

1 Sermon, June 10, 2012

Texts: **Jeremiah 31:1-9**

Title: "**Stories of Faith: East Angola Partnership**"

Imagine that you have grown up in a Communist nation, where Christian faith is discouraged, but you have claimed Christ as your savior.

Imagine further that this nation is Cuba, and you have very little in the way of wealth or possessions. One of the things Cuba has done, however, is train a lot of doctors and medical professionals, and you are one of these.

Your Church, The Methodist Church in Cuba has discovered that you are willing to share your skills overseas, and you are excited about the possibility of serving in Africa. However, you don't have the funds to get to Africa, and your church can't afford it, either.

But your church has connections with United Methodists in the US, and so through a cooperative arrangement, you get funding from the US for you and your spouse to travel to Angola, a nation with one of the worst life expectancy rates and highest infant mortality rates in the world. In Angola there was a war of independence followed by a civil war, so there was war in the country for 40 years. Peace was finally achieved just ten years ago, in 2002.

You are to travel to the Eastern part of Angola, the most remote part of the country, to a place where there is an orphanage.

There is need of your skills there. There are many boys in this orphanage, some of whom do not know their own real name nor the names of their parents. The protracted war destroyed families, homes, even the buildings of the orphanage.

This is the real situation, with United Methodists from the US supporting **Leonardo Garcia and Cleivys Benitez** from Cuba to serve in the East Angola Conference of the United Methodist Church. Their responsibilities are with the Quessua Mission near Malanje, Angola and include teaching at the Faculty of Theology in Quessua and coordinating volunteer groups.

Leonardo and Cleivy are both graduates of the School of Medicine in Cuba and of the Methodist Seminary in Havana. Prior to this assignment they served for 21 years as physicians until they received the call into ministry in 2005. Since then they have served the Methodist Church in Cuba in various appointments.

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This is evidence of the global nature of the church. Our own Wisconsin Conference has made a partnership with the East Angola Conference, where we support work like this. There are only 40 congregations in the East Angola Annual Conference, risen from the ashes of War. In 2005, Bishop Linda Lee and a small group from Wisconsin visited East Angola and their bishop, Jose Quipungo. At that time, Bishop Quipungo requested assistance in many areas. To date, the Wisconsin Conference UMC has collected over \$12,000 to purchase educational books for orphans in East Angola. Our Conference has also purchased and/or collected laptop computers, graduation gowns, and medical supplies for the East Angola Conference.

Let me just share a little from the words of Cleivy Martiez, missionary to East Angola:

"The boys of the Orphanage have expressed their appreciation for our presence here in many ways. Last night one of them sang a song for me: 'God bless my mom.' At that moment I felt the happiest mother on earth. Then, I remembered God's promise several years ago that He would give me many spiritual children for those biological ones that never came."

Another day she writes: "I just got back from visiting with the kids. They were cooking and it surprised me that no attention was being given to hygiene matters. Sooner than later we will need to address that. I try to combine love and disciple with the boys. For years I have been educating myself for a responsible parenthood. Now is the time to use what I have learned."

Cleivy is also very humorous: "It's a miracle! We have been able to connect to the internet from our house two days in a row! For several days we were holding vigils, not necessarily the kind of prayer vigil that you would think of. We were just trying to connect to the internet during the early hours of the day: 1-5AM. Two days ago, as the morning light was getting in through the window, I had a serious conversation with the Lord: I told Him how tired I felt that I was getting neither sleep nor results. He (the Lord) . . . well, He understood me and decided to work with us as a team mate."

When Leonardo and Cleivy first arrived in Angola, they planted a tree with the prayer that, just like the tree would grow, their ministry in East Angola would mature and bear fruits for eternity.

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God is building something great in East Angola, through the prayers and work of many people. Hear again the scripture reading from Jeremiah, which speaks of rebuilding:

"At that time, says the LORD, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the LORD: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: "Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God." For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel." See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn." Jeremiah 31:1-9, NRSV.

Amen!!