

# JL Zwane

*Memorial Church and Centre*

A Quarterly Newsletter

Issue 3 Spring 2009

## *Why Are You Weeping?* *-John 20:15*

by Reverend Mary Ellison Baars

The Easter season has arrived and with it, somewhat ironically, so has a season of funerals. In our church community, a week does not go by without an encounter with death caused more often than not from HIV / AIDS or violence. When the work week is over, saturday is not so much a day for catching up, for doing laundry or cleaning, but it is a day to come together as a community and remember those who have departed.

In many ways, a trip to the cemetery is as much a social outing as it is rite of passage. Hundreds, maybe thousands, gather around grave after grave, dressed not always in black, but also in the colors of Africa, singing songs and celebrating God's promise of everlasting life despite evidence to the contrary. If one looks closely at these realities in South Africa, instead of seeing irony in the juxtaposition of Easter and funeral season, one might catch a glimpse of the resurrection in the midst of suffering and death.

I will admit that I was not eager to take my first funeral, or even to embark on my first bereavement visit. Being in the presence of grief requires one to tread on holy ground, to gaze upon something so sacred that it is indescribable. There is a reason the Hebrew people feared looking at God in the face and never dared to utter the Divine name. Speaking of such holiness aloud does it a grave injustice. In the same way, getting near death often feels like trespassing. And yet, it is into this raw, unfettered place of pain that God beckons us to come and abide.

The first saturday after Easter, despite my trepidation, I was forced to meet God in the stillness of



Mel and Rev. Sokoyi (a Presbyterian minister in the Western Cape and a South African Army chaplain) with elders from his church. Every worship service is completed with a prayer and benediction for the ministers and elders.

death. I attended funeral for a young man of twenty-five who had died in the early hours of Palm Sunday. A two week waiting period before burying the dead is very typical in Xhosa tradition. In these two weeks, extended family and friends come from far and wide, gathering around the family, ensuring that in this period of grief and bereavement, those who have been touched by death are never alone. Furniture is moved out of the home and mats and chairs are brought in so that there will be seating for all who visit. I often enter into what seems like a small, three room house to find handfuls of people filling the rooms. They come to the home in the morning and sometimes stay all day, bringing nothing but the gift of their time and presence. In some instances, so many family members have passed away, that there are none left to sit shiva for the dead, so neighbors take the place of the host family, all so that proper respect be given to the one who has died. After all, in this community, money is

rarely spent on birthdays or anniversaries but instead it is saved in anticipation the funeral, one final and grand celebration of God's gift of life.

Before attending funerals in South Africa, I had heard of funerals described as celebration rather than gloom. Yet, it wasn't until coming here that I fully understood what a funeral celebration looks like. There is always a moment during the service when I have to fight back tears. But they are not the kind of tears one might expect, they are instead tears of joy. Joy at stumbling across a group of people whose witness and faithfulness surpasses my own capacity. Those who gather to sing and praise God every Saturday at a funeral, they proclaim the resurrection even in the face of death. As the weeks pass, the numbers only increase, the darkness only intensifies. Despite this though, their songs continue to ring out from the grave, reminding everyone who hears that through Jesus, though we may die, we also live.

This is the promise we find again and again in scripture yet sometimes it takes an encounter in the flesh to understand. As the women gather around the coffin and dance, as they fill the grave, dust and dirt mingling with song, the presence of the risen Lord is known. These women are like the women at the tomb of Jesus; they have come to anoint the body with their songs of praise despite the fact that the coffin has been shut, the tomb sealed. They come each week because they believe in God's promises. They believe that even in death, God is still there.

Occasionally when I look into the sea of faces, my eyes come across an old mama who is too weary to dance. Her head is low and the weight of her grief is almost unbearable. The years, the struggles, they have certainly taken their toll. The gospel of John says that



Mel and Natalie (one of two other clergywomen in the Presbytery of the Western Cape) at St. Andrew's, a very diverse church which supports many refugee families who have found some asylum in South Africa

Mel and her friend Teach who is a long time volunteer and teacher at the Guguletu Senior Centre. Every day, Teach comes to staff the Senior Centre and brighten the lives of those he meets.



Over fifty children in the orphan program receive a food parcel each week as well as help with school fees, books, and uniforms.

Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside of the Jesus' tomb. Though she believed in God's promise, her heart was still broken. The pain of death is very real not only in South Africa but in each of our lives. There is nothing easy about being separated from the people that we love. And yet, when Mary walked into Jesus' tomb, the angels said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Why are you weeping? Look behind you. You may think that Jesus is dead, but you are wrong. He is right here, standing and breathing. Jesus is alive. Why do we weep for Jesus has been raised from the dead and because Jesus lives so do we. This is what God has promised us.

In this season of death for many in South Africa, the dancing, the praising, continues on. I have the privilege of watching as the communal hope lifts up even those who mourn, carrying their spirit until they can rejoin the song. Watching these women, I am humbled. They preach the gospel more fittingly than my meager words ever will. I am grateful to learn from them and pray that my own faith will grow because of their faithful example.

In this community I have learned many truths about God, yet it may be the funeral which has brought to life for me the reality God's boundless love. In our life and in our death, God's love for us has no end. For though we all die, death does not have the final say. In our death, Jesus draws us into his everlasting life. In Jesus, we are part of a new creation. Our old lives are gone, but a new life, a fuller life, a life in Christ, has begun.

*If you would like to learn more about JL Zwane and any opportunities for further involvement in this ministry please visit [www.presbyteryofflorida.com](http://www.presbyteryofflorida.com). You may also e-mail Mel at [mel.baars@gmail.com](mailto:mel.baars@gmail.com) for more information.*