

Greetings to all,

My few days of peace and quiet are quickly coming to a close. But before the students all return, I want to take a few moments to let you know what Christmas has been like.

I could not believe how many people were concerned because I was here 'alone'. It is very uncultural to be by yourself. Personally, I enjoyed the time to reflect. But many people came by, all of them saying something like, 'Oh, here you are, all by yourself. You must be so lonely. It is so sad.'

Thursday morning, one of my first visitors was the compound manager. We call him 'Uncle Martin' and he calls us his daughters. Anyway, he came to say hello and make sure I had survived the night. Then he says, "I have a small cock I want to give you for Christmas". He must have noticed my look of shock (I am not very good at hiding my expressions), as he quickly added, "you just tell me what time you want it and I will kill and clean it for you. Then you can cook it however you want." It was a very sweet gesture, but I finally convinced him that one rooster was too much for me, and it would be better to save it until Hilda and Lianne (Dutch women working in HIV/AIDS and Natural Medicines) return in mid-January. He finally agreed, and even volunteered to keep it at his compound until I was ready for it!

After morning tea, I went over to PHCC (Health Center) to see if I could help out. As it was the holidays, they did not have a full staff. I spent the next 3 hours counting pills, making packets to put medicines in and giving tetanus shots. I even attempted to explain to one patient how to take her medicine – 1 in morning, 1 at noon and 1 at night – by saying one and pointing to east, one and pointing straight up and one and pointing to west. I was pretty sure she understood, but found one of the staff just to be sure! My Dinka still leaves much to be desired!

That evening, we were to attend services in Karach. That is only a 20 minute walk from Adol, but I wasn't really looking forward to it in the dark, and especially not returning home after 1 a.m., so I offered no objections when the principal offered to drive the Across vehicle. We left around 10 p.m. and found a crowd already gathered at the church. Andrew (our Principal) was the speaker, so his wife and I were given chairs on the platform in front. Another blessing as the alternative would have been 3 hours on wooden benches. There was a lot of singing and dancing – and waiting for midnight. There is no electricity, and the solar lanterns they had borrowed had been drained before midnight, so at 11:45 p.m. Andrew drove the vehicle so that the headlights were shining down the center aisle and that was the light for the service! The closer to midnight, the more excited Miriam (Andrew's wife) became. You could feel the excitement in the church. Then, Miriam was saying, "it is midnight – what time do you have?" I also had right at midnight so she went up to pastors to tell them the time. She was ignored and returned to her seat, but still saying, "It is time! It is time!" Time for what I wondered, Sudanese are not normally very time conscious. Suddenly there was a loud scream and then everyone started shouting and singing praises! "The Saviour is born!" I am not sure if the scream was to symbolize Mary in labour or the first cries of baby Jesus, but it was a very joyous moment. Then the service started. Many of the women carry crosses – mostly wooden, but some of ivory. The pattern of the crosses and their shadows on the wall made it look as if the crosses were dancing! It was 2 a.m. when we returned home.

Christmas morning dawned, and we planned the trip to Akot, some 30 minutes drive down the main road. Andrew, his children and young relatives (8 in all) and I set off. As we were going along, we saw many of the 'cattlekeepers' on their way as well. They had made various designs on the body with ashes. It is all a part of the Christmas tradition. The children were as excited about going to Akot to church as children in the USA are about Santa Claus. Just as we approached the town, we met one of the women from our church, Rebecca. She said she was returning home as the church was packed and there were so many people outside there was no place to stand where you could hear the service. We continued on. Yes, the church grounds

was filled with people – around every window and door. We managed to get inside and one of the ‘ushers’ led us to the front, where he made one man relinquish his chair. I gave the chair to Andrew and went to sit on bench with women. This, of course, meant I lost my translator. So for the next 1 ½ - 2 hours, I could only guess at what they were saying. Still, the spirit and joy in the church was contagious. At the end of the service, they announced that there were over 7000 in attendance. Could there possibly be that many people? I doubted it, but they do count everyone outside, including all of the children, so maybe it was true. That evening I was invited to share a meal with Andrew’s family. I went at 8 p.m., the usual time for evening meal. It was meat in broth, fried liver and bread. Andrew and I ate together, while his wife sat at the side and watched us, attentive to all our needs, another Dinka tradition. It was a different Christmas, one without all of the foods I tend to associate with Christmas, without the decorations, without family (yes, I missed them) but still a very spirit-filled one and one I was blessed to experience.

Only a few more days left in this year. I pray that 2010 will find you blessed with peace joy, and love of our Lord Jesus.

Blessings

Nanc

"If we really want to love, we must first learn to forgive."

Mother Theresa