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FINDING HOPE IN SOUTH SUDAN

Interview with Jonathan Krause

Richard: This is Messages of Hope, and I'm Richard Fox. Our lives have never been so uncertain. It's been quite a shock for us. We can't rely on travel plans or on seeing family when we want to. For some parts of the world, that level of uncertainty isn't new. Today we're talking with Jonathan Krause from the charity Australian Lutheran World Service. What can we learn from people who live with constant challenges and often with no end in sight?

Jonathan, you've seen plenty of chaos and uncertainty in your work around the world. How do you compare that experience with the uncertainty of the coronavirus?

Jonathan: It's interesting. There's been times that I've been stuck in the middle of a country, in a desert, in a war zone, and felt so far away from my family and my home. But these times now with COVID, and my daughter and my son are interstate and I can't see them, the barriers feel bigger and stronger than being on the other side of the world. It's like so close yet so far, and it happened all of a sudden, the world turned upside down.

Richard: When's the last time you saw your daughter?

Jonathan: It's been seven months since I've seen my kids interstate. My daughter's got engaged. She's bought a new house, got a new job, got a new dog, and I haven't been able to share any of those things.

Celia: All those milestones, all those things that we take for granted, isn't it. That we have family alongside of us and we can at a moment's notice catch up because the world had become so global? It feels now that our worlds have really shrunk, that we haven't got those opportunities to just pick up and go and do whatever we want whenever we want.

Richard: Yeah. My parents are really struggling at the moment. They haven't seen their grandkids in about a year. You can do FaceTime and all the technology, but it's not the same of being in their lives. Even hearing the grandkids talk through FaceTime and the like, you can hear their angst. They want to catch up with Nan and Grandpa too.

Celia: Jonathan I'm really interested that you said that you felt actually more alone here than when you were across the other side of the world, away from people.

Jonathan: Yeah. When you're in the middle of a famine or something like that, you have a plan to get back and there's almost a sense of direction. But right now, when we've had COVID, you don't know when the end is going to be. You're living in this state of uncertainty. I think the uncertainty is what really tears you up inside. You don't see a way out of it.

Celia: I agree. It's that real uncertainty, that real just not knowing and not being able to plan and not being in control. Coming up, we'll look at the realities of life in South Sudan and what that can teach us about living with uncertainty.

Richard: Not only has COVID brought us uncertainty, but we've become focused on the need for hand washing to keep healthy. We just turn on a tap, but in South Sudan, it's far more complicated. Jonathan, how have people coped with the uncertainty of water there?

Jonathan: I can tell you a couple of stories about South Sudan. I remember vividly going across the river. So there was plenty of water, but at one part of the river there were a whole lot of goats coming down to drink, and there was getting mud and manure in the water. Then a little bit further up there were mothers washing their babies in the water. A bit further up there were people going to the toilet over the river. Then beyond that, there were people collecting water to take back to their community to drink. So the water was there, but it was all being polluted and people were going to get sick from it.

Celia: Wow.

Jonathan: That showed me you have to have more than just a resource. You have to find ways to make sure water is clean. And so you have to teach people about hand washing and sanitation and those kind of things. A bit further on, I went to a community where there was a borehole 100 meters deep, really, really deep, and people were using it to look after their livestock. But the water table dropped and there was a three metre gap between the end of the pipe and the water. I feel like that's where we can step in. We can be that three metres of pipe to connect people and their energy and resources to the source of life-giving water, bringing it together like that.

Celia: We see the droughts. We hear about some of that stuff. What is it really like? What does it mean for them?

Jonathan: Often it's the most vulnerable people who suffer the most, and often it's the young girls who suffer the most because they're the ones who have the job of collecting water. So each morning they might walk 10 to 15 kilometres to collect water, a 20 liter jerrycan. It's not just like turning on a tap. You have to dig a hole in the ground and wait for the water to seep up, then ladle it into your jerrycan, then put it on your head and take it back to your family and do the same thing in the evening.

So the girls are in danger from wild animals and attack while they get the water. They come home, they're exhausted, which means they don't go to school, which means they never have an opportunity to leave that situation. So something as simple as putting a well close to a village takes away all of those problems and that girl can then go to school, build a career and live the life that God wants a girl to live. We can do that simply and easily by donating money for a water pump.

Celia: So it's amazing to think just something like that can change a person's life.

Jonathan: Yeah. It's transformational.

Celia: A family's life.

Jonathan: Yeah.

Celia: Yeah.

Jonathan: And a simple thing like teaching a child to wash their hands with soap. If you don't know that, then the child gets dirty and gets sick and is vulnerable to dying. But washing your hands costs nothing, it's simple, and we can do that all the time. I guess that's one thing COVID has helped with, to take that message to more and more people. You teach it to the children at school and they go home and they teach Mum and Dad, and then it spreads.

Celia: You can see the importance of education there, can't you? It's something we just take for granted.

Jonathan: Yeah. I guess in Australia we're lucky we have the safety nets and we have people to help us, but people in these poor communities, if we don't step in and help, then their children die. It's as simple as that.

Richard: Yeah. It just shows the importance of working together, doesn't it, and finding new ways that can make such a massive difference? But it doesn't always come as quickly as we want. Jonathan, what helps them keep going?

Jonathan: When I go and talk to these people, I always ask them, "Where's God in your suffering?" And almost without fail, people teach me a lesson. They say, "Well, when the bombs are dropping, that's when God's there even stronger than normal. When my child is sick, God comes and is close and is with us as we're crying."

You go to a meeting in South Sudan, it's under a tree. Everybody sits on the ground. Then you pray at the start of the meeting and you wait for God to come down and sit in the dirt with you and direct the meeting. It's really real. They can teach us so much about faith and trust and hope. Here in Australia we've got too much junk in between us and God and we can't see over all of our junk. But there you don't have anything, so God is sitting alongside you.

Richard: So in a way, their times of uncertainty are peeling back the layers of what we kind of look to in our society here in Australia and kind of blind us a little bit of really what's real. So this time of uncertainty in our lives, is actually almost a little bit of a blessing in disguise in terms of that it's actually peeling back some of the layers to point us in a direction.

Celia: I was going to say it's forcing us to, well, get rid of some of that junk.

Jonathan: Yeah. Well, when a tragedy happens in our lives, a child gets sick, or we lose a partner, or anything like that, that automatically shifts away the junk and we're left with what's really important in life. I think our challenge is even in normal, good times that we find our way through the junk so we can see the important stuff.

Richard: What does it mean for them in Sudan to know that God is there with them in these times?

Jonathan: Well, they see God in what we do. So they see the water pump, they see the water coming out, and they say, "Thank you to the people in Australia," because they know that that's God coming alive in their community. It's really, really powerful. But just as powerful is we need to receive from them and learn from them their humility, their resilience, their hard work. We can take that into our comfortable lives and learn.

Celia: Do you find that you actually get a lot more from your experiences there and what you learn from them?

Jonathan: Yeah. You see people's faith, their strength. They work together. People live outside or they live in community and then they want to thank you. They want to sing a song or do a really long speech or collect some eggs. One place I went to, the ladies came out with 13 pumpkins on their heads and thought, "Yeah, you can take that back to Australia." But that's their way of expressing thanks for what people in Australia did.

Celia: Sharing what they have. Yeah.

Richard: So how has that impacted you and your life here? You can't go and see your daughter. So does their faith and their witness of how they live their life, despite all the uncertainty and challenges, has that impacted you?

Jonathan: I remain a human being and I cry that I can't see my kids, and when the threat of borders going up and staying up comes, I get really upset about that. But at the same time, I know there are other people in the world who suffer so much worse and have lost so much more.

Celia: So when you realize that there are people who have suffered so much, how does that help you cope with what you face here?

Jonathan: We all have our own suffering, and just because someone else has suffered, it's not in graduations, but I guess you feel more of an empathy. You know you're not alone, that there are other people hurting. When you see them holding on to faith and trusting in God and looking after each other, then you learn from that and have that in your own life as well.

Richard: One of the things I think is it's opened my eyes to not take relationships for granted. I can't go and see my brother and my parents can't go and see their grandkids either. I was talking to someone just recently and they had planned a whole trip to another state and then now that's changed and can't see their children. I think it's all just opened our eyes up to not take our relationships for granted. Okay, yes, now we're using technology and all sorts of things to connect, but I think it's heightened that importance of the relationship.

I think also it is peeling back all this stuff and seeing that a relationship with God is actually something that's core for us like the water is for people in Sudan. It sounds like their faith is actually more important than the water. For us then, faith in a relationship with God to help us get through this no matter what challenges we face, it may not necessarily change the situation, but that hope it can give us to get through, that someone's with us on this journey, I think is very important.

Jonathan: Yeah, I think you're exactly right. You have to invest in that relationship too. It doesn't just happen automatically. It can fade away. You make the time, like with our families, to go and have a barbecue together or whatever it is. And with God, it's time to pray and read the Bible and fellowship with other people. If you don't do that, then your relationship can fade.

Richard: It is a great witness that the people from South Sudan can give us and the hope that despite all those bombs and the challenges of water, et cetera, they still have a hope, and I think they can inspire us.

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