

First Sunday after Epiphany -- January 11, 2009

Saint Timothy's in the Valley Episcopal Church, Hurricane, WV

Readings: Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29, Acts 19:1-7, and Mark 1:4-11

Good morning. It is always a pleasure to be back here at St. Timothy's. I would like to thank Cheryl for this opportunity to talk with you all and share some of my experiences. About five years ago I had the honour of working here as a youth minister, so it is nice to be able to be here again.

I serve as a missionary for the Episcopal Church as part of a program called the Young Adult Service Corps (or YASC). This program is designed for people between the ages of 18 and 30 and is focused on encouraging young people to serve others in the name of Christ. The Episcopal Church provides a great deal of support for this program and more than half of its funding. Each YASC missionary must raise \$10,000 to support his or her ministry and St. Timothy's provided a great deal toward that goal 16 months ago and I am very grateful for your support and generosity.

On October 4, 2007 I left West Virginia to work for a year as a missionary for the Episcopal Church. My assignment was to work in the Diocese of Central Tanganyika in the Anglican Church of Tanzania. In particular, I was to run the computer network at Msalato Theological College, which is located about ten kilometres outside of Dodoma, Tanzania. My original appointment of twelve months was extended to fourteen months so that I could work for two full semesters. I returned to the US on December 21.

You might be asking yourself at this point – what is Msalato Theological College and why should you care? Well... first, its important to remember that we, as members of the Episcopal Church, are connected to millions of other believers through the Anglican Communion. Now this grouping has been through a lot of stress and strain in recent years, so it is very important to understand how big it is and how small we are (at least in some ways). The Anglican Communion officially includes more than seventy million people. The American part of the communion, the Episcopal Church, has about two or two and a half million people. The diocese in Tanzania where I am working has 500,000 members and that is just one diocese out of more than a dozen in just one country in Africa. This is a growing and vibrant church.

Msalato Theological College was founded in the early 1960s as a Bible school for men training to be priests and pastors in the Diocese of Central Tanganyika. In the decades since its founding, Msalato has expanded its mission and services. Under the direction of the diocesan bishop Msalato began offering its theology program in English and to men and women. DCT is the only diocese in Tanzania that ordains women. The programs are also offered to lay and ordained people. The main leaders in Anglican congregations in Tanzania are lay people who serve as catechists. These catechists teach, preach and lead congregations when a priest is not available. Remember this is a diocese with 500,000 people and there are only 300 priests. Msalato also offers a degree program in theology and a training program for secretaries. Right now, Msalato is transitioning to teaching theology only in English.

This brings me to another important point. The official language of Tanzania is Swahili, but that is not the native language of most Tanzanians. Throughout the country there are many different ethnic groups or tribes and each of these has its own language. So the first language of most Tanzanians is a tribal language. That is the language spoken in their homes. When students start primary school they must learn Swahili which is the language of instruction in most primary schools. But the very few students that get to secondary school must learn English because the government mandates that all

secondary instruction be done in English. So the students I am teaching at Msalato are trying to learn theology in their **third** language.

Msalato trains students from throughout Tanzania and there are two or three students who come from Kenya, which is Tanzania's northern neighbour. Msalato's graduates do more than just lead parishes as priests or catechists they are educators, providers of health care information, counsellors, spiritual and moral guides. All students at Msalato are trained about prevention and treatment of both HIV/AIDS and malaria two diseases that have a huge impact on the people of East Africa. All students are given instruction on how to use computers and the Internet. They are also taught about ways how to purify drinking water with simple or no equipment. The graduates of Msalato go out and teach and preach to thousands of people throughout Tanzania and bring them the Good News of Christ. They help to train other leaders in their communities.

Today is the first Sunday after Epiphany. Epiphany is a very important day in the Church calendar because it marks the end of the Christmas season. In the western Church we celebrate the visit of the three wise men to the baby Jesus on Epiphany; however, in the Orthodox Church, Epiphany is about the baptism of Jesus and God's recognition of Jesus as God's Son.

The readings for today talk about births and rebirths. The first reading tells the story of the first day of creation. Both New Testament readings are about baptism and the new life that we are born into through that sacrament. In the reading from the Book of Acts we heard Paul explain that true baptisms are done in the name of Christ and lead to new lives in Christ. In today's gospel reading we heard about John the Baptist baptizing in the wilderness and about Jesus' own baptism. The baptism of Jesus is very important because it marked the beginning of his ministry and his work that led to salvation for all of us.

I want to share with you a brief story about a chance at rebirth that I was able to play a small part in. In June of last year one of the Tanzanian teachers at Msalato came to see me. She told me the story of her niece, whose father died a few years ago and her mother had no way to support her. Her grandfather wanted her to marry a much older man who already had one wife. If this young woman married this man then her family would not have to support her. She had little education and no job prospects. The aunt, who was the teacher at Msalato, wanted her to come and be a part of the secretarial program at Msalato so that the young woman could get some job skills, but there was no money for that. Now most of the time when I am at Msalato and people ask me for money I am hesitant because I believe that my job there is not to be a fundraiser or a source of income, so I was hesitant when this teacher came to me. But I prayed and thought about it and realized that this was a chance to help someone have a new start on life. I reached out to my home parish and to the diocese overall and within a few days was able to find the money needed for this young woman to come and study in the secretarial program. She is now excelling in the program, learning English and eager to get a job at the end of the school year.

In a few weeks I will return to Tanzania for another six months. I will be teaching classes on church history, systematic theology and computers. I will be working to train and empower others to continue the work I am doing. Over the coming months I would appreciate your continued thoughts and prayers. Thank you again for your previous support. Also, I would appreciate your prayers for Msalato Theological College, its staff and students.

As you go out today, I invite you to consider the story of creation and of the baptism of Jesus. Those stories of birth and rebirth are essential to who and what we are as humans and as Christians. I invite you to also think about our fellow human beings in Africa who work without so many things we take for granted and often struggle just to survive. They are our brothers and sisters and we must be willing to learn from them and do what we can to serve them.

Thank you and God bless.

Yours in Christ,

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