



Stille Nacht

I was having a hard time believing it was Christmas. My housemate and I decked the halls. We had a tree we decorated with our friends, nativity sets, and presents under the tree. Friends of mine, including my future husband, had traveled to spend Christmas with me, but as a Northeasterner, I had come to “feel” Christmas with at least a little chill in the air. My experience had confirmed the babe in the manger must have been born in the bleak mid-winter, even if snow was improbable. A hot Christmas challenged my inner connection with the season, even though I know none of this was the reason for the season.

The choir was ready to sing, and the boys I saw every day – boys I had grown to love, were excited to be part of the worship time. I had put together a nice Christmas Eve worship service to bring joy to the world on this holy night, but try as I might, engaging all my senses, surrounded by loved ones, it simply did not feel like Christmas. That is, until I heard the angels sing:

Bushiku bwashila; Abantu tondolo; Kwaiso lubuto tutu; Afyalwa Katula wesi;
Aleto mutende; Mutende wa pe.

Let me be clear, these angels were not wearing halos or wings, they smelled a bit different from cinnamon and nutmeg, evergreen and pine, but at that moment, they were the most beautiful angels I had ever heard sing. Some of them were high, thanks to the petrol they had huffed, some of them were tired as they didn’t have the luxury of a soft bed to rest their heads, but if you could have heard them sing while holding real candles – my goodness – the heavens declared the glory of God. These words are most likely unfamiliar to many, but when sung to the tune of Stille Nacht, I suspect they would be given meaning with very little effort and certainly no need for a translation.

These are the words to Silent Night in Bemba, the language spoken by most people in the Copperbelt of Zambia. These words sung by the boys who ran to my truck every day – street children living in the city center of Kitwe. When these sweet boys sang this beloved Christmas carol, my heart stopped searching for the season for it was found. Not simply in a tune, though I do believe Silent Night is required for Christmas Eve, but because these boys embodied the innocence of a child, the mystery of incarnation, the need for all of us to encounter the child born in Bethlehem. Amoni sang the second verse as a solo and it was as if all the stars above were hanging over the manger once again.

At the completion of the service, I drove the boys back to town. They had found a new high – their enthusiasm literally sang through the streets of town as they hopped out of my truck and danced down the street singing, “Bushiku bwashila,” and it was Christmas all throughout the land – Christ the savior is born not always how we expect it but in powerful ways not always tethered to what is expected! And Christmas has never been the same after my years serving in Zambia.

For unto us a child is born! AMEN

Trisha Miller Manarin