

St. John's Lutheran Church
July 13, 2008

"God's Word Is Sure"
Isaiah 55:10-13

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Yes, we are home, safe and sound. Most of you know that Debbie and I have been to Africa and back the last three weeks. We have been to Tanzania. We have traveled to Muhanga. And we have made it safely back. The experience was rich. The experience was deep. We look forward to sharing it on an evening of September that is yet to be announced. But food for thought is not in short supply as Debbie and I continue to process the experience. On many levels.

One level of the experience was the simple level of the experience of traveling with a group, which many of you have experienced as well. The group experience was of course enhanced by the fact that it was to Africa that we traveled together. Our group was comprised of 9 older youth and 5 adults. Debbie and I were the only married couple on the trip and much fun was made amongst the members of the group of Debbie and my love life together.

Early on we had the discussion in our group about the three g's in my first name and how important that third g on the end of the name is to me. And the group nicknamed me "g3". And because my name was "g3" they nicknamed Debbie "g-honey". And so the relationships of the group continued to develop over the course of the three weeks.

One of the dynamics that happened in the group was due to the fact that one of the girl's luggage did not arrive with us, at least so we were told, in Dar es Salaam. And so it was that Kelsey lived the entire trip without any of the items she had packed in her suitcase. She literally was cared for by the other girls in the group with all of her daily needs, including clothing.

When we made it back to Dar es Salaam this past Sunday and prepared to board the flight for the first leg of our journey home, our leader and Kelsey went to check on whether or not Kelsey's luggage had ever been found. And, lo and behold, her suitcase was there in the Dar es Salaam airport! We do not know how long it had been there or even if, perhaps, it was there all along! But Kelsey was overjoyed to have her suitcase and her belongings even if it was only for the last day of the trip.

Kelsey preached a little sermon to me towards the end of the trip. She mentioned how she would probably never put her luggage on a plane again in sure and certain confidence that her luggage would arrive when she arrived. And, she said, on a spiritual level she was so glad that her salvation had been packed for her in Jesus Christ and that she knew that it was being sent on before her to the end of her life and that she could be absolutely sure that when she got there, it would be there waiting for her. I liked what she was thinking about!

And I thought about it when I spent time with this Sunday's First Reading the latter part of this past week. For Kelsey's little parable fits very well with this reading. The historical context of this reading is that the people of God are living in exile in Babylon. But God has promised them that they are to return to their homeland. And the meaning of this reading is that God's word is as good as gold. When God makes a promise, the promise is guaranteed. When God speaks a word, the word is guaranteed.

"My word," says the Lord, "that goes out from my mouth...shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." For believers in Christ, the promise of God is the promise of another homeland that is not of this world. It is the home in heaven that has been purchased for us with the precious blood of Christ. And that promise goes before us as we live this earthly life by faith. The promise cannot get lost along the way. It is guaranteed to those who believe. We can absolutely count on that salvation being there for us when we reach the last days of this earthly life.

The certainty of this hope is cause for great joy. And brings a sense of peace to the heart. The certainty of this hope is a primary reason for adoration and worship of the Lord. The Lord declares in our First Reading that creation itself will break out in praise of God as the people travel to their homeland. "The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." As we traveled to Muhanga, we experienced landscape that was both rugged and breathtakingly beautiful.

The name of the pastor of the Muhanga Parish is Pastor Msuva. The view standing at the front door of his remote mountaintop house is astounding. One looks out across a steep valley to a neighboring mountaintop.

At one point I was standing admiring that view with the Old Testament Professor from the Tumaini University whose name was, ironically, Pastor Mhanga! Pastor Mhanga served as the primary translator and facilitator for our 3-day trip out to Muhanga. "This view," I said to Pastor Mhanga, "reminds me of a song we have in our country. It is not a religious song, but it goes like this: And I broke out in song with the verse, "The hills are alive with the sound of music." "It is a good line," smiled Pastor Mhanga, "and it could very well be changed into religious music!" And I readily agreed. I knew that Pastor Mhanga was thinking about Old Testament readings like this one we have before us this morning. In the face of the certainty of God's word and promise, the mountains and the hills are said by the prophet to burst into song, and the trees of the field clap their hands.

The people of Muhanga live a primitive existence. There is no electricity. There is no running water. They are isolated from one another because of the distance and the steep and rugged terrain between their homes. Perhaps partially because of that primitive existence they seem to be very conscious of their dependence upon the providence of God and trust deeply in the word of God and the promise of God to provide both for their daily needs and their ultimate salvation.

Their praise and adoration of God is heartfelt. Their music is a mixture of folk music, some of which seems to be almost made up on the spot and the classics of Christian faith such as Amazing Grace and Faith of our Fathers, sung in Swahili. But it is all filled with heartfelt adoration of God for God's gracious care. As I think about that little church sitting on that mountaintop with the praise of God reverberating in the darkness of its rafters, I have a sense of the mountains and trees surrounding it with their beauty joining in on the praise. One way we are bound together with the Christians of Muhanga is through the praise of God which we join, even when we are learning a new song such as we will now in a moment. Together they and we are united in dependence upon the sure and certain nature of the word and promise of the very same good and gracious God. To God be the glory and praise. Amen.