



Abeba [far right] at her son's graduation

A Door No One Could Shut: Abeba's Journey

By Beth Foreman, Features Editor

It was a cold winter day in Virginia when Abeba Tzeggai began a Christmas journey that would forever change the way she witnessed about her faith in Jesus Christ.

*Savior of the nations, come,
Virgin's Son make here Your home!
Marvel now, o heav'n and earth
That the Lord chose such a birth.*

While the world celebrated the miracle of the Christ Child's birth, Abeba was about to experience another one of God's rich blessings. "I know that the Lord was working throughout this journey. I witnessed a miracle, and now I can share His love when I tell the story."

Her Christmas journey began when her brother called long distance, from 6,878 miles away in Eritrea, with the alarming news that his newborn son, Levi, affectionately known as "Baby Lewy," had just been

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diagnosed with Congenital Glaucoma, a disease that would leave Levi blind if not treated immediately.

While neighbors were hanging wreaths on their front doors, Abeba faced a series of doors on this journey, and this first one seemed to be a heavy, locked door: bringing an Eritrean baby and his mother to the United States for surgery. She already knew that it would be nearly impossible to obtain a visa from a country that did not give visas easily or quickly.

Where would she begin? Prayer.

“Pray first. That’s one of the many beautiful things I have learned through LWML,” she said. Several years ago she met with [then] LWML President Linda Reiser about participating with Heart to Heart Sisters. Before their meeting, President Linda said, “Let’s pray first.” Abeba remembers that moment fondly. “I was reminded then about how important it is to pray first. Also I learned a lot about serving with gladness!”

Abeba, a life long Lutheran, was born and raised in Asmara, Eritrea, and moved to the United States in 1981 so she could study Nutritional Sciences at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Her homeland, a small country about the size of Pennsylvania, is located on the west coast of the Red Sea in north-east Africa, an area often called the Horn of Africa.

For the first half of the twentieth century, Eritrea was a colony of Italy until 1941 when it came under British rule. In 1952, despite the people’s protests, the United Nations resolved to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia. After much strife, Eritrea finally gained independence in 1993, more than forty years later. Today, while Eritreans are making progress as a democratic nation with religious freedom, conflicts continue. The U.S. Department of State recently issued a travel warning for U.S. citizens because of ongoing border tensions.

*Savior of the nations, come,
Virgin’s Son make here Your home!
Marvel now, o heav’n and earth
That the Lord chose such a birth.*

Prayers, thought Abeba. I need prayers.

At home in Arlington, Virginia, Abeba called upon her Bible study group and church friends. One dear Christian friend shared a Bible verse that would become Abeba’s prayer for her Christmas journey: *See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name* (Revelation 3:8).

“This became my prayer, over and over. ‘I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.’”

While Abeba and her friends prayed, Abeba’s day-to-day life continued. She and her husband, Yohannes Araia, have four children, two sons in college and a twin son and daughter in high school. Their home in Arlington, Virginia, is a busy one as Abeba tends to her family’s daily needs, rushes out the door to her job as Nutrition Administrator for Fairfax County, and volunteers at her church, Our Savior Lutheran Church in Arlington. When she could grab a quiet moment, she would go for a walk in her neighborhood or read a chapter in a book that inspires her. “I like the quiet walks so I can think,” she said.

Focusing on her nephew, Abeba read whatever she could find about Congenital Glaucoma. “I knew that Levi might be blind without surgery.” Once she knew this, she worked hard to find a way to bring Levi to the United States for treatment. “I found doctors who were willing to do the surgery. They gave documents to me to present to the consulate office in Eritrea. The board of doctors in Eritrea also approved the medical treatment for Levi abroad, and the government of Eritrea gave exit visas for Levi and his mother.”

It seemed that everything was in place. However, the biggest door she had to open was to obtain a visa from the U.S. Consulate to bring them to the United States.

“There is a U.S. Consulate Office in Eritrea, but it operates only in emergency cases such as medical or death.” Oftentimes, those requesting this visa must first travel to another country like Djibouti or Kenya to get the visa, but Abeba — and little Levi — did not have the luxury of time.

Prayers continued to be lifted to God from Eritrea to Virginia to St. Louis and across the globe.

*Savior of the nations, come...
Not by human flesh and blood,
By the Spirit of our God,
Was the Word of God made flesh—
Woman’s offspring, pure and fresh.*

Her church friends, Bible study group, and her LWML sisters and brothers in Christ prayed for Abeba and for Levi. “I was in St. Louis at an LWML meeting right before I was scheduled to fly to Eritrea, and everyone there prayed with me.”



Abeba [third from the left] with her LWML Heart to Heart Sisters

Abeba stepped on the jet en route to Eritrea in early January and arrived just in time to attend the Christmas Eve celebration, which for many Eritrean Christians comes in January, according to the orthodox church calendar.

While some American children were home playing their latest video game and listening to their new iPods®, Abeba arrived, tired and weary, in her home country after 18 hours of travel. According to Abeba, Christmas in Eritrea is similar to American Christmas traditions, filled with big gatherings and family celebrations. The Christmas Eve worship service is often two or three hours long. “Even though I was tired when I arrived, I didn’t want to miss church!”

The church was fully packed, Abeba explained. “There were even tents outside the church! But I managed to get inside and find a seat on the aisle. I was so tired, so sleepy. There was an older gentleman sitting next to me, and I asked him to wake me up if I dozed off. I didn’t want to miss the sermon. And I did doze off!”

But Abeba remembers when he gently nudged her and said, “Look, my daughter, do you see? It is the Ambassador of the United States coming into church with his family.”

Blinking her weary eyes, Abeba thought, “Is this Your doing, Lord? Why is the U.S. Ambassador at church at this time?”

I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.

The U.S. Ambassador to Eritrea was *exactly* the man she needed to see about obtaining the visas for Levi and his mother.

Abeba could see God’s hand at work in bringing this man into the church, but she wasn’t sure how she would be able to gain an audience with him.

So she continued to do what she had been taught. She prayed. All during the Christmas Eve service she prayed that the Lord would show her a way.

I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.

When the service came to an end, the pastor announced that everyone must remain seated while the dignitaries exited the church.

Abeba thought this door of opportunity might be closing, but as the ambassador and his family started to walk out of the church, Abeba did something that surprised her. She followed them!

Although Abeba is not one to ignore rules, she boldly stood up and followed the ambassador out of the church. “I wasn’t supposed to do that! Security reasons. But I didn’t know what I was doing! I just followed him and called out, ‘Mr. Ambassador!’”

He did not hear her or respond. The second time she called a little louder, “Mr. Ambassador!” and she continued to pursue him, eager to say something

even though she wasn't sure exactly what she was going to say.

Finally, he heard her when she caught up to him. He continued to walk but listened. Confident, Abeba spoke. "I am a U.S. citizen, sir. I came here because my nephew who is only six months old has Congenital Glaucoma."

The ambassador continued walking with his family and sighed, "Well, what do you want?"

Abeba quickly told him her nephew's story and finished with these bold words. "Give me a visa right now, and I will bring him to the United States for treatment."

His response was abrupt. "Merry Christmas and good luck." To end the conversation, he reached out to shake her hand, but Abeba did not give up. "I would not shake his hand. Instead, I said, 'Are you going to help me?'"

Surprisingly, he didn't become angry or turn and walk away. Abeba knew that she would need to go to another country — Djibouti or Kenya or Uganda. He said, "You know that we don't give visas." Then he paused. "But bring your documents to the consulate."

The door was still open.

*Here a maid was found with child,
Yet remained a virgin mild.
In her womb this truth was shown:
God was there upon His throne.*

Abeba knows that the Holy Spirit was with her and gave her the words to say. "I had no business talking to an ambassador of my country in the middle of the church!" She was also surprised that no one else stopped her or interrupted their conversation.

Some family and friends doubted she could get the needed visas in time. They saw the doors closing. But Abeba encouraged them to pray, pray, and pray. "I didn't want to hear their negative comments. Pray but don't doubt. Once you give it to the Lord, don't take it back," she told them.

The day that she went to the consulate, Abeba collected her documents and her prayers. "On my way to meet with him, I prayed for him, for the office staff, for everyone." Abeba also knew that all her friends and family were still praying for Levi and for her Christmas journey.

*Then stepped forth the Lord of all
From His pure and kingly hall;
God of God, yet full man,
His heroic course began.*



Levi, "Baby Lewy"

Facing the Consul in his office, Abeba heard cold words. "You know we don't give visas in Eritrea. Why are you here?" His words hit hard — like a big wooden door slamming shut.

Abeba prayed.

See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.

Abeba's bold response shocked even her. "My answer to him was, 'Because I believe in the Lord!'"

The man did not even respond. He did not know what to say. He just stared at her. And then he gave her the humanitarian visas.

"I was not even fearful at that time. It was the Lord's strength in me," she shares.

"It was a miracle that I managed to bring Levi and his mother to this country." Levi's eyesight in the one eye was restored less than one month later. And miracles upon miracles continued with the doctors and the financial burdens. "One hundred percent of the cost for the procedure was donated!" Abeba exclaims. "If I tell you the whole story, it would take all night!"

Since then, she continues to tell this story of Levi and the story of Jesus Christ her Savior. "I'm sharing every day with people who call and ask me how I got the visas. There are often Eritreans here at my church who are also seeking visas. The first thing I tell them to do is to pray. I pray with them, and I tell them to trust their heavenly Father. It's amazing that God is using me to do this. He is bringing me people so I can witness about His love and His grace."



*From the manger newborn light
Shines in glory through the night.
Darkness there no more resides;
In this light faith now abides.*

“The Triune God wants the whole family, the whole body, to focus on Him. So even though family and friends prayed for little Levi and for his healing, their focus was on more than Levi.”

God’s people were focused on Him.

*For You are the Father’s Son
Who in flesh the vict’ry won.
By Your mighty pow’r make whole
All our ills of flesh and soul.*

Abeba has often been bold as she proclaims His love for all people. Her involvement in Lutheran Women in Mission is a story of open doors as well.

“I never heard about LWML until I was invited to participate in a Bridging the Cultures gathering at the San Jose Convention in 2001.

This led to ongoing discussions with the LWML Board of Directors as [then] LWML President Virginia Von Seggern invited Abeba and other women

to speak about how LWML could reach ethnic women in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Abeba thought, “Lord, who am I to speak to these ladies? What will I say to them?”

Nervous and uncertain as she prepared for this meeting, Abeba read through the LWML mission statement.

The mission of the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League is to assist each woman of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in affirming her relationship with the Triune God so that she is enabled to use her gifts in ministry to the people of the world.

The words “each woman” jumped out at her. When it was her turn to present to the LWML Board of Directors, she was confident. “I was so bold when I spoke and said, ‘When I look in this room I see that — with one exception— you are the same color, white. You don’t have to go to Africa or Asia to find ‘each woman.’ We are here. It’s time for you ladies to open your doors so we can work with you!’”

The response? A standing ovation.

She continued speaking to the board of directors. “Yes, we are different, but our similarities are more! We have one Lord. And there is no different place in heaven for black or white or whatever color. Why don’t we practice while we are here living together?”

This one meeting would lead to many more and ultimately to the Heart to Heart Sisters program. Abeba’s work with LWML continued as she was trained as an MMV Consultant and has been invited to speak at zone, district, and national events.

“I am always asking, ‘Lord, Lord, why do you want me to do this?’ It’s not because I have the experience or the ability. God is doing His work. It’s not me. To God be the glory!”

As Abeba travels to other churches with ethnic populations, her goal is to motivate and connect the women to each other. Guided by prayer, she sees doors continuing to open. “We have a long ways to go. We have language barriers, but with God’s grace, we will overcome.”

*Glory to the Father sing,
Glory to the Son, our king,
Glory to the Spirit be
Now and through eternity.*