

Paul and Sallie Holmes, Kathryn Tobias, with help from Andy and Caren Holmes: Finding God in South Africa

Finding God in South Africa

Where did we find God in South Africa in August 2004?

by Paul Holmes

Two things that the rest of the world, and I, have long admired about South Africans are:

1. Their remarkable capacity to suffer abuse and indignity with courage, patience and forbearance; and
2. When change finally did come, their courage to embrace forgiveness and reconciliation. Bishop Tutu's book *No Future without Forgiveness* is a testimony to this.

Therefore, it came as a surprise to me that, when I started thinking about our theme – Finding God in South Africa – the images I kept returning to were ... barbed wire and guard dogs. South Africa has long had one of the most unequal income structures in the world; I think only Brazil and Nicaragua are worse. Just a few people own almost all the wealth while most of the people have very little.

Under apartheid, the state spent vast amounts to protect whites and white-owned property. I had last been in South Africa in 1994. One of the things that I found most shocking in the new South Africa was a pervasive fear of theft and violence and an obsession with security: fences, locks, barbed wire, alarms, security services and guard dogs. I must confess that, with a chauvinist sense of responsibility for the family and Cathy, I too was caught up in it.

Our scriptures for today talk of the faithfulness of God to the people of Israel. As with Israel, God watched over South Africa during its many years in the wilderness and God led the people to freedom. The people of South Africa have come a long way, but there is still a long way to go. I think all of us felt a bit overwhelmed by the challenges facing the new South Africa – jobs, housing, water and sanitation, health care, etc. Even amidst all the signs of hope, separations continue and are strong. In many ways, I saw economic apartheid replacing racial apartheid. Is it the same for us in the U.S. and the rest of the world?

When I look towards South Africa's future, this economic apartheid scares me most. Is it the same for us in the U.S. and the rest of the world?

Today's scriptures are clear; the way to defeat violence is not with walls, barbed wire, guns and preemptive strikes. They only offer the **illusion** of security. Rather, the scriptures offer a different way, modeled for us by the Carpenters, the Storeys, Sollie, Rosina and many, many others in South Africa.

The scriptures and those people emphasize that the way to peace and security is through reaching out in love; reaching out with open hands and relationships; reaching out to forgive and reconcile through the love of Jesus; reaching out and trusting; reaching out and allowing Jesus to guide our feet in the ways of peace. That is one way I saw God in South Africa. Is it the same for us in the U.S. and the rest of the world?

by Sallie Holmes

My love for South Africa began with my love for Paul, some 16 years ago. His passion for S.A. was contagious and started a journey that has included contacts with Stephen and MaryAnn Carpenter, hosting Brian and Goodwill from the MUKA project in our home 6 years ago, and ultimately our family trip to South Africa in August.

Life is mystery and nowhere is this clearer to me than in S.A., perhaps because the contrasts are so great- wealth and poverty, health and illness, misery and joy, fear and safety. Alan Paton says it best in *Cry, The Beloved Country*...

“Who indeed knows the secret of the earthly pilgrimage? Who indeed knows why there can be comfort in a world of desolation? Now God be thanked that there is a beloved one who can lift up the heart in suffering, that one can play with a child in the face of such misery. Who knows for what we live, and struggle, and die? Who knows what keeps us living and struggling, while all things break around us? Who knows why the warm flesh of a child is such comfort, when one’s own child is lost and cannot be recovered? Wise men write many books, in words too hard to understand. But this, the purpose of our lives, the end of our struggle, is beyond

all human wisdom."

While staying in Tumelong, I spent two amazing days accompanying Thandi, a young black woman trained in occupational and physical therapy who works for the Stinkwater Rehabilitation project. Her patients are some of the most marginalized in Winterveldt, a sprawling community of displaced immigrants living in unimaginable poverty.

Thandi's roles include

- Being an advocate for an amputee victim in need of a new prosthetic device,
- An educator for a teen mom with a child with cerebral palsy,
- A counselor for a young man who recently lost his sight and is afraid to leave his home,
- A friend and support to a frail, isolated girl with juvenile arthritis,
- A means of transportation to hospitals and clinics,
- A ray of hope for a young girl paralyzed and her mother who is in shock and feeling helpless.

As we got out of the car and approached the first house on our home visits, a tiny 2 room ramshackle building loosely constructed over the years from scavenged materials, I guess Thandi anticipated my passage to a world with which I was so unfamiliar. Her message to me was simple, but powerful, and instructive:

"We struggle," she said.

I was so struck by this comment, which took on more meaning over the days I spent with her and beyond.

The Struggle is complex in South Africa.

It is a struggle to survive: to find enough scrap material to patch the hole in the roof, to find something or make something to sell in order to buy a loaf of bread to feed a family for a week.

It is a struggle to stay healthy, to find work, to get to work, to keep your family safe.

It is a struggle to repair the damage of years of apartheid, to bridge the economic and social disparities.

It is a struggle to continue the work for reconciliation, peace and justice.

Thandi was one of only **a few** rehabilitation workers in this community of limited resources, but one of **many** Tumelong employees who had continued working faithfully **without pay** for the past two months. Despite her own personal hardships, she did her job with passion and commitment, without judgment and without pity, engaging her patients with warmth, encouragement and expectation.

As witness to these mysteries and contrasts, I give thanks for the many people who touched my life on this brief pilgrimage of pain and hope.

**by Kathryn Tobias, with help from
Andy and Caren Holmes**

As background, I note Caren's story about our night drive with a park ranger at Kruger Wildlife Park in which we watched a

family of four honey badgers weaving a pattern in and out, in and out, down the road in front of us for several miles. Whenever the four honey badgers veered toward the shoulder of the road, the driver tried to pass them, but each time, they would unfailingly weave back to the middle, one by one or en masse, as if to say, "We may look disorganized, but we are together and we take care of each other and this is our road. You spectators keep back!" Later in the trip when we were out walking somewhere, Sallie began weaving back and forth down the path, saying, "Who am I?" – and I think we answered en masse: "a honey badger!"

In some ways, we came to see ourselves as the honey badgers, weaving in and out, seeing things in a somewhat different but coordinated way. In the spirit of the honey badgers (or for those who did the recent Interplay workshop, in the spirit of "side-by-side" stories – wherein two or three people stand next to each other to tell and act out their seemingly unrelated stories), I want to set out several stories today, side by side and woven together in the coordinated, uncoordinated way of the honey badgers.

Andy Holmes will read story 1, from today's Old Testament lesson in Jeremiah 23:1-6 [Andy reads]: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" says the Lord."

Caren Holmes reads Story 2, from one of the gospel lessons offered for today, Luke 1:68-79 [Caren reads]: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and blessed them."

Story 3, my South African journal for 2004, begins from high above the African desert: "I've been sitting too long, so I'm walking around, looking down over the desert— Fascinating views from above. This place looks like a very old face...with long scratches, deep, filled with tan sand. Right now, it is as if we were passing over a village of giant rondavels — round shapes, conical with feathered edges, like thatch. Now I look out at the rhythmic circling patterns in the sand and see a hatched pattern—like a pound sign—and realize it is a small set of streets laid out in a faint human footprint. What must it be like down below?"

Three beginnings of three stories...

So let me continue a little with Story 3, coming down to earth in South Africa. The trip the Holmes family and I took was a long and wonderful journey over some of the very ground I might have seen from the air, had I been looking at the right moment. It was a journey by air of almost 10,000 miles via Amsterdam to Cape Town—and more than 24 hours each way with layovers. Then in three weeks we drove 3,000 miles by car over terrain as wonderfully varied as anything I have seen in our United States—Colorado-like mountains, spectacular California shoreline, New Mexico desert, miles of Kansas flatland, wooded Minnesota forestland, rolling Pennsylvania hill country, Florida beaches, Arizona canyons, and unbelievably varied wildlife, from penguins to elephants and baby lions—but that is Caren's story. And there were people, so many people of all nationalities, old friends—Shawne Johnson and his family, the Carpenters, Alan Storey, Grace Sicwebo and Solly and the Guest House folks and all the people at Tumelong, Trevor Hudson, the MUKA guys—and new friends, people in difficult life circumstances and a few "odd ducks" that made us laugh. It is a story that takes up all 200 pages of the journal I took along with me.

It began in Cape Town, with Paul's friend Shawne and his family, who showed us around places laden with human stories and human sorrow, like the District Six museum, once a Methodist Church, where Peter Storey preached. It's next to the old District Six, once a fully realized, thriving community that was emptied of its people in the apartheid era of the 1960s, torn down to the ground, to a desiccated wasteland that is still empty today except, ironically, of churches. We met Noor there, a resident of the former District Six, who has written a book and told the story of being forcibly removed to another place, along with his 50 homing pigeons, which he kept inside for some months after the move. When he finally did let them go, they did not come home that night. The next morning, as he passed through the razed neighborhood of District Six, as was his custom on the way to work, he found all 50 of them sitting on the exact site where his house had stood, looking at him accusingly as if to say, "Where is our home?"

[Andy continues reading Story 1:] "Therefore thus says the Lord the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings says the Lord."

[Caren reads Story 2:] "He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us."

[And in Story 3, my story:] We thanked Noor, left the museum and drove a bit around old District Six. We saw the desolation, but we also saw the places where the grass had

grown back over what had once been paved streets, and we saw the churches that had never been torn down. In addition, we saw a single row of new houses, where the oldest still living residents of District Six are being resettled. There we met an old man on his porch, who lived in some terrible places after he left District Six the first time, and who finally found a place to stay for 24 years with his wife and—after they both learned they would be allowed to move back to the rebuilt District Six—his wife died before it came to fruition. Nevertheless, he was there on his porch—handed the key by Nelson Mandela himself—planning a new life with a new wife. Such sadness and loss, and such grace.

[Andy reads Story 1:] “Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.”

[Caren reads Story 2:] “Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”

And in these difficult times in our own country’s history there is a fourth side-by-side story I want to read a little of today. It is a story of hope that we heard in a letter from Peter Storey, who in those difficult times once preached in the church that is now the District Six Museum. And here is part of what he wrote in the letter that Paul forwarded to us: “For forty years, in more than ten elections, a small number

of white South Africans campaigned persistently against the apartheid that kept us in unfair privilege and we had our expectations dashed every time. In spite of this, our disenfranchised black compatriots always let us know that it counted for them...What God does appear to find helpful in such circumstances is a Church obedient enough to live and proclaim the alternative—the ‘otherness’ of the Gospel. This is where transformation can and must begin.”

[Andy reads Story 1:] “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days, Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness’

[Caren reads Story 2:] “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Amen, Amen.