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Ebenezer Baptist Church

by Janis Woodward

On Sunday, September 13th, 2015, I visited the Ebenezer Baptist Church. The Ebenezer Baptist Church is located on 13020 Telegraph Road Woodbridge, VA 22192. This institution's denominational affiliation is Baptist/Christian. The service started at exactly 10 AM and lasted one hour and thirty minutes. The service was led by Reverend Charles A. Lundy. The deacon is Albert Hardy.

The Ebenezer Baptist Church is a very large building situated on a big green hill, with trees to the left and the busy road to the right of it. This service was held on the outside of the building instead of the inside. As I walked up this large hill I heard the chatter of joyous conversations and outgoing happy people. I attended this service with a friend; therefore I was introduced to many strangers willing to meet me. There was a lovely set up on the side of the church with chairs and a tent to sit under to hide from the sun's beating rays. I was greeted with a fan to fan myself and a smile. Everyone grabbed a seat and offered to save seats for their friends and family and then the service began.

The Ebenezer Baptist Church's community consists prevalently of African Americans. There were only a handful of Caucasian Americans who attended the service, me included. The attendees were all dressed very fashionable, some wearing avant-garde church hats, which I found to be very palatable. The ages of the people ranged from 6 year olds

to 16 year olds to 60 year olds. There was an equal amount of women and men for the most part and most of the community members came with their entire family. It was a very family oriented, big crowd. More people came than expected and there was a shortage of chairs, but people did not mind standing for the duration of the service.

I was very comfortable at this service for various reasons. I was with my friend and her family so I did not feel so alone. They made me feel very welcome. If I was alone, I am positive that I would still feel as welcomed as I did with my friend. Another reason for my comfortableness was the fact that the church service was held outside. The sun and the air felt good on my skin and I could tell that everyone around me was enjoying the amazing weather as much as I was; all of the women occasionally fanning themselves when the sun became a little too strong. Many people who attended offered welcoming hands to me into their community. They encouraged me to join in other activities they had such as retreats and cookouts—they encouraged me to come again and I would not mind doing so.

As I approached this church on top of a hill, I wondered what the experience would be like and if it would make a lasting impact on my religious and spiritual identity. I wondered if the community members would like me. Would they accept me? The climb to the top of the hill created suspense and wonder as to

what was awaiting for me at the top. I finally reached the top and I was not let down. I could hear the hum of gospel sounds; I could feel the uplifted joyous energy surrounding me. I could see so much culture and so much joy radiating from the people around me. I felt a sense of togetherness and community and I felt as if I belonged, even though the color of my face was different than almost all who had attended. The service was held outside and there were microphones and pianos and a gospel choir—it was grand. I felt such a different energy at this church in comparison to a Catholic mass. It was almost as if I was at a concert and not at a church service. The people in the audience were not afraid to voice their love of God out loud as the reverend spoke. I was in complete awe.

The whole service was very dramatic and emotionally intense from start to finish. The reverend spoke in a rhythmic tone. He held so much emotion in his words that I could feel the struggle, the sadness, the hope, the happiness, and the faith in every sentence that flowed out of his mouth. He spoke of being saved and he spoke of love and faith and it was moving to say the least. The congregational participation was reserved during prayers as a common courtesy, but very emotionally involved during the pastor's preaching. I could tell the people in the audience were moved from Rev. Charles A. Lundy's words; hearing an occasional "amen!" coming from the crowd. Between prayers and the reverend's preaches, came the hymns. There was a choir set up on stage and they sang and danced to upbeat gospel hymns. The congregation all stood up and clapped and sang along as much as their heart desired. I clapped and swayed alongside my friend as we listened to the beautiful songs. The choir was impassioned, rhythmic,

and spiritual. I could feel the culture and the emotion with every note. The music revealed a history, with its blues and soul roots from the Deep South. The gospel music spoke of a journey to an unknown destination and it spoke of the power of faith and community. The preaching and the songs were full of spontaneity and excitement. The service ended with a final prayer and final words to encourage the congregation to "have a wonderful and blessed day".

Some of the symbols I saw represented the African American culture more so than the Baptist religion itself. Because the service was held outside, fans were passed out to all the attendees. One thing that really stuck with me was what was printed on the fans. There was an abstract African American painting on it. The painting consisted of black women and consisted of blue and red and orange swirls in the background. The message of the painting was beautiful, yet depressing. It assisted in representing black culture. The painting portrayed the fight for equality and peace among African Americans. Perhaps religion acted as a savior in the trying times of inequality, discrimination, and prejudice. The reverend himself was wearing a very traditional African Dashiki shirt, which was vibrant in colors and spirits. The people I saw acted as symbols of the religion. They were all full of passion and spirituality it was moving and symbolic. They all symbolized what a religion's purpose is and that purpose is love and hope. What I learned from this service was that their religion cultivated a joyous community. Their mission was about helping one's fellow brother and sister and being very accepting even in the crazy world we live in today. The reverend gave no doubts about the ability for anyone to be saved. Other common symbols such as

the cross and the bible were apparent as well; most brought their own bible.

To conclude such an enlightening and entertaining experience what better way to do it then have a cookout? There was a cookout scheduled right after the service, with barbeque and chicken and fish. It was the perfect way to end the day. I lined up to get all kinds of good comfort food and desert. I spoke to many outgoing people in line and had very light heartening conversation with everyone around me. Music played in the background as we ate our food. From start to finish, from the passionate preacher to the sweet strawberry shortcake, the whole experience was very jovial and fascinating. Did I come to a revelation about my own religion and spirituality? I am still very ambiguous on the subject, but I did come to the conclusion that community and hope and faith are keys to happiness. •

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