

## **As the Spirit Moves in Kwia**

(a.k.a. “How I got one step closer to sainthood”;-)

Last week I journeyed to Kwia, a little village on the other side of the valley.

A little background information: the basis for this trip actually dates back to Holy Week, when my Education/Formation Director, Diane Marten, and her friend Joanna Truemper were here visiting us in Mambis. During a tour of the hospital, one of the mothers who had just given birth surprised us all by asking whether one of the two guests would like to help her name her little boy. Diane and Joanna were both greatly flattered by the request. They finally settled on Trumper, in honor of Joanna’s late husband and former Dean of Theology at Valparaiso University. And thus, two months later, Liz and I arrived at Kwia, where we would serve as Joanna’s representatives at the child’s dedication. Here is the play-by-play, as I have recounted to Joanna...

I would have to say our journey actually began on Wednesday, not because that’s when we actually started traveling, but because two items that are significant to this story took place on that day. One, Liz and I went to Hagen to pick up Sister Ruth Ellen, an ELCA deaconess who teaches at a seminary along the coast. She had come to spend some of her vacation time with us. Two, as part of my preparations for the trip, I made a banana cake. The family had asked if I could bring a sweet treat and I was happy to oblige.

Thursday morning came, and Liz, Ruth Ellen, and I were up by 5:30am. Why were we up so early? Because Bella, the aunt of Baby Trumper, had said she would pick us up at 6am, and because we’re Westerners, meaning we’re typically ready at the time indicated. Silly us. Around 7am, we bid Anton a fond farewell, and he and Julie left for Hagen where he would catch his flight back to the States for furlough. Bella finally showed up around 8:30am. Typical Engan time.

We then had to take a PMV to Kwia. This involved waiting for 30 minutes in Mambis, another 2 hours in Kumbis, another 10 minutes to wait for our vehicle to get fuel, another 5 for our driver to have a smoke break, and then about a 30 minute journey on a big Dinah truck. They put Sister Ruth Ellen and I in the front cab, so we had delightful time hearing all the stories of our driver Wilson. I think our experience was slightly more pleasant than Liz’s, who was seated in the overcrowded back and had a man “accidentally” sit on her lap.

We arrived in Kwia around noon and briefly stopped by the house where we would be spending the night in order to drop off our belongings. I was expecting a kunai (grass) house and pit toilet, so I was absolutely shocked, in the best kind of way, to find that they were hosting us in a beautiful elevated house with a porch. The house itself was incredibly Western. It had two small bedrooms, one of which the three of us had to ourselves—only one bed, but I didn’t mind sleeping on the ground. It also had a living room with chairs, TV, and table... a small bathroom with a real toilet and sink... and a small kitchen—no appliances, but a sink and nice counter/cabinet space. It was lovely. We were told that their uncle was a carpenter and with the help of some of his friends had built this house many years ago. The walls were adorned with some of the political posters of various family members. It’s clear this family is one of prestige and means.

Around 12:30pm, we headed off to lotu (worship). The service was being held in a make-shift church that had been constructed using wood, grass, and green tarps. The church was a new creation just opened 2 days earlier, and the congregation was described to us as a Unity congregation, meaning it was composed of people from a wide variety of denominations—Christian Apostolic Fellowship, AGO, Four Square, Lutheran, etc. This lotu involved music that was amplified by guitar, keyboard, and microphone. Quite loud, spirited

and joyful, with many people dancing along. Subsequently, a preacher spoke in Engan on, of all things, 1 Kings 3:16-28— The story of Solomon’s wisdom regarding the two prostitutes who both claimed to be mother of one child. Bella’s brother, Martin, translated bits for me since it was all in Engan. The preacher spoke of how one woman represented a faith that is dead and the other represented a faith and love that is alive, and God is able to discern the difference. The whole sermon reeked of works righteousness, and I have to say that my “Lutheran spidey-senses” were tingling. However, that sermon inspired many of Liz’s and my actions and talks throughout the rest of the two days, so as a catalyst for speaking about God’s grace, it served a valuable purpose.

After about two and a half hours of lotu, it was picture-taking time. We pretty much became the official camerawomen for those two days. Following our paparazzi moment, we all journeyed down to the river where Trumper’s mother and 7 other men and women would be baptized. The party atmosphere continued as they had carried a small generator and all their electric equipment down with them. The tambourine girls danced. The preachers preached. We all sang. Many picnicked along the riverside, enjoying the sights and sounds.

Finally, it was time for the baptisms. Each person to be baptized spoke briefly about what their lives were like before Christ (smoking, fighting, arguing with parents, etc.) and how all their sins would be washed away in the water. Then, all made their way down the hill to the water. I had never seen a full immersion baptism in a river, and it was quite an inspiring site. The pastor stood waist deep in the water. Those to be baptized dressed in white, looking as sanctified as can be. As each person came out of the water some of the women sprinkled flower petals and all rejoiced. Once all those pre-designated to be baptized were out of the water, we were surprised to discover that one of the women who was just hanging around ran down, longing for baptism as well... The first of the “miracles” that would take place during those two days. It is a beautiful thing to see the Spirit move in the hearts of the people. The pastors gave a final blessing. The crowds moved forward to greet and shed tears of joy with the newly baptized. And to our amusement, the kids quickly stripped down to play in the river. Clearly, the thought that they were playing in the “sin-filled” water didn’t cross their minds, but it did spark laughter in my own.

The baptismal service finished around 5pm. Having not eaten since that morning, we headed back to the house for peanut butter sandwiches and fruit. We spent the next three hours resting up for the night’s activities.

Around 8pm, just before the heavy rains started, we were back under the tarped church for evening worship. They had brought chairs for us to sit on, once again evidencing “white privilege” and the fact that we were honored guests. It was a lively environment and Liz and I were in fact quite giggly, as we made faces at the children from our “stage.” We later forsook the chairs and the attention they afforded and sat on the ground among the people.

We soon discovered that this service was more like an “open mic night” where people could offer music or testimonies. Inspired by some of the “works righteousness” heresies I had heard earlier in the day, I too offered a song as my gift—an English song from my youth, which I described in pidgin and was further translated into Engan.

Only by grace can we enter  
Only by grace can we stand  
Not by our human endeavor  
But by the blood of the Lamb  
Into Your presence you call us  
You call us to come  
Into Your presence You draw us

And now by Your grace we come  
Now by Your grace we come

Bridge: Lord if You marked our transgressions, who could stand?  
Thanks to Your grace, we are cleansed by the blood of the Lamb.

The power went out in the middle of the song, but, according to Liz, it was in that darkness, with no electrical amplification, that the beauty of the music and words really shone forth.

By 10pm, the “open mic” portion was finished. Urged on by a break in the nightly rains and our own exhaustion, we took the offering time as an opportunity to excuse ourselves. We later learned that the service went on for another 2 hours. The stamina people here have for worship is quite remarkable.

We made our way back to the house, where Bella had prepared some rice, chicken, and kumu (similar to steamed salad) for our dinner. After eating, chatting for a while and watching a bit of T.V, we proceeded to our room for the night. I can’t speak for the others, but I was out by 11pm. The floor and cold mountain air clearly did not impede my sleep, as I did not arise from my sleeping bed until 8am the next morning.

When I awoke, the house was filled with family and a crew of 5 or 6 pastors and church leaders from various denominations who had come to visit with us. They asked us to share the story of how Trumper had been named and a bit about Dave Truemper. We also talked theology for a bit. They explained that they dedicate babies as a promise of the parents and community that they will “train up the child in the ways that they should go.” They wait for baptism until the person can understand the meaning of such an act, noting that Jesus wasn’t baptized until age 30. Each person also took the opportunity to once again thank us for being present, and we again shared how honored we felt to be a part of these events.

When the pastors and other guests had left, we went down to a house where the pig was waiting to be killed and cooked for the Dedication Mumu. Bella suggested walking to her sister’s house, but as we walked we soon discovered the roads to be too muddy for walking. By the time we got back, the pig was dead and being prepared for cooking (Looking back, I now believe this to be Bella’s clever ploy, so we wouldn’t have to see the killing. Ruth Ellen seemed a little squeamish.) For the next few hours, we watched as they prepared the pig and the fire, munching on sugar cane in the meantime. We also watched as Trumper grumpily received his bath. Then, we lunched on pork ribs and kumu. Quite delicious.

After washing up at the house, it was time to head back down to the church. To our amusement, they took with us the banana cake I had made as a gift to the family and the cinnamon buns and rolls Julie had sent along in case we needed emergency rations. Upon inquiry, we were told they were going to be shared with all the children and Bella asked that I cut the cake in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I begrudgingly agreed, never having cut a cake in God’s holy name, but knowing that this desire to do all things, even the distribution of cake, in the name of the Trinity is very cultural. Anyway, they took the baked goods to the church. I knew this was a solemn occasion, but I had to laugh when upon arrival our gifts were placed under a fine linen at the front of the church.

The service began and thankfully the dedication was towards the beginning of the service. They had Liz and I sit front and center, with baby Trumper and his parents between us. Other children were also to receive a blessing on this day, and therefore, they and their families were seated on the ground on either side. The pastor introduced Liz and I. Then, I told the story of when Joanna had named Trumper and shared the words of greeting and blessing she had sent, which Liz and I had translated into pidgin. Everyone shuffled in agreement and joy, with little proclamations of “yes Lord” and “Hallelujah” interspersed

throughout. Next, Liz spoke a bit about who Dave Truemper was and the grace about which he proclaimed. Here's a copy of her words (They are translated from pidgin into English, so it doesn't quite do it justice):

This dedication shows that Trumper and all the other children here are in God's hand and are God's. They are all God's children. We will be unable to touch them and mess them up. God has chosen you to look out for them, teach them the Word of God, and show the grace of God. In this way, Trumper and the others will grow up following the footsteps of God.

Trumper is the namesake of a man from our homeplace, named Dave Truemper. He has died, but his wife is still alive. Dave Truemper was a teacher of theology. He was a good man of God and he taught many students the true meaning of the grace of God. One phrase he frequently used was "God loves you, for Christ's sake, and he will never let you go." This means that God loves you so much and has compassion on you because of the work of Jesus, and God will never let you go. Jesus died and rose for this reason. God loves us, and He will never abandon even one of us. When God looks upon us, He does not see our sin. No. He sees the holy blood of Christ and has compassion on us. We have done nothing to deserve God's mercy. Indeed, Jesus himself completed this work, therefore God loves us and will never leave us. Jesus died and rose first, and then we received this blessing and strength. Now, our task is to show the same grace, mercy and love to others. We do not do good in order to please God or receive blessings. No. We have received the blessing first and we are now *able* to show this love and compassion to all people on this earth. We are able to stand up, receive strength, walk in the footsteps of God and praise Him. We praise Him in order to say thank you for putting us in the palm of His hand.

Now is a big day in our lives. We are giving Trumper, Benomi (Trumper's cousin) and all the other children to God and putting them in the hand of the Father who will not abandon one of us.

Then Liz and I were urged to one side. After that, we played "pass the baby" as the pastor took Trumper and then handed him to me, who gave him to Liz, who gave him to the pastor, who gave him to the mother, who gave him to the father, who gave him back to the pastor. I'm not entirely sure what all the significance of these actions were, but I would guess that they illustrate that Trumper was a gift from God, who received his name from our people, and God has given him as a gift to his parents, who in turn give Him back from God. The pastor also said a few words about how Trumper serves as a bridge between two peoples and a sign of unity in God's church.

Next came the time for the other children to receive their blessings. Some of the pastors and church leaders who were present came forward and each of them put their hands on a child. They prayed fervently for that child, either in Engan or some other tongue (I could not distinguish).

Finally, it was time to cut and distribute the cake. Not entirely sure what to say, I gave a little talk about how we rejoiced with them this day as these children were in God's loving hands. I noted that it was right for us to do this because Jesus said let the little children come to me. And we give these sweet foods as a way to celebrate with them and as a reminder of all the sweet things God has given us in this life, including our children. Then, I cut a cross into the cake in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Unsure of how many children we would be feeding, I cut it further into many small pieces, about the size that you would serve fudge at. Just a taste for everyone.

In the distribution, we began by giving Julie's rolls to the parents of the children blessed and the cinnamon buns to the church leaders. Then all the children came forward to receive their pieces. Afterwards, there was still about half a cake left. I was about to begin distributing to the adults, but I was quickly ushered back to my seat and to my shock and awe discovered that the cake had been placed on the altar. They were going to use the cake for bread in the first communion of those who had been baptized the day before!! My jaw dropped. I racked my brain for theological implications of it all, but finally settled on, "God knows our hearts and intentions, and I'll just leave it in His gracious hands."

After the newly baptized received communion, the pastor announced that there was still cake left. The adults present began to come forward for a piece. And they came, and they came, and they came. I leaned over to Liz, "Surely the cake's run out by now." We just sat there in amazement as the pastor encouraged the people to come forward, announcing all the while that there was still more. Finally, no more came forward, and the pastor proclaimed that a miracle had occurred. He dumped the remaining crumbs onto the altar and took each one, dramatically dropping it back in the pan and counting "1...2...3..." until he reached, with great enthusiasm, "10...11...12!" He reminded us all that when Christ fed the five thousand, 12 baskets were left. Here, all were fed and there were still 12 pieces remaining. He also chided those who had been greedy and taken more than their share. I must admit that I was in a bit of a stupor. I still don't quite know what to think about it all.

By this point, it was about 3pm. We had asked that arrangements be made as soon as possible for our return to Mambis so that we could arrive before dark. We left the service because we still had to pack up our belongings and because we wanted to forestall the subsequent migraine that often accompanies the Engan style of preaching, i.e. shouting into the microphone.

We went back to the house, packed, and chatted with Martin about his own dreams and the place of white-skins in ministry in Papua New Guinea. Exhausted, we had hoped to leave soon. However, we were asked to wait until service was over and we had received our portion of the mumu pig. So we waited, and we waited. 3pm turned into 4pm, which turned into 5pm. Finally, the sounds of the preachers, which we could distinguish clearly even from our house, came to a halt. We were ushered back to the church, so the people could thank us once again and give us parting gifts.

As we sat among the crowded church, with each family grouping gathered around a portion of cokes, pig, kaukau (sweet potatoes), bananas and chicken set on banana leaves, I felt a sense of gratitude but also a deep abiding weariness. We saw the sun setting and began to lose all hope of seeing a shower and our beds for another evening. Just then, I heard someone call out my name and turned to see one of my Sunday School youth, Wendy. Before I could get out the words, "What are you doing here?" she proclaimed in pidgin, "Julie's here. We've come to take you home." My heart rejoiced. Julie followed shortly after and was quickly ushered to greet all the big men of the community. Finally, however, we all made our way out to the car only to discover that a big group of Mambis friends had been worried about us and had come with Julie to find us. This would later be termed as a "rescue mission," one for which we were all grateful. Not that we were unhappy during our time in Kwia... Just that we were tired, and the recognition that people are concerned for you and love you enough to grab Julie and drive all the way out to find us is a beautiful thing.

As we made our way back home to Mambis we regaled Julie with tales of our adventures—enough experiences to fill these five pages and memories to last a lifetime. Looking back now, a week later, I still don't understand all that happened during those days. All I know is that the Spirit moved, and I am grateful to have been able to bear witness.