

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## Preaching to Shepherds

*The Rev. Woody Bartlett*

After my wife, Carol, and I had both retired, we looked around for a place to live that would be less crowded than Atlanta. We found a lovely spot in nearby Clarkston, Georgia, where we would have a spacious house on a beautiful acre of land. From Carol's volunteer experience, we knew that Clarkston was also a center for refugee resettlement and activity. We thought that working with refugees might be a way for us to serve together as retired people.

We moved and were still unpacking when we learned that Clarkston was the site of the Sudanese Episcopal Church of Atlanta. Before long I offered my services as an occasional celebrant for their monthly Eucharist. And I learned the tragic story that led to their status as refugees:

Civil war was ravaging Southern Sudan. Raids on defenseless villages left thousands dead, with others captured and sold into slavery. However, many of the young boys (some as young as ten) were not in their villages at the time of the raids but were out in the fields, tending the family flocks of cattle, goats, and the like. When they returned home, they met the horror of the raids and did the only thing they could do; they escaped back out into the fields. There they met other boys in similar situations and started wandering around the countryside in loose bands, looking for food and shelter. They became known as the "lost boys of Sudan."

These lost boys faced many dangers, including being hunted by those who had attacked their villages. As one story goes, they had to cross a river to the safety of another country on the other side. Some were killed by machine gun fire while swimming across. And others were attacked by alligators.

Eventually, many found their way to refugee camps outside of Sudan, where they were fed and clothed and given some schooling. In some of these camps Anglican priests tended to their spiritual needs, baptizing many of them and introducing them to the Church.

The official gears of refugee resettlement turn slowly, but after years in these camps, a great many Sudanese were brought to the U.S., some settling in Clarkston, not too far from where I lived. They went to school, worked a job or two, and had regular Sunday afternoon worship, sponsored by the Diocese of Atlanta, in a local Episcopal Church. Most of the time, worship was led by a young Sudanese man, Abraham. He had been trained in the refugee camp and eventually ordained deacon. He served as the official leader of the congregation. People like me came in from time to time to do priestly kinds of things.

The Sunday afternoon worship was like nothing I had ever experienced. Many of the thirty to forty in attendance were former “lost boys,” now young Sudanese men in their twenties. There also was a sprinkling of Sudanese women who sat on one side of the church — always separated from the men. The parts of the service led by Deacon Abraham were in their native tongue, Dinka. I preached, celebrated the Eucharist, and gave the final blessing, but not in Dinka, I can assure you. I usually preached from the center aisle, doing a conversational style of sermon that invited responses from the Sudanese congregation. It was not their normal experience of a sermon, but it provided a way for me to connect with them more personally. For those who didn’t speak English, there was, of course, an interpreter, usually Deacon Abraham.

The music consisted of African chants from a Dinka hymnal, accompanied by vigorously played drums. Usually, the leader of the singing sang loudly into a microphone. In fact, everyone sang as loudly and as exuberantly as they were able. Most Episcopal priests would envy such participation from their parishioners. But I still wonder if some of my current hearing loss is the result of those services!

One year, I was celebrating the Christmas Eucharist at the usual Sunday afternoon time. It was a busy season for me, as it is for most of us. So I had made some notes to talk about the appointed gospel from Luke: the announcement to the shepherds in the fields of “the good news of great joy” concerning the birth of Jesus. As the sermon hymn was being shouted with their accustomed gusto, I had an inspiration.

I went to my usual place in the center aisle and asked this question, “How many of you have been shepherds?” Over a third of the congregation raised their hands! So I continued, “On that first Christmas Day, God chose to announce his great love for the world first to shepherds in the fields.” And their faces began to glow as I went on to talk about the incredible love of God, proclaimed to those lonely shepherds outside of Bethlehem and now to us in our day, especially shepherds. I could see in their beaming faces that these once “lost boys” were no longer lost but had since been found by the gift proclaimed at that first Christmas.

After that service, I wondered how many of us have had the privilege of preaching to real shepherds on Christmas Day? It is among my most treasured memories in a bountiful lifetime in the priesthood.



The Rev. Woody Bartlett lives in Clarkston, Georgia, with his wife, Carol, a teacher and group facilitator. Although retired in the Diocese of Atlanta after thirty-seven years of priesthood, he and Carol remain quite active by working with refugee girls in a program that prepares them for formal schooling and successful life in this country. Woody and Carol also try to keep up with eight grandchildren, stay active in their community, and travel on occasion.