



no room

a true African tale



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BY D. MERRILL EWERT

THUNDER SHOOK THE GROUND. Lightning illuminated the midnight sky. Angry clouds boiled in the heavens, and palm trees bent in the wind. The cool, humid air signaled the arrival of a tropical storm.

And I, standing under the open night sky outside an African village, had nowhere to go.

The day had started 18 hours earlier on a little mission plane carrying me from one Mennonite mission station in Congo to another 100 miles away. I had just attended a meeting of community development workers and was on my way to the city where my wife and I served as Mennonite Central Committee volunteers. The national airline flew weekly from a nearby city to my home, but there were no seats available for several weeks. Driving was not an option because the heavy rains had washed away several bridges and closed the only road. I was stranded.

Fortunately, a missionary pilot learned of my predicament and flew me across the desolate countryside to another mission station where I might be able to catch a ride with one of the commercial traders who traveled throughout the region. Although not where I wanted to go, at least I was moving in the right general direction.

After the pilot dropped me off at the mission station, I walked to the nearby road—a dirt path that traders used when traveling through the region—and waited under a small tree. Two or three commercial vehicles passed that way on a typical day.

After several hours of waiting, a truck finally came along. The driver stopped and offered me a ride. Though he wasn't going to the city where I lived, he agreed to take me to another town where two major roads intersected. From there, I could easily catch a ride home. I tossed my bag in the back and joined the driver and another young man in the cab. The route was indirect—like driving from Minneapolis to Chicago by way of Kansas City—but at least I was going home.

Over the next few hours, I learned that my traveling companion was a student on his way to the city where I lived. As we approached the crossroads village around midnight, it was clear that we would be stranded for the night.

So, there we stood in the dark, a major storm moving through the area and no vehicles on the road.

"You are lucky," the young student said to me, "because you have a 'brother' in this village, so you can stay with him."

Surprised, I asked what he meant. He explained that two young Peace Corps volunteers lived in this community and taught in a nearby school. He would

take me to their house so I could stay with them.

"What about you?" I asked.

He said he'd sleep under a tree or something. I gazed anxiously at the lightning.

"No," I told him, "we'll both stay with my 'brothers.'"

By the time I knocked on the Peace Corps volunteers' door, I felt the first drops of rain. An almost continual flash of lightning illuminated the landscape. It was eerie.

"Who is it?" one of the Peace Corps volunteers asked.

Through the locked door, I explained that I was an MCC volunteer from the next major city—and that I was stranded with no place to stay for the night. The young man with me, I added, had been a student in their school.

"Go away!" one of the volunteers shouted. "I don't know you."

Again, I explained who I was, what I did for MCC, and why I had arrived in their village at midnight. I elaborated further—I was an American from Minnesota, a Mennonite volunteer working in community development. I also dropped the names of every Peace Corps volunteer I knew in the region.

"Go away," he repeated. "We don't know you! You can't stay here!"

I was dumfounded. With nowhere else to go, the student and I ran through what was by now the pouring rain to the center of the village. We ducked under the eaves of a nearby building. By pressing ourselves against the wall, we avoided the downpour until the wind shifted, soaking us once again.

This wouldn't do, I thought. I told my traveling companion that we were returning to the house of my "brothers."

Once again, I pounded on the door. They came with their oil lamps, peering at us through a crack. The light revealed a nicely furnished living room with a large couch, several comfortable chairs, and a dry cement floor covered with an inviting mat. It was the biggest house in the village, the only one made of brick and covered with a tin roof.

"You can't stay here," one shouted when I asked if we could come in and wait out the storm. "We don't know you. Besides, we don't have any room."

"What do you mean, you don't have any room?" I asked. "All we need is a dry place to sit until morning, and then we'll be on the first truck out of town."

The two volunteers began moving furniture to block the door.

"You can't stay here," they shouted. "Go away! Go away!"

Every Christmas since that stormy night in Congo, I've wondered what I would have done if Mary and Joseph had come to my house. Welcome

As the student and I ran back to the village center, he asked me what my brothers had said. (The Peace Corps volunteers and I had conversed in English). I told him that they claimed to have no room for us.

"That's what I thought they said," he responded. "Why did they say that?"

I had no answer.

By now, the tropical storm had arrived in force. The student turned to me and said, "Let's try one other thing. I think that a guy I met in school lives around here somewhere."

We ran between rows of grass houses, waking several people to ask directions. Finally we came to a tiny house where my guide stopped, called out softly and waited. Sure enough, a young man—who knew the student with me only slightly—emerged and immediately invited us inside. The young home owner apologized profusely for not having any food or hot coffee for us. We assured him that we had already eaten and weren't thirsty.

The one-room house was barely bigger than the bed that took up most of the floor. As soon as our host heard our story, he pointed to the grass-filled mattress and said, "You are going to sleep here tonight."

"We can't take your bed," I protested. "If we can just sit inside until the rain stops, we'll be okay."

"No," he replied, "you are strangers and don't know anybody in this village. You are tired from your trip, so you must rest. I should study anyway."

Then, over our objections, he gave us his thin, worn blanket saying, "You're cold and wet. You'll get sick if you don't warm up."

He picked up a book, huddled over a small lamp in the corner of the house and began to read. Exhausted and grateful, the student and I collapsed on the mattress and went instantly to sleep.

Early the next morning, I heard the sound of a truck engine starting up. I jumped to my feet, grabbed my bag and looked for my host. I wanted to thank him, but he was not around. So, I ran to the market square and caught a truck just as it was starting to drive away. The driver agreed to take me along, so I climbed into the back of his vehicle and made myself as comfortable as I could on top of a load of cassava. I arrived home that night.

No room in Bethlehem

Although I never saw my host again, I think of him every time I hear the story of Mary and Joseph on the night that Jesus was born.

I remember the young man in a little grass house during a tropical storm in the middle of Africa. He heard my knock and opened the door. He saw that I was a stranger and took me in. He noticed that I was exhausted and gave me his bed. When he realized that I was wet and cold, he offered me his blanket. He thought I must be hungry and thirsty so he apologized because he didn't have any food in the house or hot coffee to drink.

I also remember the two Peace Corps volunteers who occupied the biggest house in the village but sent us out into the storm because they "didn't know us" and "didn't have any room." Although supposedly there to teach the Congolese, these young Americans had much to learn. From their Congolese hosts, they could have learned about compassion, hospitality and meeting human needs.

Over the years, I've felt that we've been much too hard on that innkeeper in Bethlehem. After all, Mary and Joseph didn't have reservations. He didn't know they were coming. The inn was full of other guests who had already arrived and checked in. Instead of turning them away, however, he offered Mary and Joseph what he had—a warm and dry place in his stable.

If Mary and Joseph had arrived at the home of those two Peace Corps volunteers in Congo, I suspect that they would have been sent back out into the storm. On the other hand, I'll never forget that young Congolese man who would have given them his bed.

Every Christmas since that stormy night in Congo, I've wondered what I would have done if Mary and Joseph had come to my house. Would I have opened the door and welcomed them in? Would I have made room for Jesus? ■

D. Merrill Ewert served with MBMS International from 1967-1969 and Mennonite Central Committee from 1973-1976, spending 1974-76 in Congo. Last month, Ewert was inaugurated as president of Fresno Pacific University, an MB university in Central California.