

Cultivating beloved community Bearing witness to Jesus Christ  
Seeking transformational development

# Threads

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Bill & Noy Peeler, July 2019

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

PO Box 93299, Siem Reap, Cambodia

[bill.noy.peeler@worldpersonnel.org](mailto:bill.noy.peeler@worldpersonnel.org)

<https://www.classy.org/campaign/bill-and-noy-peeler/c113448>

***“The eyes of the LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good.” Proverbs 15.3 NIV***

**A**t any given moment day or night, in every square inch of human habitation, countless dramas are playing out, most of them ordinary and unremarkable, following predictable patterns and routines, while others can be totally unexpected, tragic, even catastrophic. At ground level, this myriad of events may seem unrelated to other events in the vicinity. People go about their business unaware of what others are doing across town or even down the road a piece. But if we could view them all at once as these individual dramas are unfolding, we would see that each is a thread of the same broad piece of social fabric. Sometimes, in the late afternoons, I ride my bike up Phnom Kraom, a hilltop from which you can view a large swathe of the Siem Reap tapestry. To the south are the farms, the rice fields, and the vast expanse of the Tonle Sap with its floating villages scattered across its sky-gray waters. In the other direction is the town with its maze of streets and alleyways, its tight-packed jumble of dwellings and the tireless movement of commerce, traffic, expansion and construction. From that height, one day looks much the same as the one before it. But if you could watch it in time-lapse sequence, you would see it pulsate, beating like a heart, spreading its arms in every direction on a trelliswork of earthen features laid out across a landscape fashioned by the mighty hand of its Creator in times long past before any human being ever existed. All this serves as a reminder that what we’re witnessing is a living fabric of sentient beings generating culture and a civilization, filling every available space with the busy-ness of human interaction, activity and the artifacts these phenomena produce.

A couple Sundays back, Noy, Leap, Pastor Thoeur and I were having church under Ploeuk’s house in Svay Village a few kilometers outside town. You may recall me saying he’s the man who was pretty much incapacitated by a fall from of a coconut tree, the one Thoeur baptized with a bucket of water a year or so ago. As I explained before, he can’t do much of anything but lay there on his pallet and stare up at the floorboards. With help getting him upright, he can sit on his own for a spell, but that’s about it. I noticed he was getting a bit shaggy, so I brought my electric clippers along and gave him a haircut. Afterwards his wife gave him a bath and a shave. He was looking pretty spiffy after we got through with him, if I do say so myself. Anyway, there we were having church under his house. At the same moment and unbeknownst to us, an event of a

different kind was unfolding in a village across the patchwork of rice paddies about a kilometer from Phloeuk's house as the crow flies.

The sight of a plume of smoke in the distance is not unusual here in farm country as rice farmers will typically burn off the vegetation to clear land for cultivation. I can't say I even noticed it and even if I had, I wouldn't have given it a second thought. We learned afterwards that that plume of smoke marked the spot where a house was burning down. A young woman of 30 and her two-month old baby were at that very moment perishing in the flames along with the man who had set the fire. It's a complicated story, but I'll tell it in abbreviated fashion. Turns out it was a murder-cum-suicide revenge killing committed by a deranged alcoholic with whom the young woman had had a lengthy affair after divorcing her husband but whom she ultimately rebuffed as dead weight and the cause of heartache, threats and acts of violence. She had a job. He didn't. He had no income. She did. He had a habit and she was for a time, his enabler. When that arrangement became too great a burden and no one else would provide him the means to indulge his habit, he got stinking drunk one more time, filled three bottles with gasoline and went to the house. The girl's father had only just returned from dropping his wife off at the market in time to see the man charging up the stairs with the gasoline. He jumped off his motorcycle in pursuit and managed to grab the man by the leg. But the man fought him off, lit two of his Molotov cocktails and broke them on the steps, effectively blocking the girl's father and giving the man just enough time to get into the house and bolt the door shut with the girl and the baby they'd had together trapped inside. With the conflagration now spreading directly under the house, the man ignited the third bottle engulfing himself, the girl and the baby in flames. The girl's father ran to turn on the water pump at the well and use the hose to douse the flames, but the fire had already burned through the power line rendering the electric pump inoperable. His only option now was to run back and forth between the fish pond and the house with a bucket of water to throw on a now raging inferno. As that particular Sunday was a religious holiday, all the neighbors had gone to the local temple and no one was within earshot to help. The situation was hopeless leaving the girl's father with no means to save his daughter and grandchild. The girl had had a little boy of primary school age with her former husband, who had that day gone to join the festivities at the temple with his friends and was thus spared the same fate as his mother and younger sibling. Now orphaned, he's presently living with his grandparents, the girl's older sister and her husband.

When we learned of it, we went to see what was left of the house. Of course, there was nothing of the upper level still standing. It had all collapsed into the bottom half of the house. Nothing flammable survived. The steel bones of a mattress hung warped and distorted, snagged on the remnants of a charred floor beam. The roof tiles lay on the ground, shattered to bits by the intensity of the heat. The trees and vegetation for several yards around had been singed by the flames. And all that remained of the deceased was indistinguishable from the rest of the wreckage leaving little to be cremated for the funeral. I noticed that a little cup of joss sticks had been placed among the ashes. The older sister and her husband came out to greet us. That's when we began to learn the

details of what had happened. We came back a second time with 50 kg. of rice and a box of noodles, several bars of bath soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste and school supplies for the boy as well as a little cash. We stayed a while spending time getting to know the girl's father, mother and grandmother. The girl's mother brought out the wedding pictures and the girl's framed portrait as she recounted in a matter-of-fact way the events that led up to the fire and tragic demise of her youngest daughter and grandchild. The girl had been quite beautiful dressed in a frilly blue gown, adorned with a delicate



gold-link necklace and earrings with dainty globes of opal dangling from her ears.

The Khmer are a stoic people and well acquainted with suffering and the vicissitudes of life. In the aftermath of a shock as horrendous as that which befell this family, you might get the impression that grief, albeit intense at the outset, is short-lived. But

it's not. An extended period of mourning is a luxury few here can afford. After the initial shock and magnitude of a catastrophe such as the one I just related, grief and suffering dive deep into the psyche and reside there giving way to the more practical matters to which one must attend together with the demands and requisites that accompany each passing day. Even so, the dead are never far. They occupy the air in the space above, below and all around, comprised of ghostly filaments woven into the same seamless fabric in which both living and dead coexist and play a part. In that sense, the Christian bearer of Good News has a distinct advantage because the world described on the pages of Scripture is a spiritual one of both good and evil. As we sat on the mat the girl's mother had laid out for us on a pallet under the mango tree, Pastor Thoeur spoke of those spiritual things – the good, the evil and the one true God who is the only source of good in these evil times. He carefully planted a single seed of hope in the very heart of that grieving family whom evil had singled out one fateful Sunday morning while nearby, we were at worship and unaware of it. So, that's how it is as viewed from the top of a hill overlooking the landscape in a far country – a myriad of dramas happening all at once under the watchful eye of God, seemingly unrelated, and yet each one a single thread of fiber woven into that strange sheet of cloth from which the story unfolds.