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Amanuel Ethiopian Evangelical Church: “My trip to church”

by Rihana Ahmed

When i was a little girl, my mother used to take me to church. I didn't know much about God or why we had to go church, but i was always happy to tag along. Going to church felt like a holiday to me. I liked the festivities that surrounded the event. My mother was a christian and my dad, a muslim. I was stuck in between. My parents never pressured me to choose, much to my relief. I currently don't follow any belief system but someday, i hope to understand enough so that i can choose one that i'm passionate about.

Since my mother's death in 2002, i never stepped a foot in a church. I avoided it. Until almost two weeks ago on october 25, 2015. During my visit home to Alexandria, VA, i asked my neighbour, Saba, a devout christian, if she can take me to church with her on Sunday. As long as i've known her, Saba never missed sunday service.

On the day of the service. I woke up at 8am in the morning and got ready for church. Saba and her family wore a traditional Ethiopian clothing since we were going to an Ethiopian church. I didn't have a traditional Ethiopian clothing so i settled for a simple skirt and blouse. We got to Amanuel Ethiopian Evangelical Church (AEEC) - on 5411 Franconia Road, Alexandria, VA 22310 - at around 9:30am.

The architectural features of this church resembled a lot of churches i've seen. The off white colour of the building contrasted

beautifully against the backdrop of the autumn trees. The parking lot wasn't that big so we had to park on the street and walk to the church. In front of the church was a small billboard that welcomed worshippers with the quote “Seek the Lord and live, Amos 5:6.”

As we neared the entrances, we were greeted by two volunteers who encouraged us to go inside and handed out the sermon of the day. Unfortunately for me, it was written in Amharic. Everyone who attended the church were Ethiopian. They greeted each other in Amharic with a hug and kissed each other once on both cheeks. Here at the church, everyone was treated with the same respect. There was no distinction between social classes. Most of the attendants were adults ranging from early 20's to late 60's. There were a couple of youths and very few children's. The overall number of worshippers was staggering. Every inch of the seats inside the church was occupied. I was surprised by how comfortable i felt despite being underdressed. My neighbour Saba stayed with me throughout the whole service.

Once inside, we walked down the aisle with rows and rows of long, wooden benches on both sides. The huge stage upfront was decorated by a maroon curtain on all sides. A statue of Jesus on a cross and A statue of Mary stood on both sides of the podium. Candles flickered, creating a warm and peaceful atmosphere. One by one, people took their seats.

Almost everyone was covered in white, traditional garment. I felt a little ashamed of my mismatched blouse and skirt. Pastor Samuel approached the podium. Sunday service was about to begin.

Pastor Samuel began the sermon in Amharic. After welcoming everyone, the pastor thanked the Lord for gathering everyone at the church. He began by singing from the booklet that was handed out at the beginning of the sermon. Everyone in the church began singing along in a harmonious tune. The atmosphere was emotional. People sang with pure rapture. Most have their eyes closed because they have memorized the whole song. I stood with them to show my respect although i didn't understand the song. I didn't speak Amharic.

After the song was done, the pastor praised God once more and delved into his lecture about "The Grace of the Lord." The pastor spoke, his voice rising and winding down at the different sections of the lecture. His voice rang with emotion and authority when he talked about sin and forgiveness. Once in awhile, the pastor would look at the audience and ask questions (i believed they were rhetorical questions since no one answered them), he asked why it was so hard for people to pray, to really set aside a time for prayer. He talked about Satan and how he guides people away from the righteous path. He asked everyone to pray as much as they can so they don't fall for the satan's tricks.

I was able to understand all of this because my Neighbor was explaining them to me - lowering her voice as not to disturb anyone. The lecture went on for a little while. Pastor Samuel closed the ceremony with another song. Again, everyone stood and sang together.

This song was more upbeat. People clapped and swayed to the song.

After the ceremony was closed, everyone mingled in the lobby. Kids ran around and the youths stood in a corner huddled together. My neighbor introduced me to few of her friends. They asked about my assignment and jokingly told me to write good things about them. We got in our car and drove home. I profusely thanked my neighbour and walked into my house, happy to have been part of something so spiritual and heightening. •

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