

May 14, 2010

Dear Friends,

Greetings from Khartoum! These past few weeks at the Nile Theological College and in Khartoum and surrounding towns have been amazing.

I have preached at two church services. I was to preach at three services but I did not discover until the second one that being invited to “encourage” actually means being invited to preach. One service received a very long prayer, for one service I prepared the sermon as I waited to preach and for the last service I finally knew what was expected and I showed up with my outline.

One of the services was held in the evening in the city of Omdurman. Omdurman is across a bridge, over the Nile River, from Khartoum 2/Bahri where I live. The service is held in an Episcopalian church and has pews, a place for the choir, and soaring ceilings. This service consists of all young people. In Africa the church is literally *young*. 80% of the congregation are young women who are from traditional African religions and have come to Khartoum to find work. The pastor of this church finds the young people and encourages them to come to the Christian church. There they find community and engage in Bible Study and are prepared for baptism. The night that I preached five young women were baptized. I was given the extraordinary joy of baptizing three of them. These were my first baptisms.

Before the pastor and I baptized the young women I preached. I talked about the importance of education. Baptism is a step that takes us into a deeper place in our Christian journey. We go from drinking spiritual milk to being ready for solid food entering a new phase in our Christian education. Education is also learning about the world and the global community.

A week ago I attended a Sudanese Christian church wedding. Three of my students accompanied me and so I had someone to translate some of the Arabic for me as we sat together in the pews. The church is a traditional one with pews and a large cross in the background that was draped in celebratory cloth for the wedding.

Because issues such as polygamy are a current reality in many Arab and African countries I was very glad to hear that in the sermon the minister said that one man is to be married to one woman in a Christian marriage. And he called for not only a bride to be a virgin, but also a groom.

In speaking with students outside at the college on a hot afternoon this week I realized with great clarity that Jesus was truly an Eastern man. The Old Testament is Semitic, just as Arab and Hebrew cultures are Semitic. The two languages, Arab and Hebrew, are very close in vocabulary and grammar. We were discussing the issue of bride price, or dowry, in Sudan. In the Old Testament polygamy was practiced and dowries were paid. This is a worldview that I cannot phathom and yet it is a reality here in much of Sudan. Sudan is Eastern as is the Old Testament. Our New Testament is Greek and has a language that is much closer to English and has a different worldview in many ways. I pray often for a deeper understanding of the culture in which I am living and serving here in Sudan.

This morning I was invited to speak with a group of women at the Spouse's Program with NTC. The wives of several of my students were present and it was a delight to meet them. The piece of information that was very important for me to learn was that two of the women who were illiterate when they were married had husbands who taught them to read. One of the women said (in Arabic, it was translated for me) that every year for five years her husband took her through the school curriculum in order to give her an education. I was truly touched by this loving act on the part of these men.

In the History of Missions class that I taught this past semester we learned that there were male missionaries in past centuries that had illiterate wives. One of questions to my students was, "if this made the woman an ill suited partner, as implied, why did her husband not educate her to bring her into full partnership with him?" The men teaching their wives in Sudan does not in and of itself the society change in full. I certainly accept it as a blessing that God is sending to that woman and to her children. Blessings,
Reverend Debbie Blane