

What am I seeing?



When I arrived in Malawi ten months ago, I didn't know what I was looking at.

I saw men riding bicycles with short sticks of wood piled up on the back bumper. How did they stack them that high, and what was keeping the load from crashing down on their heads? How did they keep their balance, and what can you build with sticks? But these guys weren't trying out for the circus - this is a matter of daily survival. These guys sell firewood for cooking in order to feed their families.

I saw a toilet that resembled a medieval instrument of torture. Why would anyone imprison a toilet with bands of iron and a padlock? What did the toilet do to deserve such a punishment? And why was a cup perched on top of the tank? I know water is a scarce commodity in Africa, but stealing water from a toilet? Malawi isn't the

Sahara. My mind could not process what my eyes were seeing.



Malawi is a lushly vegetated country, with flowers, fruits and trees that I cannot identify by name. I'm partial to palm trees, of which there are many different varieties, including man-made. But seriously, artificial palm trees in the tropics? I must say however that they do make stylish cell phone towers.



Driving on the left side of the road and using the turn signal on the right side of the steering column required rewiring my brain. I didn't study for my Malawian driver's license exam...and I failed it. What does a red triangle with a scorpion in the middle of it signify? Does a red line drawn through the letter "S" indicate that you are in a snake-free zone? And when both the red and the green lights are lit at the same time do you stop or go, or do both?



When you move to another country, one of the biggest challenges you face is decoding the foreign writing on the signs. But even when the signs are in English, you can't believe what your eyes are seeing. Why is there a street named "Lutherane"? Why is there a church named "Wisconsin"? It makes me realize that I'm not the first WELS missionary to set foot in this land.



And that's a very good thing, because there are so many things here that need explaining. I see suffering. I see poverty. I see barefoot children dressed in rags. I see the blind and the lame begging. I saw the casket of a 19-year-old girl. These things will never make sense to me or to anyone else. How can a good God allow

such evil to exist?

That is the mystery of the cross, the beautiful ugliness of Christ's death. It is evidence of God's unexplainable love for unlovable wretches. God's goodness is right there for the viewing in Scripture, but how can people understand what they are seeing unless they hear what it means? How can they hear what it means unless someone preaches to them? How can anyone preach unless they are sent? WELS sent its first missionaries to Central Africa six decades ago, and by God's grace the Lutheran Church of Central Africa is still opening the minds of people to understand what God has shown the world in his Word.



When they see water splashed on their child's head, or the head of an adult, they understand that Baptism saves souls by washing away sin's stain and covering them with the pureness of Christ. When they see people swallowing wheat wafers and sips of wine, they understand that Communion is uniting them with the body and blood Christ used to pay for their freedom. When they see the pastor standing in front and hear him say, "I forgive you all your sins in name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" they understand that it is Christ who is speaking to them, the same Christ whose words give eternal life.

I have begun to understand a little better what my eyes are showing me in Malawi. I have also begun to have a greater appreciation for what God has been doing through his faithful servants here in Central Africa. I hope that through this blog, you also have begun to understand that God's design is much bigger than what we can see. "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit." (1 Cor. 2:9-10)

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