung in the air unanswered--they shouted a reply to everything I said. Every pause in my sermon was filled with their cries of praise to God, and laughing encouragement for my elementary Russian phrases. When I brought a greeting from my congregation, they thundered a "preeviyet" in return. I was startled each time, and kept losing track of what I was going to say next. Yet it may have been my best sermon, because we preached it together.

The frost was just coming out of the ground on Easter Eve 1977. I parked along the unpaved street some distance from the small Orthodox church and carefully made my way through the mud and the darkness. I could sense the crowd gathered up ahead of me. As I got close enough so they could see me, the "welcoming committee," mostly teenagers, began a familiar ritual. I had experienced it other Easters, and also on Yom Kippur outside the Moscow Synagogue. Insults and laughter accompanied me the last hundred yards to the double doors of the church.

I passed inspection by the "church police," who tried to determine if I was there to make trouble, and then pushed through the people standing tightly packed together. Finally I reached a side door in the icon screen and found the priest to whom I had talked earlier on the phone. He had said I would be welcome to come "backstage" and spend the Easter vigil and liturgy with the priests near the altar.

The Old Testament readings of the vigil continued for several hours. Then, just before midnight, the congregation began preparing for the procession around the church. The priest asked me if I would join them, and told me not to worry, that "they" had assured him that this year there would be more control over the crowd.

"They" were correct. Nothing was thrown at the procession except the same laughing taunts we'd heard before. Having circled the church in our ritual search for the body of Jesus, we came back to the front doors. They opened at the demand of the priest--"Lift up your heads, O ye gates"--and we plunged into a blaze of Easter candles as the liturgy of the resurrection began.

Part of the liturgy required that the priest wear vestments in all the different colors of the church seasons, each in turn. As I watched them behind the scenes, the priest and his helper opened one closet after another, trying to find the color the priest was supposed to wear next. One moment they would be almost collapsing in laughter, and the next the priest would go back before the congregation in hastily composed dignity.

True to Orthodox theology of worship, that shabby church on a muddy road with the shroud of midnight wrapped around it was the site of an ascension into heaven. The colors shone like a rainbow covenant, the candles were the light that the darkness has not overcome, and heaven and earth kissed each other in a laughing embrace that must be a blessed glimpse of that glad moment when Christ's glory will be revealed.