

Middle East: Digging up rocks

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The Muslim call to prayer cuts through this city five times a day. I should be used to it by now, but it still catches me off guard every time. In former days, a *muezzin* would climb up the minaret tower of the mosque and sing the call to prayer from there, his Arabic song carrying only as far as his voice could reach. Today, his voice is pumped through a public-address system to reach the city at large.

And he is not alone. At every mosque (and there are as many mosques here as there are churches in a decently sized Southern town) a voice sings out. The product is an eerie mix of deep voices (with varying degrees of vocal ability) singing on top of one another. It pours into the humid Middle-Eastern air and wafts into every home and business to invite the inhabitants to pray. As a result, everyone knows when it's time to pray. The other result is that my teammates and I never forget where we are and just how much is stacked against the Good News in this land.

Before coming to the Middle East, I was told that mission work here would be difficult and slow. I can still hear the words of one supervisor: "You know the parable of the four soils? Well, the kind of work you will be doing is more like pre-sowing. You're going to be digging up rocks." I have not heard a more accurate description.

For example, just the other day I was having a conversation with a Muslim teenage girl and the subject of Jesus came up. The girl tried to explain to me that he didn't actually die on the cross. (Muslims generally believe that the traitor Judas stepped up to take Christ's place.)

She would have continued her short speech, but I side-stepped the Judas debate and asked if she knew why Christians believe Jesus did die that day.

A look of surprise flashed across her formerly confident expression.

“No, I don’t know,” she replied.

I explained the concept of sacrifice, underscoring its parallels in Islam and Christ’s identity as the Lamb of God. She listened patiently, but before long we were on to a different subject.

How much of that conversation stuck in her head? I have no way of knowing. What I do know, however, is that she - and all other Muslims - “deserve to hear it.” Such are the words of a Palestinian Christian I met before leaving. After being trapped in a system of works trying to earn paradise, they deserve to know the truth and freedom that our Savior brings. As the encounter above illustrates, so much of what they have been taught about Christians and Jesus are distortions and lies. These are the “rocks” that need digging up as part of the seed sowing process.

But for all of the misconceptions that they have about us, they have one thing right. They call us masiHee, which has its root in the word messiah. To them, we are those who believe in a messiah. And indeed, that is what we are. The question remains for us: Will we show them what it means to belong to the Messiah?

Traditional mission work doesn’t fly over here. In fact, it is very much illegal. But truth be told, the Muslims I’m serving in this country don’t need our evangelical tracts or our preaching, and they most certainly don’t need any hand-outs (this particular country is pretty wealthy.) What they do need, however, is Christians living among them and holding out the word of life (Php 2:16). Among this people, we are “letters from Christ,” as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 3. We are letters written by the Spirit and sent to this culture and generation, with the ink of freedom and love still fresh on every page.

Does it take time to break through the lies here? Yes. Does it take time and

effort to gain their trust and share our hope? Yes. Are there times when it seems like the message just isn't getting through? Again, yes. But a piece of advice I learned during training now always echoes in my ears: "The proper way to respond to any situation is with faith and hope."

After an awesome conversation about Jesus-faith and hope. And after a disheartening day with what seems to be no progress at all-faith and hope. By this I mean not a mere optimism blind to the task ahead, but an abiding faith that Christ is who he says he is and a shining hope that he is in control even here. If Christ is for us, who can be against us? Even now, he is working to set all things right.

And the work in this region has not been without fruit. A worker here described the sense of fresh wonder among two new native believers as she walked through the word of God with them. "God did this . . . put this all together in a beautiful story . . . for us?" they asked in awe.

It's joy like this that brings me back to the parable of the four soils. In many ways, it can be perceived as a sad tale. Three of the soils choke out any new life that forms! But Jesus says that the fourth soil bears a crop that yields a hundred times more than what was originally sown. And I've come to take that not just in numbers, but in beauty. For it is a special kind of beauty when even just one Muslim realizes that the good news of Jesus Christ is neither an American thing nor a Western thing, but a gift and a promise meant for all peoples.

We have been promised a harvest. Not a gratification of our pride and not an accomplishment of our own agendas, but a harvest in His own way and time. With the seed sown by his servants and watered by the Spirit himself, I am convinced that the harvest will continue to grow in this land too. All that remains is to continue in faith and hope, trusting our Savior all the way.

Libby, a student at Baylor University, served in the Middle East with Go Now Missions. Her last name is withheld for security reasons.