Christmas Tales from the Maghreb - Part 2

By Julie Musché

“Go, tell it on the mountain
Over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born!..."

Go Tell It on the Mountain, John W. Work, Jr.

If you missed the first part, please click here.

Following a six-hour train journey over the Atlas Mountains, our band of travelers arrived in Oujda. Apropos, we were delayed once again. Our Christmas was to have been celebrated in the Sahara; however, our truck was in Algeria and we were not allowed to walk across the border to retrieve it. We
could see it from the checkpoint: An interesting conundrum. This perplexing circumstance caused our guide and driver, Eric, to make his way into Algeria using an alternative route back through the northern part of Morocco where he took a boat transport to enter the country through the port of Algiers to eventually retrieve the truck which he would drive back to Oujda. The detour took three days.

As we waited, our group took advantage of the extra time to explore the town, including tours of the Souk, various residential areas, a mosque, restaurants, and specialty merchants such as Rug dealers. We found the climate comparable to Southern California, the Moorish architecture familiar, and the community welcoming. The background noise of Arabic, French, the haunting calls to prayer, and the smells of black tobacco, grilled meats, and mint tea made the whole experience quite exotic.

Late in the day on December 23, we came across what appeared to be a deserted Catholic church. I was surprised to see an 8 1/2 x 11 notice posted on the entry door advertising a Crèche service on Christmas Eve. Some of the members of our group decided to return the next evening.

December 24th was a golden day, rain-washed and richly colorful. A dinner of spicy couscous and red wine welcomed a chilly and crystal-clear evening while we waited for the mystery of the promised liturgy to unfold. As we made our way to the church, we could see a soft light shining through the windows. Entering the church, we were amazed to see it filled near capacity. Makeshift lights were collaged around the church; an orchard heater, as well as the closeness of bodies, warmed the late-night chill.

Although it was difficult to keep up with the Homily given in French, the message was clear: this was a season of fulfilled promise, of hope and redemption. As the infant Redeemer was escorted in procession around the church, songs of joy filled the air as the sojourning congregation joined together in communion to celebrate the ancient promise of Love Incarnate. The universal connection of prayer and worship was undeniable, extending beyond time, distance, language and culture. We are all one, united by the Sacred Thread of Love.

To be continued...
For Pondering and Prayer

How are you encountering the Sacred Thread of Love as you enter into Christmas?

What is your favorite Christmas Carol? Take a moment to sing it as a prayer.

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