

So Many Sad Stories Here

“We have so many sad stories here,” Lungile said today. She’s right, I suppose. There will be a lot of sad stories here. If there weren’t we wouldn’t have come here. Us being here isn’t going to suddenly turn the stories all happy.

She was referring to a boy who left the orphanage where she serves as a caregiver. He went to visit relatives for Christmas and didn’t come back, presumably because he was in a hospital.

But she’s also worried because a new director is taking over the orphanage. Ironically the Americans I know involved in the orphanage are very excited about the new director, who is the first Zulu director in years. But to a Zulu like Lungile, change means a chance for broken promises, and Lungile has had many broken promises in her life already. It’s easy for her to think of the negative possibilities. “If this orphanage collapses,” she says, “I’m in a very bad place. I have eleven orphans who are my children now.”

I spoke also with a home based care worker called MamShezi (women are literally called Mother-Surname or Mother-of-so-and-so, so I’m either MamChrissy or MamakaPhoebe). She told me the story of how her twelve year-old daughter had died. “Mother of Phoebe,” she said to me, “I tell you that was the saddest day of my life.” She described how the girl was jumping up and down, swimming with friends in an unfamiliar river. Suddenly the girl disappeared under the water and friends couldn’t pull her out. MamShezi surmised that it could be a big snake in there. Who knows. I know we won’t be swimming in any rivers here.

This place is full of a running stream of prayer requests. On the same afternoon, I met Zodwa, a young woman thinking about taking out a loan from us at Microfinance for Youth (now called YEBO). She heard about a foreigner running a bead cooperative and wants to sell beadwork, but the fact is the market to tourists is flooded by people with far greater beadwork skill than she has. She wants to start a business and takes the task seriously but is stumped about what to try.

Then there’s Ana, who we hoped could be our first loan client of the year. When I spoke with her further, she explained that she’s very worried about her teenage daughter. While the girl has had huge success selling baked goods orders worth as much as \$40, this year the daughter will attend eleventh grade, and schoolwork gets one step busier. Will she have time to run the business? Ana works full time, so would she have any time to help? Besides, to take out a loan, they need a group of three to five youth with mentors, and they’re not sure they can find others they would trust to join their group. .

Multiple times our own staff have questioned why we want to work with youth. Why not give loans to older established business people in the community, or at the very least adults with solid skills to run businesses? Why bother with youth, who are unskilled, busy, and immature? Are they worth the time we spend training and investing in them?

It's hard to know just how much hope to have, and how much to grapple with reality.

Frankly I can see no other reason to have hope except that I believe in a Good God.

I'm rereading Lamentations. Only recently I learned that exactly one half of this carefully crafted book of poetry sets out a grand complaint to God. I mean seriously bad stories, like people eating their own children while their cities are under siege. And then the hinge of the whole book hits, and from then on it gets hopeful. And this is the hinge:

“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’”

If you read this and don't believe in God, you may call me a fool, but it's the beginning and the end of everything for me. When the signs of hope in life around me run out, there are words like “When I called, you answered me; you greatly emboldened me... Though the Lord is exalted, he looks kindly at the lowly” (Psalm 138) and James’ “True religion is this: to care for widows and orphans...” and Isaiah 40:11 “He gently leads those who have young.”

Last weekend we attended our regular Zulu church, but our pastor had left for a six month training program. Honestly I had been wondering if his absence would be an excuse to leave the church for a while and attend something with a Western style Sunday School and all that. Wouldn't it be nice to meet some white South Africans who could lend us things like curtains or a refrigerator for our new house?

Instead we're getting connected to people who can teach us to live without curtains or a refrigerator.

We met in a home. We had met in a school until recently, but now the school doesn't want us to use the room. So we met in a little Zulu home with mud walls and borrowed chairs.

A man I didn't remember meeting before preached. He began by repeating several times just how happy he was to be there. He said he didn't think he'd ever end up in a place like this in life, and you could tell by the way he said it that he meant it. There was a freshness to his salvation, as if he could still taste the old life, and knew this one tasted so much sweeter.

He preached about treasures in jars of clay. We are broken people, in broken places, but there's treasure peeking out of the cracks from inside. And I saw us there, our group of twenty or so people—all black except our family—staring out a chipped blue door frame at a broken tractor and a green field, from here in a cracked mud house. And I know there is treasure here in this clay jar.