

Papua New Guinea

By: Penny Holste and Keith Holste

February 2, 2014. Pastors Penny and Keith talk about their recent trip to Papua New Guinea.

[In this sermon, Pastor Penny and Pastor Keith refer to photos that were being displayed by projectors in the church at the time.]

*** Transcript ***

[Pastor Keith]

Well we've heard about Simeon in our reading this morning as one who held this Christ child and said he is the light of the nations. And this gospel that comes through Jesus then is the light to all nations, and we're going to focus this morning on it being the light to a place in the world called Papua New Guinea. It's just north of Australia. And the part that you see in orange there is the part that's Papua New Guinea. The island is divided in half. It's the second largest island in the world. But the part that's in orange, and then New Britain and some of the other islands around it, make this country that's in partnership with our Central States Synod, ELCA. We've been in partnership for many years now. Different people in our synod, including a former bishop, have lived in Papua New Guinea during part of their lives. So we have a partnership with Papua New Guinea, as well as with Eastern Russia, the Urals, and Siberia. People from there were with us this summer, and we hosted a dinner for them back in June. But today's focus is on Papua New Guinea.

This is a picture of our delegation. See Penny there, and the mission developer in our synod office, and pastor Gary Teske, who most recently was pastor at Lawrence, Kansas. Now he's retired, but still working with our companion synod committee. The two other men you see there are Walter and Phillip, two men who were the ones who took us around and took care of us on this trip. I want to talk about the last Sunday morning we were there. We went to this church at a place called Sattelburg. It's kind of in a German style; you can see it looks like a cathedral. The mission was started by Germans about 1886, late 1800s, when Germans had come to put in plantations and to take trees for wood. There was a pastor who came first to be minister to the workers, but then noticed all the people who were doing the low-level work, the natives, and began to change his idea from being a chaplain to the German workers, to being a missionary to the workers who were doing the hard work. And so he started that in this area. It took a long time, maybe 25 years or so, to get conversions to happen.

But this church is on a very high mountain, one of the highest places in that area. And as you probably recall, important things happen in the spiritual world on mountains. In the Old Testament we have several things that happen on mountains. And the normal lesson for today, if we weren't doing the Presentation of Our Lord, would include the words of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus was on a mountain to speak. So, high places like mountains, in both more native religions as well as Christianity, can be important parts. And so it was a symbol to have a Christian church on this mountain that had been the premier spot for the native religion of Papua New Guinea. For the people it was their high, holy place. And so their religion went away, and Christianity came to take that place. And so this is at this place called Sattelburg.

Well for once on the trip, we were early for something. We were early for church. And so we'd ridden in this pickup up there. And so we were talking, waiting for the worship to happen. And the man you

see on the right had been in our conferences all week. Even though he was an older man, he was always concerned that the stewardship plans that we were talking about were not modern enough, that they would not appeal to the young people. And so we heard from him in other ways, both in the pigeon, that normal language, and he could speak English also. But here we begin with a new theme, and he talked to us with a big thank you. He said, "I want to thank you for being here." First I thought he meant like other people we've run into, people on the reservation or people in El Salvador, or others who say, "Thank you for being here because it just helps us keep up hope." But that was just his start. He did thank us for coming, but he said, "I mean 'you,' as all of your people who have brought the gospel to us. We would not be the same. We would be back in slavery to death," like we heard in our Hebrews lesson today, "If it weren't for the gospel having come here. It's completely changed us as a people, both in ways that make for good institutions, but especially in our faith. It changes how we think." And so he was one who thanked us as representing all those who have come before, as ones who brought the gospel to him and to those people.

We talked to Pastor Gary Teske, who was with us on this trip. He had been a missionary in the western highlands for about nine years. In our conversations we asked Gary, how did you come into villages that have never heard a word about Jesus or the gospel, and make any change with them? He said well, we'd arrange a meeting with either the tribal elders, and other people would come, and we'd say you live under this "slavery to death." That is you live under, in your former religion, the fear always of what the spirits of the ancestors are going to do to you today. Are you going to make the right move? Are you going to do the right thing? Or will your ancestor haunt you in some way? You never have a moment of joy because you're always worried about what the spirit of the ancestors are going to do. I have news to you, Gary would say, of a different god, a god who cares about you, a god who doesn't want you to live in fear, a god who wants you to live knowing care and love. And it wasn't always at the first meeting that they would convert, but hearing a word of a god who loves them rather than gods who are always after them converted the people. And that's, I think, what he really was trying to say to us that day.

About 15 miles away is another church, and it's the scene where another conversion happened for the people in about 1909 (we'll see on a chart in a minute) when a pastor got all the tribes together on this spot and said: this is the day I ask you to choose. I ask you to choose to live for the Lord Jesus and to lay down your weapons. And he had the persuasive power -- we'll call it the power of the Holy Spirit, would be better explanation. They laid down their weapons and they all that day said yes, said -- as many tribes -- that they would now become Christian. And so, we begin to get a hint of what a difference this has made in the last hundred, hundred twenty-five years in this country and change of life. Someone said, we used to fight all the time, we would eat each other, you know. There were cannibals. It was awful. But everything is different now with the news of Jesus.

Pastor Teske used the example when he was in the highlands that, as for Paul and others, congregations don't always get along very well. One of the congregations under his charge had split. He was disappointed and had a meeting with them, and said we've been talking about love and loving one another in the Lord. Isn't there a way to work this out? And they said no, there's no way to work it out. And a man came to him afterwards and said Pastor Gary, just remember that in former times we would have killed each other. Now we're just splitting into two different churches. So it's a depth of change that the gospel has made in this place, and we came to appreciate it. Part of our guide's thanks was for the institutions that came with the church. They didn't have organized schools. They didn't have organized hospitals. But because of God's care now, through the faith, they have. This is the sign for a hospital begun by Lutherans from Germany -- the Brown Hospital, still operating. They have hospital care, ways to heal one another, ways to heal a person. And now they have things like a school system

and regular daily primary public schools. They also have a government. He was proud that Lutherans are in high places in the government, that they are a part of things. People from their district are high up in the government. And so this wouldn't have happened in the days before PNG became independent in 1975. So he went on and on to talk to us about big changes. The gospel has made this light of Christ to the nations, has changed them just thoroughly, as individuals and as a people, because it's come to them.

Now Pastor Penny will pick it up.

[Pastor Penny]

As Pastor Keith mentioned, it's probably been a hundred twenty-five years since the light of the gospel came to people in Papua New Guinea. As an aside, the children were looking at a picture of a child fascinated by wheels. It's been said that in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, in the isolated valleys, the first time they ever saw wheels was in the second world war, because they were that isolated. So this was a country that was very isolated and certainly didn't know the gospel until a hundred twenty-five years ago. And like Anna and Simeon, they live now the gospel. You can see it in big ways, where they've come to be peaceable and they've organized a government. But we saw it in three ways that I think are very distinctive in Papua New Guinea.

In the first way, we saw how the gospel changed them, that they love to get together. And it's nothing for them to travel by foot, on hot and humid days, carrying things on their heads and on their backs for a half hour or more to get to a meeting or to get to church. They routinely walk, and they're just so eager to be together. They had a farewell dinner at one place for us, and it was a potluck. And I sat next to a lady and I said what did you bring? And she pointed to a big tray of things. Turns out she'd walked for a half hour or more carrying that tray. And by the time that potluck was over it was pitch dark, and she was going to just turn right around and walk -- no electricity or anything, no flashlights -- home again, carrying her tray. She was happy to do that. They love being together. They love community.

Another thing that I noticed was (and this is not new for anybody who's ever been to a third world country) they have a different sense of time. And of course it's a challenge to people from the Western world, but I came to really get a better sense of why they have a different sense of time. They took time to greet people. We went to a nature preserve, and the men that were guiding us went up and they were talking with the the guards and shaking hands and laughing. I thought they must know these men. No, that's just the way you are in Papua New Guinea: you take time for one another. They didn't mind just watching each other. We saw three men who were volunteering to repaint the student union at a seminary in Lae. And there were four or more watching them, just spending time with them. They took the time to be together, to encourage each other, to be friendly. When we were staying in the rural area, we stayed in a guest house, which is the house on the left. And it was right next to the district office, right across the lawn from us. And I was amazed that late into the night there would be guys in there laughing and talking. It was a place of socialization, not just business. They did get business done, but they did it on their own time, which allowed for a lot of talk and care of one another.

We took a number of different hikes. And I was hiking with this man who's a minister named Robert. And before he became a minister, for 18 or 19 years he was a commercial fisherman, or sailor I should say. And he told me one time they sailed to Florida and they docked in Miami and spent a month there. And I said, what did you think of United States? And he said, I've told my friends if you want to live in the United States, it's all about time, time, time. We have a different sense of time. We have our own

agendas. Therefore our meetings start on time. Their's don't. Their worship may not start on time and may not end on time. But the reason, I came to realize, is because they set aside their personal agendas for other people, and they're just very willing to let interruptions become their business. So it was frustrating and refreshing at the same time.

The third way that the light of the gospel really shows through in their way of life is their hospitality. We were fed three times a day by a woman who insisted on bringing these lavish meals for us. We told her we still have some left over, we can eat this for two meals. No, she would take what was left over and give us something brand-new out of her garden, which was quite a distance away. She had to hike to it. Or she would go to the local market and use the fruits and vegetables from the area. But she would also have canned meat and ramen noodles. They have their own brand of ramen noodles, many flavors -- and she used it so creatively. Every meal was different, very tasty and beautiful. This is how she liked to serve the fruit. So we really knew the hospitality of food and being well cared for. Often when we'd go places there would be a ceremony to greet us. They call them "sing sings," where they'd have native garb and they'd sing native songs. The second time we encountered it was when we came from traveling by ferry to this rural area. And of course being PNG, they didn't have the battery for the ferries. The ferry was three or four hours late. So what they had intended to be a ceremony in the afternoon leading up to dinner, was now in the evening and it's pitch-dark there. But they waited for us. And then they met us and they had erected kind of a gate out of foliage and it would fall down -- they would push it down -- to show that we were welcomed, and then we would walk over that gate. They had prepared the passage to the meeting house where we were going to have the meeting, decorated it with petals. And they led us by this procession wearing their native garb and singing their native songs all the way up to the house where we would be having the meeting.

There were often gifts. You can see we all got PNG hats. I mean they have so little. Beautiful bags, you saw the men wearing them around their heads. Everyone used them as a way to transport papers, books, groceries, babies, whatever you had. You put that around your head to transport your baby. You can see we're trying out our caps. Necklaces too. They liked to give gifts, and it was a beautiful thing they did. But I think the person who embodied hospitality the most for us was Walter. He's an official with their district -- or their synod, it would be like our synod. But he was our guide. And he was always hovering, so to each other we called him our mother hen. He was a beautiful man. And the last time he showed it, we were about to leave to return to Lae for a four-hour ride in a motorboat. I'm going to move ahead so you can see what they are like. They're not that big, and they pack them full of people and things, and they sit really low on the water and go very fast and they're way out in the sea. And nobody, nobody has life jackets. Well Walter couldn't stand that. Here he was in charge of the four of us, and he wanted to make sure we got there without drowning. So Walter borrowed life jackets, four of them -- and there were fifteen of us in there, so I'm not sure what would happen. And here he is, like a good flight attendant showing us how to put on the lifejacket to make sure we were protected. He was a beautiful person and his hospitality was amazing.

At one service, which is so typical of them, they just turned to the four of us and said, you sing a song. And we looked at each other thinking okay, what do we know the words to that kind of fits in? And someone said how about "They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love." We thought okay, we probably all know that one, so we started singing it. And of course they knew it and they joined right in -- and they knew all the words. And it was really a kind of a theme song, I think for me anyway, because as we flew out it was a very sad time. I figured, being logical, I would never see these people again. And they were so gracious and so passionate about their faith. But they reminded me of all the ways that we who have the light of Christ live that light out -- in the way we treat other people, in the way we treat time, in the little things as well as the big things. They were a good reminder to me of the

wonderful responsibility and gift that we have in knowing the light of Christ, and that whatever we do we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to let the world see that we are Christians by our love.

So they taught us a lot. And we have a lot to be grateful for. And hopefully we will keep in contact with them and continue to support them.

*** Keywords ***

2014, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Penny Holste, Pastor Keith Holste, Hebrews 2:14-18, Luke 2:22-40