



A Gathering Cloud

For the writer of the book of Hebrews, the “cloud of witnesses” included his ancestors in the faith all the way back to Abel. Then he added Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, along with unnamed “people,” “prophets,” “women,” and “others.” The list covers millennia, from Israel’s prehistory to the Maccabean revolt, yet they are cited as though personal friends to the writer and well known to the reader as well.

That worked only because the Jewish people were inveterate storytellers. These stories, passed down from generation to generation, gave them both history and identity. They told them who they were.

This is who we are, as well. These folks are our friends and parents in the faith, but they are known to us only as we hear their stories. Biblical literacy is not just a theoretical good; it provides stories for us to live in.

Now, two more millennia have been added, and our list of friends and forebears has grown immeasurably. In addition to the biblical saints, our cloud of witnesses includes believers from every age and every culture, some of them known to us, but many who, for us, too, are just “people” or “others.”

We need to hear their stories so that our lives can be enriched and our faith strengthened. Stories take us to their places, their worlds, their realities, which would otherwise be inaccessible to us. “How will they hear without a preacher?” wondered Paul (Rom 10:14). And how will we know about the lives of others without hearing their stories? Storytelling opens things up, lets us in. As Sven Birkerts writes:

One of the most heartening long-term effects of reading African-American literature has been the erosion of the sense of irreconcilable otherness. True, the lives depicted in many of the works are in certain aspects alien to me. But the fact of the portrayal, the fact that I can enter those lives by way of language, confirms for me the existence of a commonality prior to all cultural divergences.*

Thus, the value of hearing stories from brothers and sisters in Christ like those contained in this issue of *Word & World*. We are taken places we could not otherwise go, and as we listen, we are changed. Our “cloud of witnesses” is enlarged, and, somehow, we get involved.

*Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994) 106.

Thinking about this, I realize that I have been telling a small part of the story of brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe for almost ten years now—the story of their betrayal and suffering at the hands of their own government and their once-respected leader Robert Mugabe. I tell that story because I was asked to do so over and over again by people in Zimbabwe, desperate for help and assuming—naively, as it turns out—that if the world only knew, something would surely happen.

Why return to this theme? Because the stories keep coming to me, asking to be told, as they did again in recent days:

- the story of a once middle-class family, living only a decade ago in a modest but comfortable home in Harare, but now scrambling to exist through subsistence agriculture in a small hut in a traditional communal area (think Indian reservation), with no electricity and nothing of the conveniences they had worked so long to provide for themselves
- the story of Lutheran pastors beaten and left for dead in rural Zimbabwe because they were merely suspected of supporting “the opposition”
- the story of another young Lutheran pastor near Harare who, threatened with the same treatment, nevertheless told his congregation that he would continue to preach and act as the word of God led him
- the stories of Zimbabwean expatriates unable to return home because of the violence they would face and the difficulty or impossibility of ever returning to their work and families in the United States should they leave.

We all hear the occasional news reports about the collapse of Zimbabwe’s economy and the oppression of its people, but these become other than theoretical when the stories are told personally, face-to-face, by dear friends. As I write this, it is not yet clear whether the talks underway between Mugabe and Tsvangirai (leader of the opposition) will bear fruit. One can only hope so, for the sake of the people, but the fruit will be bitter at best. It is hardly magnanimous to “offer” a place in a shared government to the person who clearly won the election in the first place and was then excluded from the “runoff” by real and threatened violence! And should the opposition ever come to power, they will inherit a country raped and ravaged by the brutality and venality of the present regime.

We need to hear this story for the sake of our prayer life. At least sixty to seventy percent of the people of Zimbabwe are Christians. They (along with all the people of that country) need to be in our prayers, just as do the now named “others” that we hear about in this issue and the remaining unnamed “others” who bear witness to Christ quite outside our periphery of sight and hearing. Through the work of the Spirit, they enrich our lives, no doubt, even without our knowing. But it’s better to know. So listen to their stories whenever you can, and spread them as you are able.

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