

The power of a story



Heather Smith *reflects on Genesis 21:8-21*

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is shocking. Sent off into the desert on Sarah's instructions to, one fears, almost certain death, Ishmael's life seems destined to be cut short along with his mother's. Hagar is not the first woman to be abandoned by a man when a child was an inconvenience, nor the last. Neither Abraham nor Sarah emerge well from the story. Sarah is vindictive and jealous and Abraham is too weak to stick up for Hagar and make proper arrangements for the care of her and their child.

God saves the day. The Jewish nation arose from Isaac, but Hagar was not abandoned. Alone in the desert with Ishmael, God directs her to a well so that she and the child can quench their thirst and will not die.

Christians know the story of Isaac well, but the story of Ishmael forms a central part of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. Pilgrims re-enact the Islamic tradition that Hagar ran back and forth between the hills of Safa and Marwa seven times, looking for water. For them, Abraham and Ishmael represent the foundation of Islam.

We do not own our stories. Others may find different meaning in the stories of our religion, our history or our lives. But despite the different interpretations, God is there, as for Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham, Sarah and Isaac. When our stories drive us apart, the knowledge of God's presence should bring us together again. 🙏

Climbing Kilimanjaro – part II – preparations

by John Witcombe

John Witcombe continues his account of climbing Kilimanjaro.

The Tanzanian government requires all Kilimanjaro trekkers to register, join a licensed guiding company and pay a tax. So the first hurdle to overcome is the cost. My next task was to choose a trekking company. One criterion for me was that it should be a company

that pays its porters a proper living wage. There are many stories of people carrying huge loads for wealthy tourists who don't treat them – their hosts – with respect.

Next I needed to choose suitable equipment. Conditions on Kilimanjaro vary from the heat and damp of tropical rainforest, to sub-zero alpine temperatures on the summit. I also needed to take clerical robes and gifts for my hosts – all within the twenty-three-kilogramme weight limit!

Through all this I was seeking a sense of the Spirit's confirmation. It wasn't just what I did, but the way I did it, that mattered. I had to be doing it in the way God would choose. It all added to the expense, but making ethical decisions mattered. 🙏

When we struggle to find common ground, Lord, help us to understand that you are the loving force that brings us together, always there at the centre, ready to heal and reconcile. Amen.

Walking with Poppy Courage

by Gillian Cooper

We are at the seaside. Gentle waves roll onto the sandy beach, and I take my shoes off to paddle. Poppy watches from a safe distance; she hates getting her feet wet, even in puddles. But the lure of the treats in my hand is too strong, and she risks a little run towards me, at exactly the

same moment as a larger wave heads for the shore. It splashes my trousers, and catches Poppy as she turns tail and races back up the beach. She shakes herself and turns round to see me praising her and laughing at her. She wags her tail and does her little happy dance. She has been brave, even if by accident, and she has escaped.

God made us brave and free. We allow ourselves to be constrained by fear, but taking risks in our actions, in our relationships, in our walk with God, can bring unexpected rewards. 🙏

“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge.

Ruth 1:16