

November 2013

The team slogged on, studying, learning language, visiting people, praying for those who expressed oppressive fear of demons. Once again we took time to invite native speakers to come help us make recordings we could then listen to, memorize and use with others. Nancy and Ashley, sisters-in-law, came at our invitation, demurely wrapped in finery. Alone, they were too shy to think clearly about how to translate and say things, but together they were a lot of fun, and had fun with us. We appreciated their willingness to come help us for a couple of hours every morning.

In the hot afternoons, sitting outdoors on a straw mat in the shade, I visited with them again. One wanted to learn how to sew a skirt. While we stitched by hand, another sister and kids sat nearby and read from the children's Bible storybook. When we got to the story of Joseph, they were riveted. "You see, this shows that you should be nice to your family members because they might end up going into politics!" one advised the other. Ashley brought out a notebook and stubby pencil. "Can you write this verse out for me to copy?" It said, "God sent me here to save many people."

The day after we finished the skirt and the story, I brought a number of Bible books to show them and ask what we should read together next. Everyone began picking up a book, then reading it aloud. The babble brought a couple of curious passing teenage girls over. One girl immediately turned to pictures of Jesus on the cross. "Will we all be killed, like Jesus was?" she asked. I started to answer, when to my astonishment Ashley said, "No, Jesus was killed like that to take our place and pay for our sins, so we would not have to die. Three days later He rose again from the dead. If we believe in Him, we will have eternal life and forgiveness of all our sins...at least, that's what Christians believe," she concluded, rather weakly. What? They knew the gospel well enough to share it with someone else! Another day we read Jesus' words, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep." Ashley was thoughtful. "Did you know that the 'shepherd' at the church you attend sometimes is my uncle? A few years ago he got saved." Hmm, no wonder Ashley showed unusual interest in the Bible stories.

Meanwhile, Deborah began having a number of mysterious physical symptoms. Sleeplessness, aches and pains in her arms and legs, extreme fatigue and discouragement. Although little Abigail was with her and Peter, their three other children were away at boarding school. Finances were tight. She had no one of her own culture with her; everyone else on our team were Americans, and the villagers were not from her tribe. English was a foreign language. Her mother kept calling, telling her to come home and let Peter stay in Cana, a common arrangement for Tanzanian couples when husbands have jobs far from their home areas.

Team policy was that each of us could decide where to go for medical treatment when we were sick. We were afraid, though, that Peter and Deborah would not have enough funds to go see a doctor of their choice, so we gathered a gift to help them.

They went to a Christian clinic and found both medical and spiritual help. It also helped that their children arrived home from boarding school to spend Christmas in the village with their mom and dad. All of the team took turns going to visit them and shared verses or cared for their needs in some practical way.

Just before we Americans went to Dar es Salaam for our annual conference and a few weeks' vacation, we took a day to record the Christmas story in the language. That way we could all memorize it before Christmas and put on a little program with our village Christmas party. We met in a rural home on a large farm set on a hill, and we had a couple of local Christians with us to discuss the story and do the recording. First we talked over the Christmas story, then tried a couple of times to get an accurate yet natural account of the birth of Jesus. While we worked, a huge rainstorm blew in through the open windows. The family scurried around outside, hauling buckets and barrels under the gutters along the eaves to catch every precious drop. Farmers consider rain a great blessing, and this was an unseasonable downpour. Our final and best recording of the Christmas story was punctuated by the music of rain on the steel roof.

We had no idea how significant that first Christmas party would be.

