

KEN LOTTIS

With Contributions by Jim Petersen

WILL THIS ROCK IN  
RIO?

Finding God in an Urban Culture

NAVPRESS 



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*To Carol,  
who said yes when I asked her to marry me fifty years ago.  
And also said yes to the challenges of moving halfway around  
the world, learning a new language, and adapting to a new culture,  
doing it all with amazing grace, captivating charm, and  
affectionate love.*

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# PREFACE

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, GOD has seemed to take pleasure in departing from patterns we expect of him. He often does something very different using unlikely people.

For example, that fanatical Pharisee named Saul was knocked off his horse while on a mission to protect the purity of first-century Judaism. He changed his name to Paul, did a theological U-turn, and became the first missionary to take the message of Jesus to the non-Jewish world.

Or that small-town German monk who wrote out some notes from his Bible studies and nailed them to the door of his church. He unwittingly triggered a movement that changed the course of history.

And then there's the story of a young man in Southern California who began meeting one-on-one with sailors serving in the U.S. Navy in the 1930s. By the end of World War II, Dawson Trotman was involved with men who called themselves Navigators on more than a thousand ships and military bases. As I write this, I am one of 4,200 Navigator missionaries of sixty-four different nationalities laboring in 103 countries of the world.

It should come as no surprise that this same pattern is evident throughout the earthly ministry of Jesus. He stunned his disciples when he engaged a Samaritan woman in conversation. He was labeled a glutton and a drunkard by religious leaders because of his association with the "wrong crowd." He trashed the commerce that profited from the temple in Jerusalem.

Then there's that amazing story in Mark's gospel (4:35–5:20) when Jesus, "leaving the crowd behind," crossed the Sea of Galilee to the Gentile side of the lake. After weathering a frightening storm, the disciples must have watched in wonder as their Master encountered and healed a scary but needy individual. After instructing the man to "tell [your family] how much the Lord has done for you," Jesus and his disciples sailed back across the lake.

In a similar fashion, this is a story about some very unlikely people who find themselves involved in an extraordinary adventure. Carol and I were raised in small towns in very conservative religious homes, as were Jim and Marge Petersen. In the mid-1960s the four of us were selected by The Navigators to move to Brazil and begin a ministry among university students. For us "leaving the crowd behind" meant saying good-bye to our evangelical upbringings, our colleagues with The Navigators, our families and friends and going "to the Gentile side of the lake." That's what this book is about.

Thus began an adventure that has shaped our lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren. It gave us fresh insight into the gospel, a broader understanding of Christ's Great Commission and the nature of the church. But most of all it allowed us to be participants in God's redemptive and transforming work in the lives of people in some remarkably unique ways.

It is my hope that in reading this story you will be encouraged in your personal adventure with God, that you will find yourself participating in one of these experiences where ordinary people are involved in his extraordinary work. But let me warn you: Such an experience might involve leaving the familiarity of your crowd and crossing to the other side of the street. It might require moving out of your comfort zone and taking initiatives to make some new friends.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS STORY WOULD never have happened nor would this book have been written without Jim Petersen. Our friendship began in Minneapolis at Northwestern College in the fall of 1952. We hung out together and stayed in touch for the next ten years. Then early in 1963 he let me know that my name was on a list of candidates to join his team that would pioneer a Navigator ministry in Brazil. He was on the dock in the port of Santos in November of 1964 to greet us when this story started. Forty years later as we vacationed together with our wives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the idea for this book was born. Since then we've spent many days together along with hours on Skype connections to review what I was writing. Without his notes, journals, and memories, together with his patient coaching, this story would still be a bunch 1s and 0s on my laptop's hard drive.

If my life and this book could be dusted for fingerprints, the imprints of three men would appear over and over again.

During the first few days of my freshman year at Northwestern College, a note appeared in my mailbox from Ed Reis inviting me to meet with him at his apartment a few blocks off campus. That first meeting began a relationship that has had a powerful influence on my life for more than half a century. Ed continues to pray for me every day.

Another friendship begun that fall has remained intact—with Denny Repko. We were roommates in Dinkytown near the campus of the University of Minnesota during my senior year at Northwestern

College. Two years later, in October of 1958, he traveled across the Midwest arriving with only an hour to spare to be best man in my wedding. Denny is my definition of a lifelong friend.

My relationship with Aldo Berndt transcended nationality, culture, and language to establish a unique bond of friendship, unlike anything I had experienced prior or since. He seemed to have an uncanny ability to understand what was deep in the well of my soul, give it great value, and help me draw it to the surface. His influence in my life and in this story is profound.

In carrying out their roles of leadership in *The Navigators*, Lorne Sanny, George Sanchez, and Jim Downing signed off on the decision to send us to Brazil. Their subsequent trips to visit us provided guidance and affirmation. This story is punctuated with their wisdom.

I met Jack Combs for the first time in São Paulo's chaotic Congonhas International Airport. His cowboy humor and earthy common sense made him an easy guy to partner with when we worked together in Porto Alegre. Our friendship with Jack and Barbara is in the forever category.

There are others whose presence in Brazil contributed to the story you are about to read. The lives of Sue Gliebe, Dan and Suzanne Greene, Fernando and Ieda Gonzalez, Ray and Sharon Rice, Bo and Judy Young, Doug and Evelyn MacKenzie, Don and Marion Caulkins, Dave and Beatrice Hicks, Tom and Dana Steers, and Blake and Shirlee Soule are all visible in between the lines of what I have written.

There is no way that I can convey the value and significance of our many friends in Brazil, only some of whom appear in this story. The list would be much too long to include here. Our lives and our faith experiences have been eternally blended. In reality, this is their story, not mine. I just had the privilege of being in the right place at the right time.

Once I began writing, it became apparent that I needed blocks of time in isolation from my day-to-day reality in order to reconnect with the past. On numerous occasions my brother Loren and his wife,

Marge, allowed me to set up shop with file boxes, journals, laptop, and a box of groceries in their apartment at the Embarcadero in Newport, Oregon.

Dave and Donna Simonson, in a similar way, allowed me to hunker down in the Hillside Lodge at their Falls Creek Retreat Center near Raymond, Washington. The staff did their best to make me comfortable but could do nothing to stop the distraction of deer walking by my window. Falls Creek is an extraordinary place.

A special thank you to Jake and Marge Barnett and to George and Marilyn Duff for the creative and compassionate ways they have cared for and encouraged us.

Words are inadequate to express our gratitude to the pastors, staff, and many friends at Mercer Island Covenant Church. Your warm welcome embraced us as a family when we most needed to feel accepted and loved. Your generosity provided for us when we most needed financial support. Your prayers sustained us when we faced difficult times. You are a vital part of our story in Brazil.

For almost as long as I have known him, Chuck “Monte” Unger has urged me to write. I like to think that the wonderful days Chuck and I spent together in Brazil in 1976 ignited a small flame that became a blazing fire when I started this project.

Karen Lee-Thorp encouraged me as a writer and came to my rescue when I needed fresh motivation.

Hugh Steven is a historical biographer with Wycliffe Bible Translators and the author of more than thirty-two books, including a three-volume work on the life and times of Wycliffe founder William Cameron Townsend. In one of our initial conversations he responded to my remark that I was uncertain if what I was writing would ever get published: “You write history because it is history.” I repeated that phrase to myself more than once when I wondered if I was wasting my time.

The crew at NavPress have been exceptional in their efforts on this project. Tia Stauffer worked through the manuscript and helped me

clean up some of the more convoluted sections. Whatever you find to be unintelligible is my fault, not hers. Don Simpson read my first few chapters and convinced me to keep writing when I wasn't sure that the number of potential readers exceeded the members of my own family. He seemed confident that this was a story that had to be written.

Finally a word of tribute to my wife, Carol, and our three sons, Kent, Daniel, and Brian, who were participants from day one in the story you are about to read. They have each read the manuscript and contributed memories and details. They have provided an abundance of encouragement. But most importantly they have allowed God to be at work in their lives while as a family we lived through the events recorded in this book. As a result, Carol, Kent, Daniel, and Brian each possess an amazing depth of character that is shaped by a worldview that can only come from being immersed in the kind of adventure I have tried to describe in these pages. I love you and am honored to be known as your husband and your father.

Mercer Island, Washington  
May 2009

## INTRODUCTION

# FEIJOADA — MORE THAN JUST A MEAL

IT WAS NOON, Saturday, November 28, 1964, our third day in Brazil. I was in a noisy restaurant in downtown Campinas. Seated next to me was Daví, a young Brazilian whom I had met the day before at the Sears store where he worked. He had invited me to meet some of his friends for lunch. My mind was spinning like a ship's radar, picking up the sights, sounds, and smells.

Waiters in white jackets streamed from the kitchen burdened with platters of rice, dishes of collard greens fried in bacon grease, and steaming clay pots filled with black beans and assorted pieces of meat, including spicy sausage, pig's ears and tail. Plates of peeled orange slices added a dash of color. I was about to be introduced to a *feijoada*, Brazil's national dish.

“Let me serve up your plate,” Daví said in his heavily accented English. There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye as he picked up my plate and spooned on a layer of rice. Next he ladled some beans and a few pieces of meat over the rice. He continued stirring the pot, searching, and then deftly placed a final piece of meat in the middle of the plate. At first I couldn't believe my eyes. It was a pig's snout!

As I looked up from my plate, I realized every set of eyes around that table was watching me, including those of my American colleague,

Jim Petersen, seated across from me. Davi completed my plate with a mound of collard greens and an orange slice, and then he filled his own plate in the same way. Meanwhile the rest of the guys were filling their plates, and someone called out *bom appetite*, which was the signal to begin eating. I lifted a forkful toward my mouth, not knowing what to expect.

That day, that restaurant, that table filled with young Brazilians, and that steaming plate of feijoada—it was more than just a meal; it became something of a cultural continental divide. I was crossing over into a whole new world, leaving behind all that was familiar and comfortable. It was the beginning of an adventure that was to profoundly affect every area of my life, including my understanding of the gospel and my relationship with God.

That first mouthful of feijoada set off an explosion of new tastes in my mouth. The beans, the meat, and the spices had simmered for hours, creating a rich dark sauce that blended with the rice. The beans, rice, and collard greens combined into a unique culinary experience that I have never forgotten. Even now as I write these words, I salivate, thinking about the taste of a feijoada. It's a calorie-counter's worst nightmare, but if you are curious, you can find a recipe for feijoada on the Internet.

However, if you want the real thing, you will have to travel with me to Brazil, gather with a few of my friends around a table on a Saturday afternoon, and let one of them serve up your plate.

In the meantime, turn the page, and travel with me as I tell you stories of what life was like in Brazil. I'll describe some of the things we learned, introduce you to a few of our fascinating Brazilian friends, and take you along on some of our wonderful adventures of leaving the crowd behind and crossing over to the other side of the lake.

In the process you may discover that God wants to open up some new relationships with people who are not part of your normal traffic patterns, people who rarely, if ever, show up at your church and have little or no interest in what goes on there.

PART ONE

1964–1968

# PRAYING ON THE PEOPLE STREET

WE THREADED OUR way through the nighttime crowds on Curitiba's "people street." As Jim and I walked, we looked into the faces of the men, some standing in the coffee bars, others gathered in circles engaged in animated conversation. And we prayed.

"God, those are the kinds of men we want to see come to faith in Jesus."

"Lord, we want to find ourselves in a circle like that talking about your kingdom."

It was December 1964. The Lottis and Petersen families were celebrating their first Christmas together in Brazil, which was also something of a reunion. Eleven years earlier, in the fall of 1953, Jim Petersen, Marge Pyne, Carol Bauer, and I were all living in Minneapolis. Jim was an art major at the University of Minnesota. Marge, Carol, and I were studying at Northwestern College and would frequently sit together in class or in the student cafeteria. Carol and Marge had part-time jobs in the same hospital.

Jim and I were part of a group of guys who liked jazz and would attend Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts. I had my initial involvement with The Navigators during those years. Jim and Marge were married in July of 1954 while they were both still in college. After Carol and

I graduated, we wound up working together with The North America Indian Mission in British Columbia, Canada. We became engaged and were married in October of 1958.

In 1960 we left the mission in Canada, reconnected with The Navigators, and started a student ministry on the campus of Northern Illinois University. That's where we were when we learned that Jim and Marge were preparing to move to Brazil and that we were on Jim's "list" to join them.

So when the four of us, along with our five children, gathered around that Brazilian Christmas tree in 1964, we were very aware that this was no coincidence. God had something special planned for us.

Jim and Marge, along with their daughter, Michelle, age three, had arrived in Brazil in August of 1963. They settled temporarily in Campinas to begin language study. During the year that they were in school, Jim began to survey different cities where we might launch our ministry among university students. He began receiving advice from Brazilian pastors and other missionaries regarding the campus environments. The essence of what they were saying was, "Attempting to reach students is a waste of time. Students are very politically oriented and will not be interested in discussing the Bible with North Americans." It was apparent we were on a collision course with these widely held opinions. This raised the question, Were we being foolish to ignore this advice?

To further complicate things, in March of 1964, years of political tension erupted into an armed revolution. The civilian government was replaced by a military dictatorship, setting off harsh repression of some of the defeated political factions. Rumors circulated that the U.S. Navy had been off the coast of Brazil, ready to lend support to Brazil's armed forces. While the military intervention turned the country away from a possible takeover by the Brazilian Communist Party, it also raised the level of anti-American sentiment among university students to new heights. We learned the significance of that the moment we set foot on a university campus. We were operating under a sinister cloud of suspicion that we were CIA agents.

Jim described what happened in the course of that year based on notes from his journal dated August 1964:

After our year in language school, Marge and I took a break and went to Guarujá beach. I was struggling with the apparent absurdity of what we were doing. Here we were, a man with a pregnant wife and a three-year-old daughter, in a country of 100 million people. What madness led us to believe our presence would make any difference to anyone or anything?

I had been reading in the book of Isaiah and on that day found myself in Isaiah 45. In it, God addresses the Persian king Cyrus and says,

*I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness . . . so that you may know that I am the LORD. . . . I will strengthen you . . . so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. . . . I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty.*

*This is what the LORD says: "The products of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and those tall Sabeans—they will come over to you . . . coming over to you in chains. They will bow down before you and plead with you, saying, 'Surely God is with you, and there is no other; there is no other god.'" (verses 2-3,5-6,13-14)*

As I read this, I thought, *This is what we need God to do for us. We need him to cut a path through all these obstacles that loom before us, to straighten out our road. We need him to bring people to us, able people who are engaged in the affairs of this country.*

But, unfortunately, this was not written to me; it was written to Cyrus, a Persian king who lived some 2,600 years ago. I put my Bible away.

Three days later this passage was still roaring around in my head. I thought, *If God wanted to say something to me today, how would he do it?* Would I hear a voice coming out of the wall? That was doubtful. Or, would the Holy Spirit call my attention to something he had already said in a different time and place, and tell me, “What I told Cyrus through Isaiah is what I am telling you today.” That would be more likely.

Was I being subjective? Yes, of course I was. Was I conjuring up something that wasn't really happening? Of course I could have been. Only time would tell. Galatians 3:29 helped me at this point: “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.” I felt the freedom to accept this Isaiah passage as God's personal word to us.

The effects were immediate. In the next days I wrote in my journal,

*God has prepared people for us and he will bring them to us. . . . I am looking forward to the future because the results have already been assured. Men of stature with prepared hearts will be given to us. To have a promise like this is like reading the last chapter of a mystery first. You not only know if it will work out, you know how.*

Recently, in looking back to those experiences, Jim reflected on their significance during our initial years:

This chapter in Isaiah has been a guide for us over these succeeding 40 years in many ways. It has defined our sphere of ministry and kept us on track. This is the only time in our lives God used a passage of Scripture to direct us in this way. The

immediate application was obvious; we were to go to people in chains. That means people who are captives in Satan's dominion, the lost. They were to be our starting point.

Obviously, if one wants to inherit a promise, one must be obedient to it. This distinction narrowed our options to a single conclusion; our starting point must be among lost people, people who were not already within the community of the church.

Four months after Jim wrote those words in his journal, in the evenings of that holiday season after our five small children had been fed, bathed, and bedded down, Jim and I would drive into downtown Curitiba to walk the streets and pray. The words from those verses in Isaiah 45 emboldened us to pray for the kind of people described as "the products of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and those tall Sabeans." We weren't sure what that meant, but we soon found out as God began to answer those prayers.



Ken Lottis and Jim Petersen pause for a cafezinho in one of Curitiba's ubiquitous coffee bars on the "people street."