

The hostel, called „At the End of the Desert“, was nearly empty. Only one table was taken, so the three people sitting there immediately attracted a newcomer’s attention. They seemed to be very tired and had a weary look. Two men and a woman in the long and dark robes of Bedouins.

There was a big round flatbread in the middle of the table; next to it was a water jug and a small alabaster jar, filled with a lovely smelling oil. After having finished their meal, they started a lively conversation, which again and again was interrupted by long periods of contemplative silence.

“How on earth”, the one whose name was **Elija** asked, “did we have the idea to talk about God? I can’t remember...”

“Somehow you always end up talking about God when you start reflecting on your life”, the other, whose name was **Jacob**, grumbled.

“It is not ‘always’, as you claim it, not in everybody’s life”, the woman, sitting at the table as well, contradicted. Her name was **Hagar**.

“It took quite a long time,” she continued, “until it became clear to me, that God had a plan for my life. What could I expect as a slave-girl! Of course, Abraham and Sarah, whom I served, talked about God all the time. To be honest, I would have preferred to be treated fairly instead of being taught about God all the time. Providing a baby for Abraham, because Sarah was barren, that was all I was good enough for. **Hagar’s** voice became bitter and quiet.

“And when the ‘great Madam’ couldn’t bear me and my son any longer, she simply drove me away into the desert.

Imagine: A slave-girl all alone, abandoned, in the desert! If tears weren’t salty, I could have survived on drinking my tears.

„Desert – oh, yes. I too remember my experiences!“, **Elija** agreed.

“That is where I had ended up as well. I had been so successful and prosperous before... I never would have believed how fast one can collapse when one becomes too arrogant. I only wanted to die. I tell you, I definitely was fed up. Desert – oh, yes, I was in the desert. And my soul was a desert, too.“

His voice was trembling. Then he fell silent.

„Isn't it strange?“, **Jacob** came forward. “Somehow all of us have been running away. I am not keen on telling too much about my story. Just, that I had betrayed my brother and my father and therefore had to run from home. Desert – yes, there is enough about it in my story too. Cold and lonesome nights. A stone as a pillow. And being afraid of where my path was going to lead me...” **Jacob** sat back and closed his eyes.

There was silence around the table. Elija took a sip of water out of the jug. Hagar broke a piece of bread from the loaf.

“This piece of bread which is in your hands right now, Hagar,” Elija went on with the conversation, “this piece of bread saved me. I had totally lost my sense of time, when I slept under the broom tree. Suddenly I felt something touching my shoulder. A strange person was standing near me, saying: ‘Get up and eat, otherwise your journey will be too much for you.’ I had no idea where this person with bread and water came from. As fast as the person had arrived, he then disappeared again.

Arriving at Mount Sinai many weeks later, I suddenly realized: It must have been God's angel. What a soft contact. As soft as the wind out of which God spoke to me: ‘Get up. Don't give up. I need you. Return back. I will be with you!’

Today I only can say: What a friendly God. Soft enough for me to bear. A God like bread and water. And exactly at the right time.”

„Similar to me but with water“, **Hagar** interrupted him. “I also met such a stranger. It was in the middle of the desert, too. I also was at a loss. Then a stranger appeared to me, too. It must have been an angel sent by God. God who had seen me, me, the slave-girl. God is the living one who sees me.

Otherwise I would have died long ago!”

Jacob got up and paced up and down the room. He limped a little bit.

Finally, he said: “In my life it wasn't that friendly all the time. But it was my own fault. Once I had a very strange dream. A ladder reaching to heaven. But not for me. When I woke up the other morning, I still had this nighttime voice in my ears: ‘Don't be afraid, for I will not

leave you'. I will not forget *this* sentence for the rest of my life. That was God's promise to me.

In remembrance of that night, I set up a stone for a pillar and poured oil over the top of it. It will help me keep in mind God's promise."

Before **Jacob** sat down, another little detail came to his mind.

"Years later", he started again, "there was another dark and serious night. The night before I met my brother again for the first time after I had betrayed him. My limping is a leftover of that night. I don't want to tell you more about it now.

Besides that: God really is a friendly God, although he stood in my way from time to time. In the end, every encounter with him turned out to be helpful.

Somehow you always end up talking about God", **Jacob** grumbled again.

"Thank God".

The conversation around the table went on. They ordered some more flatbreads and jugs with fresh water.

Whoever listened to them could hear some scraps of this conversation, like:

"...friendly, angel, blessing, get up, never alone, unbelievable..."

Hundreds of years later, - meanwhile the hostel's name had changed to "The everlasting fountain" - the table was taken again. Five, six people were sitting there having an intense conversation. There was a big round flatbread in the middle of the table, next to a water jug and a small alabaster jar, filled with a lovely smelling oil.

Again: whoever listened to them could hear some scraps of this conversation, like: "Blessing, friendly, walking upright, leftover twelve baskets of bread, incredible, everyone had enough, No, I am not exaggerating, they left without throwing a single stone, he forgave me, for the first time in my life I was able to see something, I had to anoint his feet, so grateful,..."

This conversation around the table went on for hours, too.

Before they got up and left, one of them added: “How friendly God is. I only realized when I met Jesus for the first time. Of course, I was familiar with the old stories of Elija, Hagar and Jacob and so on... However, that’s long ago. That God is still the same, friendly as ever, I only learnt when I met Jesus. If you allow me to tell it this way: If God has a face, it has to look like the one of Jesus...” He nearly whispered the last words, before he got up to look for his bedroom.

In 2017 the hostel still exists.

The tables are more or less taken. Meanwhile the name on the signpost next to the entrance door says:

“Philippuskirche” or “Peace Church”, and the hostel is part of an organization with lots of agencies all around the world. The names on the signposts sound very similar wherever they are located.

Whenever you need a place to rest or to talk to someone else, whenever you are just curious about what they are talking and singing, you are at the right place.

People from all around the world are sitting or standing around a big table. There is bread on this table, and a jug too. And you can hear scraps of a conversation, like: “...friendly, home away from home, promise, I am not alone, pray for me, safe, so grateful...”

I am sure: As soon as you enter this hostel, someone will offer you a seat: “You are welcome, sit down, rest and join our community!”

And you will listen to stories about how many different faces God has. Hagar has met God. Jacob as well. But in a different way. Elijah in yet another way. But one thing remains the same: God’s face is an extraordinary friendly face.

Always facing his people.

You are in the midst of the story.

In these hostels, you will feel how much you are a part of this story. You will feel that God has an extraordinary friendly face. Full of grace and love – for you.

Wherever you may find a bread on a table, next to a jug of water or wine...it is an invitation to start a conversation.

For somehow you always end up talking about... .. God.