

Diana's Update About Mali...

Pastor Keith, Pastor Paul & I met with the Roaches & the Paces the day after arriving in Bamako, Mali, just before heading out to the bush again. They challenged us that our task this trip was to disciple the budding & blooming church - and suggested that we teach the Christmas story. They encouraged us to rely totally on scripture as we teach. We decided that we would teach the prophecies from Isaiah & Micah, and then turn to the gospels as the source for Mary's visitation by the angel, the actual nativity, and the celebration that followed by the angels & shepherds.

What I discovered when we arrived in Sunja was a group of more than 30 individuals, comprising a growing church. They have been meeting weekly to hear what their teacher has been learning, to pray for needs and to praise God in songs. We were able to identify 5 families where both the husband & wife were practicing believers. There are several families where one parent is a believer, and the other one is not yet. The rest of the believers we are still trying to figure out. :) I was able to identify 6 women who were especially eager to grow in the knowledge & love of the Lord - I would term them the women's leadership. Their names are Hawa, Fatoumata, Djenneba, Saidio, Sitan & Hawa.

The story I want to share with you today took place on the last night of our stay, last Monday night. During the course of the previous week, we had taught on various aspects of the Christmas story. That night, I had been encouraged to put all the pieces together, and teach the SIMPLE YET PROFOUND STORY OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS.

Picture this:

- The African night sky - filled with a million (or perhaps a gazillion) stars
- a small campfire producing a minimal amount of light - so the backdrop is entirely dark
- 15 women gathered around that small fire - they're sitting on small stools
- only their faces are illuminated - they are hungry & thirsty for the teaching
- as they sit on the stools, they are leaning in - in anticipation

I reminded them of the first night's teaching about the prophecies of long ago, particularly the prophecy in Isaiah - that the virgin would be with child. They remembered the story, and could repeat much of it from memory (Editorial note here - this is a *major* milestone when they have the story memorized to repeat to others)

They were reminded of Mary's visitation by the messenger of God recorded in Luke 1. They remembered her surprise, concern, and eventual acceptance & obedience.

I told them the story found in Matthew 1 about Joseph's dream - and how the messenger encouraged him to keep Mary as his betrothed. That Joseph's response went above & beyond what was asked of him. In this passage in the New Testament, Jesus is first given the name Emmanuel - "God with us" from the book of Isaiah.

I told the story of the birth of Jesus found in Luke 2 - in story-telling detail. The women could really relate to this story - the uncomfortable ride on the donkey when so pregnant, the discouragement at not being able to find a room anywhere, the loneliness of giving birth to a child, by yourself. The confusion of giving birth in the *usual* way to the Son of God, a most *unusual* child. The confusion of giving birth in the *natural* way to a *supematural* child.

We talked about the revelation to the shepherds & their response to the angel's proclamation & song. It was easy to paint the picture of the darkness, the bright light, and the surprising chorus

of song. They learned about the shepherds response - to praise God with songs, and to go immediately to worship the King.

I then encouraged them to apply the story to their lives.

Their applications included the idea that even though we may go through hardships, like Mary, our response should be obedience.

That when we are tempted to run from something difficult, like Joseph was tempted, that we should listen to God, and be responsible.

That God can create a baby in a virgin's womb - because after all, He created everything in the world from nothing, so how hard could it be for Him to create life in a woman's womb! In other words, the *method* of conception in their eyes was not the miracle.

That their celebration of their first Christmas would be at time of praising God & worshipping Him - in the pattern of the angels & shepherds.

The women of Sunja heard the story of the birth of Jesus differently than we usually do. They heard it in its' simplicity, and believed.