# Song of a Mighty Fortress

## a Namibian diary

H. Paul Santmire

Southwest Africa is the name used on official South African maps and by members and supporters of the puppet regime in the country. But the vast majority of the 1.5 million people who live in that large but thinly populated nation at the northwest corner of South Africa call themselves "Namibians." An independent country by right, according to the United Nations, Namibia has been held under the heavy heel of South Africa since before World War II. The South African government likes to think of the country as a buffer zone that offers protection from the "dangerous" influences of the whole of black Africa to the north.

The trip north to the Namibian capital, Windhoek, was unexpectedly disquieting. Aboard the gargantuan South African Airlines 747 wide-body, ascending gently toward our cruising altitude of 30,000 feet, we felt a sudden lurching. In a few moments the pilot told us that we were returning to Cape Town because some "unusual vibrations" were affecting one of the four engines. After a fitful landing, we rattled to an unceremonious stop, to our undisguised relief. The diagnosis: a bird had been sucked into one of the engines during takeoff, damaging the blades. A team of mechanics had to be flown in from Johannesburg to repair the damage. Five hours later, the blade repaired and our heads a little lighter with the free drinks provided by the airline, we were off to Namibia again.

The symbolism of the experience slowly dawned on me. The airline had plied us with alcohol—and some of us cooperated all too easily—as a way of assuaging our anxieties about once again entering that huge flying contraption. It did not take the eyes of a Marxist or even any particularly astute insight born of common sense to observe how profusely the South African government was dishing out the opiates to that society under siege. And many of those opiates came packaged with religious labels.

Do not worry, say the protagonists of the state religion in southern Africa, God has chosen the Afrikaner people to be a bulwark of Christian civilization in Africa. Do not worry, they say, we are making progress toward the resolution of all our problems. Do not worry, they say, God wants all peoples to dwell separately—although, of course, we all are opposed to apartheid. Do not worry, they say, every tribe has its own heavenly destiny. Trust us. God is with us. We will save Africa from the red menace flooding down the continent.

But in the meantime, all the expert tinkering with the shaking engines of apartheid is not going to keep that flight aloft—unlike our 747 wide-body (which, we were thankful, made it all the way to Windhoek smoothly). The white tribe has commandeered a doomed craft, and it does not seem to recognize its own condition. Or if it knows the truth, the white tribe does not really care that its own mission is suicidal. . . .

*H. Paul Santmire is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, Hartford, Connecticut. This article is excerpted from his book South African Testament: From Personal Encounter to Theological Challenge, to be published by Eerdmans next month.*

A 4:30 A.M. arising after a midnight retiring set us all on edge. And most of us had been apprehensive about this trip to "the North." Our special permits from the government had come through without difficulty. (It had given me a sinking feeling to walk to the front desk of the Windhoek Police Station to apply for this permit knowing that some of the very Christians with whom we had been talking the day before had been held in solitary confinement and subjected to abuse in the back rooms of the same building. It all seemed so matter of fact.) Yet the fact was that, when we checked through the South African security gate on the main highway north, we were checking into a war zone.

The Owambokavango Lutheran Church was reputed to be perhaps the single most vital church in the whole of southern Africa. What we saw, in terms of comprehensive outreach, surely tended to support that impression. This church of more than 300,000 members is a seven-days-a-week enterprise of mission and ministry. We visited the twice-destroyed and once-more-shelled printing house of the church at its headquarters in Oniipa. In its own way, the new printing house told the whole story.

Generally under duress from the South African forces, the church discovered early one morning that its printing press had been blown up by "terrorists." South African troops, coincidentally, had been seen in the area the night before. Rebuilt, the facility was shelled to the ground a couple of years later. South African authorities again denied any complicity, notwithstanding the fact that theirs had been the only artillery that conceivably could have launched those shells. Undaunted, the church

once again reconstructed the printing press. Two years later, three large shells landed "accidentally" near the press, this time doing only minor damage. On this occasion South African officials said that those shells *were* from South African guns, but that the shelling had been "a mistake." That rebuilt and now thriving press is the story of the church of the Resurrection that lives under the Cross.

Accounts of police brutality abounded in the region. Soldiers were everywhere to be seen and everywhere to be feared. The white police state that rules over the black majority throughout southern Africa was perhaps more visible in northern Namibia than in any other sector. This in fact *was* a war zone—although the actual combat was some 200 miles farther north in Angola.

The church, in the meantime, goes about its daily business, holding the principalities and powers of this age at bay. It disarmingly identifies itself with SWAPO (the Southwest African People's Organization); it has pastors and confirmation instructors at all the major SWAPO bases beyond Namibia. Very few families in this area, we were told, do not have a son (or more) who has gone north to join the SWAPO forces. One of the presiding bishop's own sons followed that route, though he has now been sent to Germany by SWAPO for further studies.

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The church practices a total ministry to its members, with wide-ranging educational and pastoral programs. It sponsors a number of small-scale development projects: outreach to the bushmen, for example (the South African regime is practicing a kind of de facto genocide in this respect), or agricultural demonstration projects such as the development of a well-balanced kind of fodder from local flora, hitherto totally neglected by the tribal farmers. The church also sends a number of missionaries to Senegal and elsewhere in Africa.

The Lutheran church in Namibia, especially in the north, functions as I imagine the Roman Catholic church must function in Poland. It provides much of the cultural infrastructure for a disenfranchised, dispossessed, and oppressed people. It provides most of the good schools and the good hospitals that are available to the majority. It has offered—and continues to offer—a bulwark that allows the people to stand up against the oppressive powers of the government. It is a "people's church" in the most rudimentary sense of that expression.

This was reflected in the faces of those Namibian Christians. They are in fact the vanguard of the new society that is coming into being. It was the Namibian Lutheran churches—in concert with sister communions—that first led the way in speaking out against apartheid throughout the land. It is to these churches, perhaps more than any other organized bodies, that the masses look for inspiration and direction. These churches are indeed a voice for the voiceless.

In this sense Christians in Namibia constantly live at the edge of liberation. They know who they are and what they stand for, and so does the populace at large. In South Africa, in contrast, the situation is much more complex, given the many conflicting loyalties within the black community itself, as well as other geopolitical factors. In South Africa, as Dean Kameeta pointed out, it was the students in the Black Consciousness Movement more than the churches as a body (as in Namibia) who first brought widespread public pressure to bear on the apartheid system from within the country. To be sure, heroic church leaders and congregations, as well as some judicatories, were in the vanguard of the struggle long before. But it still took the protest of the students, led by Steve Biko, to ring the public bell, to galvanize the awareness of the nation. In Namibia, that bell has been tolled by the churches.

Some black congregations in South Africa, it seems, have only lately taken public stands against apartheid. Others, in particular those depending on government favors to exist (as in some of the Homelands), have not *yet* stood up publicly to be counted, though there can be little doubt about the sympathies of most of their members. The clarity and singlemindedness, then, that characterize the black Namibian churches sets the Christian community there somewhat apart from the more ambiguous situation of the churches, black and white, in South Africa.

Namibia is a region, therefore, where few need to talk about "liberation theology." The many are living that theology every day, perhaps without much reflective awareness of the fact. All the familiar First World critiques of liberation theology, especially from Lutherans, who still—four hundred years later—fear that the "enthusiasm" of a Thomas Münzer is going to poison the body of Christ, sound hollow indeed in this land of earnest yearnings for liberation.

I spoke with scores of Namibians who were full of enthusiasm for the liberating and reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ. Never, however, did I meet a bona fide

"enthusiast." I met with dozens of Namibians in the midst of their struggles—as they self-consciously participated in the sufferings of Jesus—and witnessed how they found liberating power in the proclamation of the Resurrection. Never, however, did I meet any Christians who believed that they were establishing the Kingdom of God on earth by their own efforts. On the contrary, this is the place, if anywhere in the world today, where Christians live by grace alone, by faith alone, on the basis of the Word of Scripture alone, and not by their own deeds, their own righteousness, their own achievements or merits. And they consistently celebrate that grace, with joy and fortitude, in proclamation and prayer and Eucharist.

It is a strange irony to hear First World neoconservative theologians and their mainline fellow travelers railing against the "works-righteousness" of liberation theology, a theology that arises from a situation where the faithful have absolutely no illusions about their power to achieve anything, since they are powerless. In the meantime, many of those very First World theologians are themselves zealously caught up in the works-righteousness of academic advancement, economic and ecclesiastical status, and personal aggrandizement.

It is an even stranger irony to see those First World theologians training their big guns on Third World liberation theologians, while an unholy theology of "self-esteem" and a rank theological individualism focusing on the conversion experience—both of which tend to produce Christians who fall all over their faces in their rush to praise the established order of affluence in the powerful West—are outflanking them left and right in their own churches.

Liberation theologians, to be sure, sometimes invoke a loaded concept, familiar to Marxists and their coworkers—*praxis*. This is a suspect word for neoconservative and mainline theologians in the First World. Even an otherwise reliable North American interpreter of the theology of hope such as Carl Braaten has demonstrated this in a recent article sharply critical of liberation theology. But the concept *praxis*, as it is used both explicitly and implicitly by liberation theologians, must be understood both in the context of their own thought and in relationship to the context from which they write. It is a word that allows them both to focus on the practical situation in which they are called to be witnesses and to engage in social analysis—often, surely, with the help of Marxist categories.

That Marxist categories are employed should not be considered an embarrassment any more than it is an embarrassment to note that Thomas Aquinas drew on Aristotelian categories or that Luther presupposed the philosophical categories of nominalism. The question must always be *how* individual theologians employ those categories and *to what end.* Do these categories help or hinder the exposition of the Word of God as it is addressed to the concrete situation?

Indigenous Namibian theology is a case in point. It arises first and foremost at the practical level of the church's life, not from the deliberations of scholars in universities or schools of religion. The Owambokavango Lutheran Church is struggling to be found faithful in its celebration of, and witness to, the gospel of Jesus Christ in a world where the principalities and powers of death—through the agency of South African might—dominate the lives of its members. This church proclaims the ancient gospel promise that Jesus announced in the synagogue, as we find it recorded in Luke 4, the gospel of liberation of the oppressed. That this gospel, then, gets that church in trouble with the authorities when it witnesses to this gospel in word and in deed, and that the authorities, in turn, in order to discredit the church, claim that this gospel is inspired by Marxism, should not be taken to mean that the preaching of the Namibian church is therefore necessarily an expression of Marxism.

Nor does this Namibian church "confuse law and gospel" by verging on works-righteousness. Nor does it somehow entertain the thought that by its actions it can usher in or advance the Kingdom of God. Those concerns make sense mainly to academic theologians in North America or Europe who do not daily live under the guns of South African oppression. This church experiences itself as liberated and commissioned by the gracious love of God in Christ Jesus: its theology is rooted in that fundamental *praxis* of God.

For this reason, it makes perfect sense to think of theology as critical reflection on the practical life of the church in the world, since in southern Africa that life is so visibly and so comprehensively engaged in celebration of the grace of God in the context of a life of discipleship under the Cross. In North America, I fear, a theology predicated on critical reflection on the practical life of the church in the world might in some places die a thousand deaths of ennui long before it ever found its way to the printed page. Another irony: North American and European theologians from churches that, in many places, are tilting toward death by boredom are troubled by the "enthusiasm" of the churches of the Third World.

It may help those who are new to this theological discussion about *praxis* to observe that the Greek title of the "Acts of the Apostles" is "the *praxeis* of the Apostles." Neither Karl Marx nor one of his latter-day followers invented the idea! The book of Acts has to do with telling the mighty acts of God—in forgiveness, redemption, and release.

A biblically based liberation theology, which is the only kind I encountered in South Africa and Namibia, takes up the same theme as it seeks to discern signs of

the liberating works of God in the history of this region and beyond, employing the Cross and the Resurrection—suffering love and redemptive power—as a kind of paradigmatic indicator or the eyeglasses through which to see those contexts in which God can be confessed to be liberating the poor and the oppressed. Liberation theology, in fact, is doing no more than other kinds of theology have done in their historical contexts. Much of the history of theological reflection in the West has been predicated on a certain correlation with the questions given in particular historical contexts. Luther addressed the burdened individual conscience; Schleiermacher addressed the questioning individual intellect; liberation theologians are addressing the oppressed social consciousness.

By invoking the Marxist term *praxis*, then, liberation theologians intend to speak to the historical situation in which they find themselves, just the way Luther and Schleiermacher did. Do they succeed in this task? That is the question. And that question can only be answered as we consider the work of each theologian or preacher as measured against the Word of God and as viewed in its own particular historical context.

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As a matter of fact, I scarcely heard the term *praxis* when I was in South Africa and Namibia. Most of the theologians and preachers there are so immersed in the practical struggle of the church to celebrate and serve the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death that they cannot afford to take the time to enter into theoretical discourses about abstract concepts such as *praxis*—Marxist or otherwise.

Appropriately, as Bishop Kleopas Dumeni and his staff and the deans from nearby districts joined us for a discussion at the Lutheran Church headquarters in the north, a low-flying South African jet drowned out the conversation. Theology in that part of the world cannot help but be contextual. The revelation of the divine Word is unavoidably heard there, as it was on the night when shepherds watched their flocks near Bethlehem, through the crisp air of a concrete situation. The eternal Word is only disclosed in the moment of historical *kairos*, the fulfilled time, as the Kairos theologians in South Africa have reminded us.

Theology at its best has always been incarnational, from Irenaeus to Augustine, from Luther to the early Barth. Theological principles and theological systems, while they surely have their value and their place, rightfully exist not as ends in themselves, surely not as timeless truths to be preserved in the vaults of our seminaries, but as servants of the universal providence of God, which comes to its fruition always in the historical moment.

In response to a question about conscription, the bishop went to great lengths to talk about his church and SWAPO. He pointed out that the Evangelical Lutheran Owambokavango Church (ELOC) ministers to all. ELOC did decide not to provide chaplains for the South African Defense Forces, he observed. At the same time, however, it voted to encourage all conscripts to attend the Lutheran church nearest where they were stationed—but to attend out of uniform.

Yet, notwithstanding its commitment to minister to all, the heart of this powerful judicatory clearly beats with the lifeblood of SWAPO. "According to our constitution," said the bishop, "we follow our members wherever they go—at home, in hospitals and prisons, and abroad. Our people who have fled their country have not fled their faith. They are in our care." To this end, he was then seeking to send one or more of his pastors who were studying in the United States on pastoral visits to Cuba, where hundreds of SWAPO forces are now being trained. And like his predecessor, he himself has visited the exiles in Angola on more than one occasion. "The members of SWAPO," he declared with unashamed affection, "are our brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers. They are one with us. We take that for granted. We send them our church calendars, newsletters, hymnals, and Bibles."

He himself brought up the question of "communist influences in SWAPO." Is SWAPO a communist organization?

"No, hardly," he replied. "Communism isn't a Namibian problem. It's an American problem. Our people don't know what communism is. Our problem is that we need our freedom—and America is resisting that." Linking the Namibian issue, he said, with the issue of Cuban troops in Angola is "just a smokescreen put up by the U.S.A. and the R.S.A. [Republic of South Africa] to hide the continued illegal presence of South African troops in Namibia and to allow the puppet 'transitional government' to establish itself without popular support."

Then he issued the familiar charge to us, which we heard often from the church people we talked with in southern Africa: Keep the pressure on! Obviously, from

what he said, he supported effective sanctions and serious-minded divestment by companies that do business in the region. He could have been thrown in jail, of course, had he come right out and said what he clearly meant to say. Some suffering, he was saying, added to an infinite amount of suffering, is no addition at all. "We must have an end to this torture and this oppression," he stressed. "For that, all of us are prepared to suffer still more."

The bishop also raised the question of race. Not too long before, he pointed out, three (white) Americans were killed in northern Namibia, and it seemed to him that the whole American nation was aroused. But every day, he added, many (black) Namibians are being killed, and America does not seem to care at all.

But this remarkable church, with such consistently capable and energetic leadership, is not going to wait for North Americans to get their act together. Nor is it going to see its own considerable energies drained by its struggle with the principalities and powers of the current political regime. These Namibians are building the church of Jesus Christ for tomorrow, come what may: training the evangelists, reaching out to the godforsaken such as the bushmen and the disabled, providing inexpensive medical care to thousands, equipping their own leadership for today and training new leaders for tomorrow, with great care and patience.

Even as this church attends to the daily tasks of mission and ministry, however, the grace it lives by is always costly. This was dramatized for me when a staff member took us out to a dirt road not far from one of the church's educational centers, about a mile and a half from the Angolan border, and showed us the remains of a large truck. Three days earlier, rolling along that dirt road—much like every other dirt road in the region, much like the several dirt roads along which we had been traveling—the truck had hit a land mine, which blew it sky high and killed the three riders. I peered down into a six-foot-deep crater and then looked around to survey the carcass of the truck and its severed parts scattered over the surrounding field. Death is that close in Namibia.

The hymn at the end of our visit to the country, therefore, took on a new immediacy for all of us. Although the precise date of its composition is in doubt, Luther penned "A Mighty Fortress" in an era when the Turks were at the doors of Vienna and when all kinds of evils were corrupting rulers in high and distant places, such as the holy city, Rome. Some scholars think that Luther may have written the hymn in 1527 as a specific response to a wave of savage persecutions of those who had become his followers. Indeed, one of Luther's close friends, a certain Leonhard Kaiser, was burned at the stake in one of those persecutions.

These Namibian brothers and sisters live in a similar, if not more oppressive, situation. The barbarians are not only at the doorstep of their country, and not only are evil powers reigning in high and distant places, such as Pretoria, but these powers are also breaking into their homes and claiming their children from the streets, much as they once claimed Leonhard Kaiser. The faith of these brothers and sisters was thus all the more remarkable, all the more resonant with the deep pain and the overflowing faith of Luther himself.

So we sang Luther's words in stanzas one and four, at Bishop Dumeni's request, with a fresh sense of their meaning. This hymn was for us at that moment—for me perhaps as never before in quite this way—a living confession of faith and a stirring song of praise in the face of the principalities and powers of this age, precisely as Luther had intended:

*A mighty fortress is our God,*
*A sword and shield victorious;*
*He breaks the cruel oppressor's rod*
*And wins salvation glorious.*
*The old satanic foe*
*Has sworn to work us woe!*
*With craft and dreadful might*
*He arms himself to fight.*
*On earth he has no equal.*

*God's Word forever shall abide,*
*No thanks to foes, who fear it;*
*For God himself fights by our side*
*With weapons of the Spirit.*
*Were they to take our house,*
*Goods, honor, child, or spouse,*
*Though life be wrenched away,*
*They cannot win the day.*
*The Kingdom's ours forever.* ■