

Hope is Never Dead – Sharon Curry

25 December 2013

When I have no words to speak, they sometimes come pouring out through my fingers on the keyboard or grasping a pencil and whatever piece of paper I can find.

The headlines are horrible this week. I read each one with a sadness in my heart as new tales unfold about the conflicts in South Sudan. Each one brings to mind the face of friends I have left behind, memories of events that I look back on and a heart full of prayers for all the people of South Sudan. This has made for one of the hardest Christmases ever.

I feel like I am two people each one looking at the world through different eyes. One person is trying hard to find joy and celebrate with family and friends in the traditional “American” style. The other is looking back on the people I have left behind, praying for them, wondering where they are and if they are safe or even still alive.

The last emails I read before I left the house yesterday afternoon were stories of trucks full of bodies rolling through the streets of one town. Some were left behind because they belonged to the wrong group. Left alone in death. Left alone in yards until women could come out of the house and cover them with sheets. There was a story of soldiers entering homes looking for members of one group of people, gunning down innocent women and children, just because they didn’t belong to the “right” group.

There were stories of people gathered in our partner church’s compound, the one where I was supposed to be living if I had gone in October. They have water but no food. These are people I know and love, people I have worked with. People I walked the streets with and laughed and played and talked with on my last visit there. People who are waiting for the fighting that is drawing closer to them.

It is hard to look out with “American” eyes and celebrate the joy this season usually brings when my heart is breaking for the people of South Sudan. It is hard for people to understand as they hugged me in greetings and told me how grateful they are that I am not there, that I don’t feel their same sense of gratitude.

I know I am the one who said I couldn’t go back. I know that I am the one who said I didn’t understand why. But even as my head understands that somewhere in all the confusion of that decision, God was playing his part in my protection, in provision for Michael and the rest of the PCUSA staff that didn’t have to worry about my safety or my evacuation, my heart longs to be on the first plane back. My heart longs to go and hold God’s people in my arms. If I thought they would let me back in I would be on the next plane back. That is what my heart says. My head knows that will not happen for a while, maybe years, if civil war does break out or the fighting continues. I know it sounds so very selfish to say, but now I see why I couldn’t find the sense of call that would have made it right for me to return. But maybe I needed this fighting to rekindle my sense of serving there. I know the time is not now, but I know, deep in my heart that one day I will return. One day I will go back and hold my people in my arms, and when I do, God will be with me.

Last night I needed church. I *needed* to be there surrounded by people I know and love. Even as I was late leaving a family gathering and knew I wouldn’t make it on time, my car drove there and I walked in the door just as the service was about to begin. God in his mercy provided green lights from one side of town to the other to make sure I arrived in time.



As the procession marched the center aisle of the church, I was brought back to the memories of my only Christmas in Akobo. As the procession passed within a sanctuary filled with song, ribbons waving through the air in proclamation of the coming Christ child, I was reminded of the Christmas Eve procession through Akobo as the church members gathered and began the march through the town proclaiming the coming Christ “baby” filled with song and banners waving high. What a joyous celebration that was.



<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-25513572>

How different is the marching in South Sudan this year. Instead of voices raised in song and praise marching throughout the town, they are hushed and quiet. The marching is a different kind this year, the sounds of military boots pounding the streets and roads in either protection or potential attack as hundreds of thousands hide in fear instead of their normal bold proclamations. The sounds of marching as people gather all they can carry and try to make it to places of safety and sanctuary.

I have lain in the dark, not daring to move, as I listened to the sounds of boots marching down my road at night, and the sounds of mortars shooting in the distance. I have shared a room filled with women as the “boots” marched outside our window one night and heard their muffled sobs and felt their fear, and wondered what memories, beyond my comprehension, they must have been reliving as guns were fired outside our window. I prayed for peace for them that night. Now it seems that may not be, and as they had begun to rebuild their lives and have a bit of hope, their fears are beginning all over again. And I continually pray for peace for them once again.

As I sat in the dimly lit sanctuary full of its opulence of silver and gold vestments, decked in trees filled with lights, I couldn't help but think of 100,000+ people hiding alone in the dark, afraid to move, afraid of the death that waits them.

I couldn't help but think of my friends in Juba and Malakal and Akobo who have no food tonight as we feasted earlier in our abundance. I couldn't help but think of the women and children mercilessly gunned down this week as the women in my family laughed and shared stories around the table. The children raced their planes across the floors, the tables and any flat surface they could find, and laughed with joy. A sharp contrast from the children I played with who must be hiding from them this night, shivering in fear, that their sounds will bring more bullets raining down on them.

As I dipped my small piece of bread into the cup of wine during communion, I didn't find comfort as I usually do, that somewhere in the world, friends I am not with have shared the same cup and the same bread today. All I could think is too many don't even have this much food this night. This was a problem before the recent fighting. I have walked the floors of the severely malnourished portion of the hospital and seen the faces of the children too weak to even pick up their heads and held the hands of their worried mothers and families. I can't even fathom what this fighting will do to them.

I was there in worship, but I wasn't. My head was listening, my heart was praying, when the words Fritz said grabbed my attention and brought new meaning to words I have heard my whole life ...

A sword will pierce your heart said Simeon to Mary at Jesus circumcision. That is how I felt last night. A sword has pierced my heart and is pouring out for the people of South Sudan.

Fritz went on to say “bearing in their arms the dead bodies of hope”... and my heart cried, “How many God, are holding the bodies of their loved ones this night? How many have lost their hope in this country they fought so hard for”?

But I found comfort in his words “Hope is never dead...the truest purpose to which we are called...to have hope and share it with others...the sword that pierces her heart is gone and replaced by hope”.

It is my prayer that the swords that pierce the hearts of the people of South Sudan, all those who are feeling grief for leaving at a time when they feel the most needed, will have their swords replaced by hope, hope that came in the form of a small baby, born in a manger this night, and are reminded that no matter what the trials in our lives may be, “hope is never dead”.