

A Lenten Journey

Lent. A time of preparation for Easter. A time of fasting. A time of journeying. In the past, a frequently asked question among my peers has been “So what did you give up for Lent?” or “What have you added to your routine for Lent?” Questions such as these emphasize a subtle, underlying truth. This time is different, set apart for a special... a holy... purpose.

No one asked me these questions this year. In fact, within our Mambis congregation, Lent was hardly mentioned. There were no soup suppers. No ashes to adorn one’s head and provide remembrance of mortality. No solemn, if not dirge-like, hymns. No elimination of the “Alleluia” from worship. No changing of the liturgical colors. So much of my experience this year deviated from my past. Yet this verity remained: Lent *was* different, set apart for a holy purpose.

One Sunday, early into Lent, the youth and I convened after church to decide what, if anything, we would like to add to this year’s Holy Week festivities. I had heard rumors that in the previous year Holy Week had elapsed somewhat “under the radar”. In fact, my missionary friends could hardly even remember it happening. To them, it had seemed an ordinary week, without much prominence or extraordinary celebration. As many who know me will attest, Holy Week is my favorite holiday season. I treasure its emotional journey—the highs, the lows, the mystery it entails. Therefore, I found the thought of the week passing by unnoticed unsettling, if not distressing. I prayed that this year’s remembrance would not suffer the same fate as the previous year. Yet, on this afternoon in February, as we discussed drama options and I saw the look of excitement gleaming in the eyes of the youth, something told me this year would be different.

The decision as to *which* aspects of the Easter story to present, however, was not one easily resolved. Holy Week is truly rich in poignant stories and imagery. Thankfully, after some discussion, the youth reached a consensus. Three dramas: the garden of Gethsemane and Jesus’ arrest on Maundy Thursday, Jesus before Pilate and the crucifixion on Good Friday, and John’s account of the two disciples and Mary Magdalene at the tomb on Easter Sunday.

We then moved to the selection of a language for the dramas, the choices being Pidgin, Engan, or English. After weeks of kibitzing, we finally opted to narrate the dramas in pidgin with a student reading all the parts, and the actors subsequently translating their lines into Engan. Since the Engan and Pidgin services would be joined for Holy Week, this seemed a welcome compromise.

The youth had also already been learning two creative dances to the songs “Above All” and “I Will Bless the Lord.” Yet, they also wanted to learn a few English songs to sing as well, in order that all language groups might be represented. Thus, on a Wednesday afternoon, they again congregated, this time at my house, to browse through my praise music. They finally settled on a song that one of them had heard before in Port Moresby, “In Christ Alone” and a classic hymn, though new to them, “Were You There.” And so, the plan was set and our preparations began...

While the amount of hours necessary to prepare for Holy Week were reminiscent of my years at Valpo and in my home congregation, the rehearsals themselves were undeniably Engan. It became our custom that the kids would designate a few days each week during which they thought they could meet after school. Each week they would resolve to meet at “3pm”. I would soon learn that in “PNG time,” 3pm merely indicates that arriving before 4 or 4:30pm is utterly

futile. With this lesson learned, each rehearsal day would begin with me wandering the market in the late afternoon, looking for someone with a key to the gate and church itself. Once the church was unlocked, I would wait, usually for about an hour and half, for the kids to get the word out that, yes, there would be a practice today. Without access to clocks and phones, information is slow moving, traveling mainly by foot and mouth. Though long, I rarely felt that this wait was a waste of my time. Usually, I would take this as an opportunity to read, talk with and show pictures to the kids who did show up, or learn new tambourine routines from them. It was during this time that faces began to have names, and the names began to have memories and stories attached to them.

Following this time of fellowship, usually lasting until 5:30 or 6pm, we would have a rehearsal... that is, *if* enough of them showed up. If not, the few that were there would make the executive decision of when we would make another attempt... Perhaps the following day or the day after. I would then return to the Lutz's house to vent my irritation, my Western sense of time once more emerging. Yet, as the season progressed, my need for control lessened and I began to experience a bit more ease in the garden of ambiguity. And ambiguity was truly in full bloom...

We never had every character show up for single rehearsal, thus leading to about three understudies per part. Even the role of Jesus changed every few weeks, days or sometimes hours. The three crosses, constructed by some of the boys, made their first appearance on Maundy Thursday. The rest of the props, what little we used, only ever arrived the hour before the drama presentation. Furthermore, the dances had to be cut—the first, when the tape deck on which the music was to be played broke the week before and no replacement could be found, and the second, as the Easter Monday service was cancelled the day of the service. The Easter Sunday drama also was almost cut when it was announced on Palm Sunday that the Governor would be joining our congregation for Easter. The “Bigmen” of our community immediately arranged for an outdoor service to accommodate the multitudes that would come to see him. They had a pavilion built and the Mambis area tidied, and organized the “program,” which conveniently left out the youth drama. I did not discover this “oversight” until the service itself. The feisty side of Linda came out when I realized what had happened. I approached the side of the pavilion during the offering and insisted that the youth be given space for the drama they had been preparing for weeks. Thankfully “the powers that be” complied, and the youth presented the only hint of gospel in the whole service (The sermon was based on Second Samuel 6 and more political and law-oriented than expressive of Easter joy). Such is the life in Enga. Full of surprising twists.

Yet, remarkably, the surprises *didn't* detract from my celebration of Holy Week. In fact, many of the surprises gave added charm and meaning to my Holy week remembrances... The realization that in every drama the amount of “extras” had multiplied since rehearsals- more soldiers, more crowd, more disciples. If only the number of disciples increased at that speed and magnitude in real life!... The youth who laid down a cardboard box with flowers on it to depict the “garden” of Gethsemane... Jesus, being a bit over-eager, almost taking the cross right into Pilate's courtroom... The five-year-old brother of Mokosata (Jesus) who started sobbing when Jesus was nailed to the cross... The girls inviting me to play tambourine with them during the Easter service... The disciple, who having forgotten to give his offering during the designated time, deciding that the time when he knelt down to look at the cloth in the tomb was a ripe opportunity to slip his offering into the basket, unnoticed by all (except me) ...the joy and excitement on the youths' faces when the governor praised their drama in his remarks...the

moment when one of the youth referred to me as “our teacher”... these are the memories I will carry with me. These are the moments that have imprinted themselves on my heart.

So what did I give up for Lent? Some might say time. Others, my sense of control. Or maybe it was my perceptions of what a “good” Easter drama entails. Yet, perhaps this is the wrong question altogether. Perhaps, the more significant question for me is “What did you receive this Lent?” To which I would reply, tears of joy shining in my eyes and a thousand memories flashing through my brain, “A community.” This Lent I received a vision of the body of Christ at work. I saw peace in the midst of chaos, joy in the midst of pain, gratitude in the midst of want, and an unconditional love that transcended it all. I pray that in all my future journeys, Lenten or otherwise, I may never forget these gifts of grace.