

Let the imbongis sing!

December 13, 2000

Back in 1994 TV viewers all over the world watched transfixed, as South Africa's first democratically elected president took the oath of office. While a dignified Nelson Mandela addressed the heads of state, many viewers wondered about the man dressed in leopard skins, standing directly behind him with a little flag stuck quaintly in his headgear. He was the *imbongi*—the praise-singer, who, according to Xhosa custom, had come from Mandela's home region to recite his praises. *Imbongis* are regarded as specially gifted by God; they proclaim not out of their own wisdom, but are possessed and overwhelmed by the greatness of which they speak.

Certainly, if you were a South African emerging from decades of apartheid darkness, there was much to sing about. The nation had been delivered by what even hardened journalists called a "miracle." The BBC commentator welcomed British viewers that morning to "South Africa's 'Day of Grace.'"

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, the psalmist envisions all of creation becoming an *imbongi* for God because of God's "marvelous deeds among all peoples." All of nature is called out to join in the shout: let heavens rejoice, seas roar, fields exult, trees and forests shout for joy! The families of nations are told to sing a new song, to bow down, to dance, and to declare and proclaim God's majesty and splendor.

The news that leaps out of scripture today is simply too much to handle with calm; it should overwhelm our senses and fill us to bursting. People who have walked in deep darkness have seen a great light! These people, according to Isaiah, have been dwelling in a land as dark as death—and suddenly everything has changed: a light has shone on them. They've been laboring under a dreadful, chafing yoke, and God has shattered it. Oppression is gone, and all the boots of trampling soldiers and garments fouled with blood have become fuel for a cleansing fire.

Imagine it if you can.

Those of us from nations who have known oppression, who have groped around for years in that "darkness deep as death," have no difficulty doing so. Those of us who have experienced God smashing the yoke can still taste the moment—the most

exhilarating joy we have ever known.

So why this same, incredible ecstasy right now?

Isaiah locates this joy in the giving of a little child. He dreams a new day into being, when true authority and dominion will be found—but not in battalions of soldiers; they will cast their bloody uniforms into the flames where they belong. God’s new day is about the birthing of a child who will bear the symbol of dominion on his tiny young shoulders. He will inherit the boy-king David’s throne, do battle with evil and bring a realm of justice and peace. This coming child turns the world of power upside down.

God is passionately determined, even zealous, to achieve this.

We are not sure whether the writer has a specific person in mind, but he is clear that God intervenes in history in a way radically different from anything our shadowed, sin-bound minds can imagine. The great light will shine on our darkness through a young woman bearing a special son; the calf and the young lion will lie down together only when we are led by a little child.

Paul’s letter to Titus invites us further into the praise song of our salvation. It is the song of a people loved undeservedly into new life. “For the grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing for all mankind; and by it we are disciplined to renounce godless ways . . .” (New English Bible).

Disciplined by grace!

We come close to the secret of our faith when we discover that lives are made different not by laboring to deserve love, but by being undeservedly loved. Only those who have known what it means to be loved with an indefatigable, impossibly forgiving grace can understand these words. It is when we know that someone has “sacrificed himself for us, to set us free from all wickedness and to make us a pure people marked out for his own,” that we become truly “eager to do good.”

So, whether we look to the liberation of those peoples living in lands dark as death or to that inner liberation that comes by the discipline of grace, we must find this indefatigable lover, this child of hope. Luke tells us where he will be found: in history, among us, with us. Not out there in some wishful scenario of the future, but in a date nailed down in time. Not in some air-conditioned, cushioned sanctuary, but

in a peasant girl's arms on a cold night in a cruel and disputed land. Not in some New Age journey into our pampered psyches, but in a world ruled by Caesars and their puppets, looking for new ways to fleece the poor.

That is where the child will be. God's gift of grace is vulnerable indeed, because he is born into a real world.

But when strong and humble hearts make that discovery and look to the Christ-child for their liberation, they will hear creation's *imbongis* sing as the psalmist commanded, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and on earth peace."