

Letters from Overseas

Catherine Christie Writes an Advent Letter from South Korea

December 2011

For He comes, the Prince of Peace

Warm Advent greetings from Seoul and from United Church partners the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea and National Council of Churches in Korea. These are the two partners I work with, as “communication specialist” in their national offices. Part of my involvement is in peace and justice work, and in this Advent of 2011, I want to share a hopeful peace story.



When the people of Kang Jeong Village, located on Jeju Island off the south coast of Korea, learned in April 2007 that their village was going to be the site of a huge new naval base, they were shocked. A few people had gone to a meeting to talk about economic possibilities, but when they were asked if they would like to see a new proposed naval base in Kang Jeong and applauded the question, they didn't expect it to be taken as approval for the construction.

Kang Jeong is a small fishing and farming village on the south coast of Jeju, a volcanic island famous for its unique natural features. It is home to a UNESCO World Geological Park. The villagers know tourists—those who follow the Jeju Coast Walking Trail, and maybe eat at a local restaurant or buy supplies at one of the two general stores at the main intersection in the village—but a naval base intruding on their life? They were not amused. So since that day in April 2007, they have been engaged in resisting the base's construction, which, besides destroying what they love about their home, would also put them right in the path of a possible northeast Asian conflict.

The resistance has been delaying the work. Slowly the people have gained support from national and international peace, ecology, and human rights activists. However, the forces against them have great strength and equal determination. There is very real evidence of the presence of the construction. An eight-foot fence now closes off the village and people from their waterfront, which they are forbidden to approach. There is an intimidating police presence in the village, and many people have been arrested and received huge fines for “obstruction of business.” The mayor of the village and two others were arrested in September and kept in prison for nearly three months. The government has let it be known it wants the work wrapped up, and is exerting real pressure to have it carried out.

One of the saddest consequences is that the village is divided against itself. There are some who want to give in to the pressure or have been persuaded the base is a good option for the future of the area, and there are the others adamant that a naval base must never be on that coast. There is poisonous bitterness within families, between neighbours, between friends.

It sounds like the Roman Empire all over again. It seems the forces of the world will crush the initiative for life. It is the Advent story.

But two recent events have excited me and others in the peace coalition. On the 18th of November the dynamite blasting was to begin on the rock of the waterfront to

prepare it for laying cement. But the Governor of the Island, who had been the target of a major international e-mail campaign, refused to issue permits for the blasting. The second is that the mayor and the two others who have been in prison for just about three months were released last week, to much jubilation in the community. I don't know the reasons for the release, but again, the international scrutiny may be part of it.

It gives me hope that perhaps reconciliation can take place and peace will have a chance to blossom in this rural community.

There is a lot more to this story, of course, and if you are interested in finding out more visit the English website (www.savejejuisland.org).

Let me take this opportunity to thank all those reading this for the support you give to the Mission and Service Fund, which enables the global partnerships, and particularly at this time, the peace work in Asia, to continue and flourish.

It is hard to believe my term of four years in Korea is nearly half over. At Easter, I will be beginning a two-month "Home Assignment," when I will be visiting Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia to share my work in Korea with any group that would like to hear (congregations, UCWs, community groups, presbyteries, etc.). I look forward to the time. If you would like me to come to your place, just contact the Saskatchewan or Maritime Conference offices.

As Advent begins and Christmas approaches, it is my wish that God bless you and those you love in this holy time of the year.

Catherine Christie

Visit our global partnership photo site (<http://unitedchurch.smugmug.com/South-Korea>) to see pictures from South Korea.

To learn more about the Jeju Island situation, visit

- www.united-church.ca/communications/news/general/101129b
- <http://space4peace.blogspot.com/2011/11/good-news-for-once.html>
- www.savejejuisland.org

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