

Kathryn Tobias: Penduka!

Sermon delivered by Kathryn Tobias

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Penduka!

As I began thinking about this sermon over the past several weeks – wrestling with questions about how we at Seekers might deepen our relationship with the Tumelong mission in South Africa – I looked for inspiration in the lessons for the day. The Gospel for this first Sunday in Advent evokes both promise and foreboding:

Therefore, keep awake-for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cock crow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.

Then I remembered the word I learned in Namibia, and how it had puzzled me when I heard it: “Penduka.”

During the apartheid era, white South Africa dominated not only its own black population but also that of its neighbor to the northwest – South West Africa – what is today known as Namibia. Namibia won its independence from South Africa in 1990, but many of the scars of apartheid remain. Near the Namibian capital of Windhoek is a former “location” where blacks were required to live, called Katatura. It is a sprawling series of hillsides covered with homes, some relatively well built, but most of corrugated metal or found materials. Many homes are precariously placed such that a good rainstorm involves rescuing whole houses full of families that have slid down into the deep gullies. Moreover, not far from Katatura is a small body of water, a lake on which a former

country club for the wealthy has been converted to a women's craft coop. The name of the coop is Penduka and the meaning of Penduka is "Wake up!" Wake up. Why that name, I asked myself when I first heard it.

Let me take a step back for background. This past spring, I had begun making plans to go back to Tumelong in South Africa, where a number of other Seekers and I have spent some time – for me it has been working with Grace Sicwebo and others on income generating projects. At that time, I was approached by Conrad Braaten, the new pastor of Reformation Lutheran Church on Capitol Hill (my other church home), who knew of my love for Africa and wondered if I would be interested in going with a group of Lutherans on a visit to sister churches in Namibia. It happens that during the colonial era, Namibia was the object of missionary attention from Germany and later Finland, and because so many Germans and Finns are Lutheran, some 750,000 Namibians of a population of some 1.6 million are Lutherans.

Many Lutheran church bodies across the United States have what is known as "companion synod" relationships with other Lutheran church bodies around the world-in Washington D.C., the synod or conference of Lutheran churches is a companion with Namibia. Within the DC metro synod, 18 individual Lutheran congregations have "sister church" relationships with individual congregations in Namibia. Reformation Lutheran Church on Capitol Hill has relationships – on paper anyway – with two congregations: Martin Luther Church in Khomasdal, a township near Windhoek composed primarily of "colored" or mixed race congregants and Christuskirche, a congregation of the DELK church of ethnic Germans located in Windhoek. I say "on paper" because although these relationships were named perhaps a decade ago just after Namibian independence, many remain undeveloped. One purpose of the trip, then, was to see how the relationships might be developed – to begin by having some of us meet each other face to face.

I said I would go, on condition that I could continue my plan to spend time working with Grace at Tumelong. While my trips to Africa over the previous three years were experiences primarily of deep joy and warmth and welcoming, this one had that-and an added dimension. It had moments of embarrassment, conflict and deep contrition. It served as a "wakeup call" – a "Penduka!" that I am still waking up to.

For me, that wakeup call is a call to **companionship**.

When I mentioned the idea of companionship for this sermon to my father in a visit to Wisconsin, he pointed out that the word "companion" comes from the Latin roots "com" – together – and "pan" as in the French for "bread." In other words, a companion is one with whom you break bread. On the road to Emmaus, it was only as the disciples broke bread with the risen Christ that they recognized him. There is something deeply relational about meeting and sharing bread together

Three weeks ago, I participated in a consultation on southern Africa at the Lutheran church Chicago headquarters. Visiting Bishop Phaswana from South Africa was from Johannesburg and knew our friends from the MUKA project, whom Roy Barber brought to Washington, D.C., in 1999. He talked about four different models of church partnership across international borders. In the most popular one – the donor model – money is supplied to the poor for "development." The setback of this model is that it fosters a dependency syndrome, he said. It does not develop human relationships, but supports an unequal power relationship based on material gain. A second model is a denominational one, which strengthens denominational ties, but sometimes at the expense of ecumenical ones. The third, ecumenical model fosters particular social actions and common witness. During the apartheid era, this kind of witness helped sustain South African Christians by, for example, denouncing injustice and preventing the deaths of some detainees. The fourth model is the communion model, the basis of all companionship. It may involve exchanges of people, material

help and gifts in kind, but its strength is in men and women of all races walking together in a common faith.

It was a way of beginning to put the companionship model into words.

This trip to Africa was really three trips for me. First, it was two weeks spent in conversation with Lutheran clergy and lay people, traveling around Namibia. Second, it was two weeks at Tumelong rekindling friendships and making new ones. Third, it was most of a week spent in Johannesburg with Marcel Korth-whom many Seekers met when he was here with the MUKA Project in 1999-listening to a "teach-in" leading up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

Namibia was the first leg of the journey: I spent several days in the capital, Windhoek, connecting with Reformation's two sister churches there. Namibia's three Lutheran church bodies are struggling to find a way to come together without throwing existing structures out of balance, and I spoke at length with the bishop of the German Lutheran church about the difficult journey toward that end. I also spoke with the two pastors of Reformation's sister church in Khomasdal – a man and a woman (in good Seekers tradition!). Both emphasized how important it is that any relationship between our churches is not about money but about companionship. How can we share our hopes, dreams, worries and pain? How can we break bread together?

I got another lesson about companionship in our trip to northern Namibia. A group of "caregivers" with our group was conducting training that the Namibian churches had requested – training of trainers in HIV/AIDS prevention. Peggy Beckman came along for that purpose. As we traveled to the more rural areas of the country in the north, several in the group were asked to carry messages to remote churches from their DC-area sister churches that were not represented on the trip. Peggy and I were to visit Onaanda, a tiny poor community not far from the Angolan border. We gathered on a Saturday evening in

Oniipa with the Namibian pastors who had traveled from far-flung parishes to take us home with them. Because it was late, we had dinner in Oniipa together. We were told to save room for more, as it is impossible to go to an African home without sharing a meal.

Peggy and I squeezed into the front of a small pickup or bakkie with a schoolteacher who served as our driver and Pastor Junius Iyambo of the church in Onaanda riding in the back. Peggy, who was on her first trip to Africa, turned to me and asked, "Are we going to be all right?" After a bumpy ride of about an hour, we arrived at last in Onaanda. More than anything, Onaanda was composed of sand-and bright, cool moonlight. There were a few houses scattered at some distance. As we hopped out of the bakkie, we were greeted at the door of a small house by the pastor's wife, Marikka, who brought us inside to a neat but sparsely furnished dining/living area lit by candlelight. Over very generous portions of bread, pasta, porridge and chicken, we talked about their parish and our respective journeys. It was only when we got up to use the "facilities" out back that we saw the children, seven of them, waiting in the kitchen for us to finish so they could eat. Marikka introduced us – three were their children by birth, she said, one was an "orphan" who had been left to them, two had been given to them to care for, and the baby belonged to another woman who shared the house. Then by gas lantern, the pastor and his wife showed us to our room. I do not know when I have slept so soundly in such absolute quiet.

Upon waking the next morning, in our new awareness of the need around us, we both wondered aloud what was in the envelope from the American sister church. We dressed for church and again shared bread, along with jam and tea. The Lutheran church in Onaanda is not large, but that Sunday it held well over 1,000 people, many of whom had walked 20 kilometers or more to get there, as they do most Sundays. There must have been more than 200 children sitting in the rows in front of

us, hardly moving a muscle during the whole 5-hour service. It was a special Sunday when women's choirs from all over the area participate in a singing competition that raises money for the church. After all, of the groups sing, parishioners "vote" by processing row by row to the front and dropping coins into offering baskets labeled with the names of each group. If not enough money is raised the first time around, the parishioners go around again. This way, they raised about 300 Namibian dollars, not a paltry sum by local standards, I guess, but equivalent to just 30 U.S. dollars.

I wish we Americans had done better by them. To make a long story short, the American church that was their sister church had, certainly without intending to, but probably without thinking, created expectations that were not met, and this was made abundantly clear during the service. It was a stinging wakeup call to some of us who were thinking of how we could best companion our fellow Christians in Namibia.

On the rest of our journey in Namibia, we witnessed the stark beauty of this country and the plush tourist towns where stark duneland ends in the Atlantic seacoast. However, nothing stays with me more than the call to companionship represented by the experiences with the congregations in Windhoek, Khomasdal and Onaanda.

The second leg, Tumelong began with a happy reunion at the airport with my friend Grace. Because it is Grace's job to facilitate and serve the needs of Tumelong's income-generating projects around Winterveldt, we've spent a lot of our time together riding around in a little bakkie, picking up supplies like flour for the breadbakers, working with the embroidery project to troubleshoot, develop ideas that will sell, and market them locally and overseas. "Companionship" with Grace has included many sandwiches shared in the front seat of a little red bakkie. As we prepared information about Tumelong for the SERRV catalog, Grace told me the story of Lurda, a Mozambican embroiderer at Lerato la Bana, whose husband works

far away and is home only infrequently. Lurda supports the sick older wife of her husband, her two children, and she supports her own child on her embroidery money.

This time at Tumelong, I also spent some time with Jackie and Dave McMakin in their final weeks working with the new Tumelong Guest House team. Their dedication and focus were making a difference in moving the project along, and the team was devoted to them.

In the context of visits to Tumelong, I have been part of several conversations that reflect differing thoughts about how best to “companion” a community coming out of apartheid. Mary-Ann Carpenter, the coordinator of the Tumelong projects, had spent more than a decade since the repeal of South Africa’s Group Areas Act living and working in townships like Winterveldt. Last summer when we brought a group of interns from the United States and Canada to work in Winterveldt, Mary Ann gave them a “tough-love” orientation. So often, she had seen students come to Tumelong with ideas about doing interviews and studies of the people in the various projects to be incorporated in their masters theses. They would go home and write up their findings and never be heard from again – none of the findings making their way back. Others came full of ideas about how things were and how they could make them better. “Consider the likelihood that you know nothing about this place,” she said. “Spend the first weeks listening and paying attention to what is happening around you, then if you see some way you can be of help, offer assistance-but wait for an answer-do not assume your idea is the solution.”

Above all, I have gathered, given the history of apartheid, which did such a good job of disempowering people, it is important not to take the power away by doing the job for them. I got further confirmation of this whole concept of empowerment in a book Jean Adams called my attention to this week, called Hope’s Edge. Maybe some of you have read it—it is by Frances Moore Lappe, the author of Diet for a Small Planet.

She describes an experience in Kenya and says “I think about how delicate our little psyches are; how we think of ourselves as such intelligent creatures—we Homo sapiens—and yet our common sense about what we need to do for ourselves is so easily overridden by fear of those in authority; overridden by messages that we are not competent.”

Once, in a moment of feeling not very useful myself, I asked Steve Carpenter what he thought I was contributing at Tumelong. “What you are doing is being encouraging,” he said. “For someone to come from such a great distance and spend so much time being here, being encouraging, being a friend—that alone is a tremendous source of hope.”

The third leg of my journey, a teach-in just prior to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, was another wakeup call – to the world’s economic powers – to live differently, to speak for justice, to be companions to our neighbors. For two days, speaker after speaker talked about ways policies that put profit ahead of people are undermining the sustainability of our planet. Tewolde of Ethiopia spoke about big industry that makes itself indispensable with genetically engineered seeds that not only force farmers to pay for seeds and fertilizer every year, but, worse, cause long-term damage by supplanting the local biodiversity. “The land has acquired a taste for bribery. It is corrupt. We have to bribe it with chemical fertilizers to produce anything.” Percy, a Canadian farmer, talked about losing his livelihood of more than 50 years when his soybean seed stock became corrupted with Monsanto’s seed stock and he was put out of business. “Who can patent a gene?” he asked. Sabrina, a survivor of the Bhopal chemical disaster that killed 8,000 in 3 days in 1984 – and continues to kill through new diseases – said that Union Carbide, maker of the chemical, has not accepted responsibility for the cleanup. I left the conference with many questions and a new sense of urgency: what to do about lifestyle and call. As Frances Moore Lappe says, “If we’re on

the wrong bus globally, how do we get off?"

There is companionship on the journey, even if we wonder where we can get off the bus. I spent time before, between, and after the sessions with Marcel and his friend Daniela talking and deepening a friendship, listening to the South African music he loves – and bringing multi-grain bread back to his flat behind Pastor George's house in a suburb of Johannesburg.

There is hope.

Today's Gospel calls us to wake up. Penduka!

The good news is that we wake to companionship with the one who comes to us in a manger – and brings us the bread of life