

***BISHOP'S GREETINGS***  
**Advent / Christmas, 2011**  
**Bishop B. Penrose Hoover, Lower Susquehanna Synod**

Dear Co-laborers with Christ,

We stood at the side of the dusty road waiting to see what would happen next. The mid day sun promised that the day would get hotter and the occasional passing vehicle only churned up more dust in the warm air. We had been on the road for more than three hours when the Land Rover broke down.

This was on our recent visit to the Konde Diocese. Bishop Israel-Peter, my wife Sharon, and my assistant, Cliff Eshbach, had loaded our luggage into the Land Rover at 7:30 that morning and left Tukuuyu, site of the Diocesan headquarters, to begin the long cross-country drive to Dar Es Salaam, a distance of over 500 miles. We anticipated that the trip on two-lane highway would take about thirteen hours. We planned to spend the night at the Luther House in Dar and catch a 7:30 a.m. flight the next morning to begin the trip home. Now, however, everything had become very uncertain. Some 100 kilometers west of the city of Iringa, with about another ten hours of driving ahead, we were now stuck at the side of the road.

Our driver, a man named Job, had raised the hood and inspected the engine. It was clear that some belt had slipped, but the extent of the trouble could not be immediately determined. While local Tanzanian women approached us with produce and trinkets to sell, and school children waved as they trooped by, three or four young men joined Job and clustered around the disabled vehicle. Animated conversation ensued in Swahili. One of the men ran off and returned shortly with some tools. It seemed that a decision had been made that the best means of addressing the situation was to disassemble everything. The hood came off and was laid on the dusty shoulder of the road. Then followed the fan, housing, and various wheels and clamps. The radiator was drained, removed, and joined the other engine parts along the road. Hoses, couplings, whatever, all became part of the growing collection. It was clear that we would not be going anywhere any time soon.

The Bishop, meanwhile, paced along the shoulder with his cell phone at his ear. He was trying to reach the bishop of the local diocese to see about the possibility of hiring another car. Success was elusive. Time passed without a clear solution in sight. All we could do was wait.

After a while, a car stopped along the road in front of us and a young man got out. He and the Bishop spoke together and the next thing we knew, our luggage was being loaded in the back of the young man's hatchback. "He has agreed to take us as far as Iringa," the Bishop told me. This was good news. There was at least a hotel in Iringa where we might stay, if need be, to wait for the next developments. We began the drive but had not gotten far when the Bishop told me more. "He says he has a meeting at the university in Iringa this afternoon," he explained. "If we are willing to wait for him for an hour or so, he says he will take us the rest of the way to Dar Es Salaam today." The

young man's name was Peter. As it turned out, his father is a prominent lay person in the congregation at Tuku and Peter stopped his car because he recognized Bishop Israel-Peter at the side of the road. He had not planned to drive to Dar Es Salaam that day, but was willing to rearrange his life to rescue us in our stranded situation. We arrived at the Luther House at 10:30 that night. After a few hours sleep, we made our departure in the morning, as planned.

What Peter did was a huge gift. It is as though you had started to drive from Harrisburg to Chicago (on two-lane roads) and had broken down near Pittsburgh. Then, someone stopped and offered to take you to Youngstown, and if you were willing to wait until a meeting concluded there, to drive on to Chicago, all in the same day! And all of this is done out of sheer generosity and grace.

On the long flight home it occurred to me that Advent is like that. It is a time of waiting, stranded along a dusty road of life, sensing a total loss of control of events, waiting to see what will happen next. Saint Paul writes about sin being beyond our control: *For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ...* (Romans 7). Our spiritual engines are broken. We cannot reach our intended destination on our own. We need to be rescued from our helplessness of sin. All we can do is wait to see what will happen next.

And in the fullness of time, God sent his Son, our savior Jesus Christ into the world to bring about that rescue. To make the greatest sacrifice for our own sakes precisely at the point where we cannot save ourselves. The Child of Bethlehem is the beginning of that rescue that takes us along on a journey to Calvary's cross. And all of this is done by the sheer grace of God.

The magnificence of this gift of grace cannot be grasped in all its fullness this side of heaven's line, but sometimes we see flashes of it in the way we treat each other; in the action of a young man named Peter on a remote Tanzanian highway.

May the richness of this season give you renewed assurance of God's rescue breaking into the world.

Faithfully, your bishop,

+ B. Penrose Hoover