

Advent 1- Season of New Beginnings

See through my eyes, hear through my ears, know my thoughts...

Nine-thirty, and I sit in the Lutz's kitchen warming myself with coffee and oatmeal. I have not yet escaped the chill of the morning, but rapidly the sun is warming the earth and I can tell that it will be another beautiful day. I am dressed in my best, which is not much distinguished from my daily wear. A skirt, flip-flops, a loose-fitting blouse, hair down at my shoulders and pulled away from my face by a headband.

Five minutes until ten. Shouldn't we be leaving? I thought church was scheduled to begin at ten. Yet, the Lutz's no longer experience my Western sense of time. There is no rush. We begin our brief trek from the house, around the front of the hospital, down the hill, and through the fence to the right. To my surprise, many people are yet scattered about on the lawn, enjoying the morning sun. We walk around the building and enter the front of the haus lotu (church), a small building made of corrugated metal and identified by a large tinted window in the shape of a cross. Upon entering, my eyes gradually adjust to the dim light. A woven grass covers the walls and ceiling, and front walls are adorned by various posters, pictures, and banners, many of which are handmade and placed with little semblance of order. Before me, I notice the traditional marks of church, an altar surrounded by a few banisters, a wooden pulpit. About a dozen rows of wooden pews solemnly stand at attention, six to the right and six to the left. Yet I spy only a few individuals speckling the seats. Where are the people? Apparently still out on the lawn. Ten o'clock indeed.

I sit and gaze around me, appreciating the subtle ruminations of the keyboardist to the left. He does not read music, but his fingers know this electronic keyboard well. A few of the tunes are recognizable even to a foreigner like myself. Five minutes pass, ten and twenty. People trickle in, gathering momentum with each new person. Finally the service begins.

The pastor, ever speaking tok pisin (pidgin), welcomes us and directs us to the first song in the Lotu Buk (worship book). I recognize it is an advent hymn, yet only the words of hymns are present in this book and cannot recall the melody. Apparently I am not the only one. The room goes mute in confusion. The pastor shifts uncomfortably. "Does anyone know this hymn?" he asks, hoping that someone might begin it. Eventually, perceiving that none make direct eye contact, he selects another, which he begins to sing with a noticeable hesitancy. After two lines, we catch on to the supposed key, and off we go. On the second verse, the accompanist likewise discovers the chosen key. I know the tune and am able to appropriately place the pidgin words, attempting to translate as I go.

The worship continues with an air of familiarity. Invocation. Confession and Absolution. Readings. Sermon. Creed. Lord's prayer. All ringing with Lutheran liturgical heritage. Thankfully, because my pidgin is not entirely cohesive, I am at this moment ignorant of certain elements of the liturgy that will later, upon further translation, speak heresy to my ears and cause my Lutheran spidey-senses to tingle.** For today however, ignorance is a blessing, and I take comfort in the recognizable liturgical elements. Though the words of the pidgin prayers and refrains come slowly to my English tongue, they still somehow feed my soul. As the Bible texts are read, I do my best to follow along in the Tok Pisin Bible the Lutz's have graciously allowed me to borrow. I no longer take for granted a single written word. All seem new to me, as if I am reading the text for the first time.

Because the sermon is almost completely unrecognizable to my uninitiated ears, I use the majority of this time to translate and ponder the lectionary texts. Apocalyptic texts. They speak of being ready. Ready for the coming of Christ both as child and king. I am reminded that each of us is also called to become like a child as we prepare for the Christmas child. We learn, and we grow, and we are born anew. I become conscious that, ironically, I feel more like a child since I graduated and came to Papua New Guinea than I have for many years. So much for adulthood. I am beginning realize the extent and necessity of my own reliance on God and others. I continue to ponder the magnitude of all I have to learn, missing the fact that the pastor has concluded his comments. The next hymn calls me out of my meditations.

Thankfully, though the pastor would timidly initiate more songs and chants throughout the service, not all the songs suffer the same fate as the first. Some songs take on a more contemporary nature, with the keyboard programmed to offer a strongly beated and animated accompaniment. Several girls in the front left row add to the song's exuberance with the sound of tambourines. Sadly, I am unable to participate in these more contemporary praises because there is no written text for me to follow. Therefore, I sit back and relish their energy, smiling my own song of praise.

Offering is taken as each person approaches the front to place their gift in the basket. Julie hands me a few kina to give, and I am reminded of the years my parents handed me coins to place in the offering basket. A child again to be sure, I smile.

Then comes Communion. The familiar words are spoken, though not yet entirely familiar to me now. As I approach the table, a rush of emotion engulfs me. I feel tears begin to pool in my eyes, though I will them not to spill out. Here at the table I am home. The family has gathered. At the table, I am linked with the saints of the past, and my grandfather graces my mind. At the table, time and space no longer separate me from my home congregation, friends in Valpo, my family, my parents, my sister. At the table, I am reminded that though I have never seen many of the faces beside me before, they have always shared the table with me. My perception of the body of Christ grows. And in a swallow, I feel the love of a Savior who is with me no matter where I go. "If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there Your hand will guide me, Your right hand will hold me fast" (Psalm 139:9-10).

I return to my seat with prayers of thanksgiving in my heart. The service concludes in song and benediction.

Yet, the service is not truly over until the announcements have taken place. The pastor thanks everyone for coming. Then we give thanks to God for the service that has just taken place through a Trinitarian ritual of three sets of three distinct claps. A few announcements of upcoming events are made. Still reveling in the emotions and observations of the service and not focused enough to comprehend the pidgin, I pay little attention to the announcements, that is, until I hear my name. They are introducing me to the congregation! I put on my most genial smile, until I am stunned by the request that I say something to the congregation. The smile vanishes. Panic seizes me as every word I have ever learned in pidgin scurries into the recesses of my mind, not to be found. Seeing me squirm, Julie leans over and reassures me "It's ok to use English." Ok, I can do this.

I stumble through a quick thank you for their warm welcome and assure them that I will try to learn tok pisin soon. A few people chuckle, and I wonder what they must think of me. Mercifully, the majority of attention is once again turned back to the speaker at the front. Yet, a few remaining eyes catch a glimpse of something they perhaps do not often have the opportunity to observe. A bright red white-skin. My hands fly to my face as I feel the warm rush of blood fill it. I pray that the color I intuitively know is present will soon recede, and do my best to find the humor in my predicament. I find I will never have a shortage of laughter in this land, assuming I can always find the courage to laugh at myself.

As we leave, a multitude of eager hands reach for mine and smiling faces greet me. I smile back. I have received grace. Advent has begun. It is the start of a new year, and a new season begins inside of me.

** Having translated more of the liturgy since that day, I have discovered some nuances that bring sadness to my heart. For example, here is a translation of the Absolution that was spoken by the pastor:

God our Father already has compassion on us. He thinks of his son, Jesus Christ, who suffered pain, died, and rose again. God considers this work Jesus did, and takes away all our sins completely. I am a worker of the church of Christ and in His name, I tell you: If you really turn your heart and believe in him, God takes away all your sins completely. In

the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But, if you don't really turn your heart and believe truly, I tell you in the name of Christ: If you don't want to change your heart and believe, God is not taking away your sin. Later you will die and you will have no more time to turn your heart. And so, if you don't turn your heart quickly, you will get the wages of your evil ways. Mercy of our Savior Jesus Christ, and compassion of the Father God, and peace of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen."

Since when does absolution include threats? How would one know that they have turned their hearts enough or have believed enough to be saved? If I thought my confession had to meet a certain standard in order to receive forgiveness, I think I would perceive little hope in absolution. Such is the case of many Papua New Guineans who feel themselves unworthy to approach the Lord's table. The sentiment expressed in this absolution is not the gospel. It is not good news. Luther himself struggled with despair at not knowing whether he could ever do enough or confess enough to be assured of salvation, that is, until he discovered the power and beauty of the gospel. The gospel speaks of Christ holding us in spite of our failings, and loving us while we were yet sinners. As a beloved Valpo professor once put it, "God loves you, for Christ's sake, and will never let you go."

With liturgies such as this, it is no wonder that there is a confusion of law and gospel in the churches of PNG. Yet, this is the liturgy that is written in the Lotu Buk, and many Papua New Guineans will stand by it and revere it to their graves. In this fervent and perhaps blind devotion to tradition, they prove themselves kin to many of their Lutheran brethren around the world. I pray that our adherence to tradition may never stand in the way of our reception of Christ's love and grace.