His Vets

As I write, an Ethiopian Airlines plane tragically crashed minutes after take-off from Addis Ababa yesterday. All 157 passengers died, from 36 countries. Such grief! O Lord, have mercy.

Gut-wrenching news, and tonight I’m boarding my flight. Gives one pause. But then there’s that time in Nigeria—we hit the biggest air pocket EVER, dropped like a rock for ages, paused on a bump of air spilling my hot tea, then continuing our plunge toward earth—plenty of opportunity for every passenger to become panicked Pentecostal believers, raising hands, calling on Jesus.

I couldn’t help laughing. People looked at crazy Fred with sidelong glances, but it was hilarious to me about to die that I couldn’t just continue up to heaven from 15,000 feet. I’d have to go all the way down before I could go up; I’d have to bounce off the ground like a red-headed basketball—then go up. It was not hysteria. It was not even bravery. It was God’s grace—always sufficient in those near-death moments. I fly tonight with confidence in Him.

In our last letter, we introduced our dear brothers, Quarcoopome and Mandieka; I’ve known them for some years. But landing in Abuja, one of the first new friends I met was Soku. He is a newly graduated, employed Ghanian veterinarian, with tech-savvy. He designed the Facebook page for the Christian Veterinary Africa Network. I’m still amazed and grateful to God.

Another delightful new friend was Joseph. His tall, thin frame, short grey beard, and slightly stooped walk and absent-minded brilliance made me want to call him Professor. But he is a successful Christian businessman, intentionally working fearlessly to bring the Good News to places where radicals make it dangerous for believers. What an honor to get to know him!

Joseph listened with solemn attention, occasionally adding wise comments as a Fulani evangelist briefed us on what to do, and what not to do when we go out to their village to treat cattle. Many of the Boko Haram terrorists are Fulani nomads who have been radicalized. Nothing like such a context to keep you on the edge of your seat during the briefing!

We had veterinarians and nurses. The Fulani evangelist encouraged us to do the veterinary and health work with joy, not fear. Bow when you greet—men with men, women with women. Men urinate squatting down; they believe it makes you unclean to pee standing up. Don’t step across the rope they use to tie up their animals; they believe that brings a curse. Respect the elders; see if they accept us.
If we see angry men coming, we back away as a group, always smiling. Never ask how many cattle they have; that’s a sensitive subject that arouses suspicions. At least pretend to eat and drink what they offer you. If they ask what time you are leaving, don’t give a definite answer; just say, “When the work is done.”

When you talk about Jesus, you don’t start with Issa al Messiq (Jesus the Messiah) right away. You start out with Issa allehu selam (Jesus bringer of peace) as it is written in the Arabic Q’ran. If they ask further questions, you tell about how he died and went to heaven. It says in the Sura that Jesus is Roh’allah, the spirit of the Father. As they continue to ask more questions, then you share from the Bible. Many times Fulani believers have to keep their new faith secret, or they become a target for radicals.

That first day, when we reached the Fulani village, the chief greeted us and welcomed us warmly with all the village elders. We sat together on mats in the shade of a big mango tree. He said that they all knew we were Christians, and in an effort to put us at ease, he explained at length that they also believe in Jesus, that He is a special prophet in the Qu’ran, that He didn’t die but was taken off the cross on a special bed and transported up to heaven.

He said that they know that Jesus is the only one who is coming back to judge the world. “This is clear in the Qu’ran.”

He welcomed us to take pictures, treat the animals, and let the nurses treat the women and children. He concluded quite bluntly: “You are safe here. It is youth and trouble-makers from other places that are the dangerous ones. You are safe here.”

Each morning for three days, we rode in several cars out to the village. I was assigned to a little Corolla, crammed with others in close fellowship. This is Africa. I love it!

Sometimes the dirt track we followed was so bad with gullies and potholes, we all got out to give that poor car its best chance to make it over a particularly rough stretch. Betcha never knew the undercarriage of a humble Toyota Corolla is designed to be a road grader when it grows up.

But one trip as we bounced and groaned along, Joseph surprised me. He casually mentioned a topic I’d never have expected to discuss in the African bush. As if commenting on sunny skies, he mused, “I haven’t played golf for over a year now.”

What? Golf in Nigeria? I thought he was joking. He explained that he’d been in a serious vehicle accident that broke his neck, ruined his golf swing. He wore a neck brace for months afterward but still couldn’t play golf. “Where is your neck brace?” I asked. He shrugged, said he had misplaced it somewhere, couldn’t find another one. Imagine. From persecution to golf swing, in rural Nigeria!

My brother Joseph is very intentional about his faith in dangerous places. “That’s where we need to be going!” He was emphatic. And he’s walking the talk.

Trusting Almighty God, Fred & Vicki

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