

The spider and the cave

A Muslim story

Key ideas: key religious figures, key events, trust in God

Muhammad awoke with a start. What was that noise? He pulled his cloak tightly round him for warmth, sat absolutely still, and listened. Here in Mecca he knew he had many enemies. When Muhammad began preaching about Allah, and telling people to get rid of the idols they worshipped many people became very angry. They had worshipped their idols for a long time, and besides that, the idols in the Ka'aba brought trade and money to Mecca. People would not change their ways just because Muhammad said they should. Who did he think he was anyway?

Everyone knew there were people plotting to kill Muhammad, but no one knew when. Muhammad and his friends made plans to leave Mecca for Medina, where the people there were keen to have him as their leader. On hearing the noise, a quick prayer came from Muhammad's lips and then he awoke his young follower, Ali, who was sleeping close by. 'It is time,' said the Prophet. Muhammad and Abu Bakr, his great friend and supporter, were to escape at the dead of night. Ali would take Muhammad's cloak and pretend to be asleep in the Prophet's bed. That would give them more time to get away. It was all important to make sure Muhammad reached Medina alive.

Ali lay down on Muhammad's mat, the sweat glistening on his forehead. His eyes were wide open, and he was listening for the slightest sound. The Prophet slipped away quietly, while Ali heard voices saying, 'Muhammad is there, asleep. At dawn, when he steps out of the door, we will silence him forever.'

By dawn the escape party was long gone. The group of assassins crept quietly around the house where Ali was sleeping. They flung open the door, scimitars flashing, but stopped, astonished to find that only Ali was there. He was too young to be of any importance. The assassins howled with disappointment, and were so surprised that they allowed Ali to push past them, and walk out of the house towards the Ka'aba.

Meanwhile Muhammad and Abu Bakr had avoided the road from Mecca to Medina, where they would have been seen and caught for certain. They were on foot, climbing the rocky slopes to the caves near Mecca. They were covered in dust, exhausted and thirsty. Abu Bakr was, by turns, angry and afraid. He could not believe a Messenger of God would have to hide like this. He called to God for help. Muhammad reassured him. 'God will hear you,' he said.

By nightfall they reached the caves, but they could hear the hooves of their enemies' horses close behind. Abu Bakr began to despair. 'What shall we do,' he said, 'there are only two of us?' Muhammad pulled him inside the nearest cave. 'You are mistaken,' he said. 'There are three of us.'

Footsteps could be heard at the mouth of the cave. Abu Bakr held his breath. Then a voice was heard. 'No, they can't be in here. It's covered with spider's webs and nests and branches. No one has been here since Muhammad was born.' There was the sound of people moving away, horses' hooves fading in the distance. Abu Bakr let out a long sigh. He praised God, but was too terrified to move. And what did they mean...spiders' webs and nests and branches?

He opened his eyes. The cave did not look the same. Over the entrance there was indeed a beautiful, silver spider's web, and above it, a low branch with a nest where a dove sat, cooing gently. 'How did that happen?' asked Abu Bakr, but the prophet simply turned to his friend and smiled.

When the two were certain the enemy had gone, they left the cave that had protected them, and continued their journey safely to Medina.