

God With Us

Devotions for the Advent Season

The Birth of Jesus

At that time a proclamation was made by Caesar Augustus that all the inhabited world should be registered. This was the first census, undertaken while Cyrenius was governor of Syria; and everybody went to the town of his birth to be registered. Joseph went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to David's town, Bethlehem, in Judaea, because he was a direct descendant of David, to be registered with his future wife, Mary, who was pregnant. So it happened that it was while they were there in Bethlehem that she came to the end of her time. She gave birth to her first child, a son. And as there was no place for them inside the inn, she wrapped him up and laid him in a manger.

There were some shepherds living in the same part of the country, keeping guard throughout the night over their flock in the open fields. Suddenly an angel of the Lord stood before them, the splendor of the Lord blazed around them, and they were terror-stricken. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid! Listen, I bring you glorious news of great joy which is for all the people. This very day, in David's town, a Saviour has been born for you. He is Christ, the Lord. Let this prove it to you: you will find a baby, wrapped up and lying in a manger."

And in a flash there appeared with the angel a vast host of the armies of Heaven, praising God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest Heaven! Peace upon earth among men of goodwill!"

When the angels left them and went back into Heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Now let us go straight to Bethlehem and see this thing which the Lord has made known to us."

So they went as fast as they could and they found Mary and Joseph - and the baby lying in the manger. And when they had seen this sight, they told everybody what had been said to them about the little child. And all those who heard them were amazed at what the shepherds said. But Mary treasured all these things and turned them over in her mind. The shepherds went back to work, glorifying and praising God for everything that they had heard and seen, which had happened just as they had been told.

Luke 2:1-20, J.B. Phillips

Welcome to Advent

My earliest memories of Christmas are of an old wooden manger and the ceramic figurines that would be carefully placed in it throughout the week before Christmas. On Christmas Eve, the baby Jesus would be placed front and center. The shepherds, who had been patiently waiting all week, were moved in close to the baby Jesus and the Wise Men would be taken from a shelf and placed at a distance. Close, but not quite there yet.

It was my family's way of teaching the Christmas story and one that continues with our own manger scene year after year in our home today. I doubt that there is anyone who doesn't know the story by heart. In fact, despite all of the secularization of the holiday, the basic facts of Jesus' birth are known by everyone.

My hope is that this devotional will stir up those thoughts as well as turn your heart to the Reason for the Season. I am grateful to my friend, Pastor Allen Randolph for joining me in the project. His writing (day 14-21) tells his heart. He is a lover of Jesus and writes with compassion and grace. I know you will draw from his well of understanding and many years of study, preaching and pastoring.

There are two sections. The first twenty-one days are simple devotional readings. May they focus our attention of the Incarnation, Jesus Christ in the flesh. The second section is a family devotional that begins seven days before Christmas. Use this as a family time leading up to Christmas morning. Let your own imagination consider what it all must have been like when Mary and Joseph traveled the eighty miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Challenge your children to consider what some of the hardships must have been.

Remember that the reason for all of this is bound up in the wonderful words of our Savior,

For God so loved the world.

May this work bring you closer to the Father's great love.

Dennis J. Gallaher, November, 2012

Part One

The Incarnation

Jesus, the Messiah, came in the flesh.

Day One

Twenty-seven hours of travel and three more to go.

Home is what I am thinking about. I'm in the belly of an international airport walking along with the masses that count off the number of gates they must pass before reaching their own. After more than a day of travel I am close but now sit and wait for the final 30 minute flight that will take me home. It is hard to wait when you are so close.

For centuries God waited. He waited after the Garden was shuttered and abandoned. He waited past the flood and the tower and the first little talk with Abraham. He waited through the abuse of Egypt and through the wilderness and kept waiting all the way to Beulah Land. He waited through the kings and the loss of His children's idolatrous soul. He waited until the fulness of time came and then set out on the final leg of His journey.

The word "incarnate" means "taking on flesh." Jesus came to this earth not to stay, but to tarry. It was the final leg of the long journey to rescue God's children created in His image. After centuries of waiting, God would briefly appear, "*In the likeness of sinful flesh,*" so that you and I might start a journey towards a true home.

Christmas is not about a baby but about a journey. It is not about a birth, but an “incarnation,” God becoming like you and me. It is not about a start, but is about the grand finale of the plan that began in the heart of God when He first shed tears over the lost destiny of Adam and Eve.

The souls wander through this airport with a purpose in mind. They want to go home. They want to make their connections and get to the end of their journey. Jesus came to earth with the same purpose except for this. By becoming flesh, he would conquer sin in my flesh so that I too could become a son of God and start a journey to my Father’s house.

Because He came, eternity is now in sight.

Day Two

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Corinthians 5:21

The cancer was not always a part of her. It just showed up, first as a nagging headache and over the years getting more severe until we found ourselves seated across from a doctor. "This is what will take your life," he said. When you are touched by your own mortality you are never the same.

Slowly, very slowly, the cancer took more and more until it eclipsed our life. An unwelcome house guest. A violating task master. An unhinged intruder bent on ownership, not just stealing.

And then a day came when she received new stem cells, a miracle of modern medicine. Slowly the chemo killed off her old DNA and the new DNA began a steady march of complete domination. Life started over the very instant that little baggy of cells dripped into her vein. Talk about a life change. That day on the tenth floor in the corner room new life not her own became her and cancer was no more.

What does incarnation mean? To incarnate means that something that is totally foreign becomes not just a part of me but becomes me. When Jesus incarnated, he became fully man without becoming less than God. God remained God, but allowed the DNA of man to become fully Him.

A day came when the sinless Jesus did the inconceivable. He willingly allowed the cancer of humanity's sin to drip into His sinless body, and He *became sin*. His sacrifice allowed the opposite to happen for you and I. By accepting His blood, the righteous everlasting life of God takes over all of life and a new creation is born. A miracle takes place. The divine exchange... holiness for my sin... takes over.

And life changes forever. Because once you are touched by immortality, you will never be the same.

Day Three

“And the Word became flesh...” John 1:14

I marvel at the Apostle John. He was not a learned man, not a scholar or a wordsmith. Yet his ability to communicate the Divine in such a way that time and language present no barriers is nothing short of genius.

Take this phrase, “*the Word became flesh.*” Four simple words in any language that describe the personification of God in the form of a human being. But he doesn’t just say “God became flesh” but “*The Word* became flesh.” What Word?

It was the Word first spoken by God to create the universe. Genesis says that the Spirit of God was hovering, brooding, moving over the formless and void space. Then, “*God said...*” and the Word created what God intended. Light became light. Darkness became darkness. Stars exploded into the sky. The universe unfolded from God’s heart like a butterfly from a cocoon. Only there was no cocoon, only the Word that carried the heart of God to creation’s best.

Isaiah said this,

*“So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
It will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing
what I desire and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.”
Isaiah 55:11*

The force and breath of creation was sent to us with the promise that the mission had no possibility of failure. The Father's trust in the Son's great love compelled Him to break the bond that had bound them eternally and send Him to rescue the very thing He created. Before the Word was Jesus, He was the ever present Creator, the Breath that spoke into being and the Source of all being's breath.

And that Word, that divine breath of creation, reduced His divinity to flesh. All for me. All for you.

Why? Because when all was completed, the Word would then breath back life into mankind; life not known since the Fall in the Garden. The Word became flesh. Jesus became like us. All so that you and I could become again like Him.

Day Four

"God is with us." Matthew 1:23

The most famous person I have ever met is a very smart and successful man who is a regular pundit on talk show programs. Jan and I met him during a respite from treatment at M.D. Anderson when he spoke at a local college on his years in Washington. If you paid extra, you got a meet-and-greet along with sliced cheese and crackers.

Jan was weak from the chemo and infusions so we stood at the back of the line. Her head was covered and her face swollen from steroids but she was energized by this first outing and was not going to miss her opportunity. I didn't expect what happened when he turned towards us, the last in line.

"I know what you're going through," he said with a warm and genuine smile. He was not patronizing and his greeting totally disarming. I tried to speak for Jan but it was as if I wasn't there. His total focus was on her and the questions and encouragement came from a place of understanding. His first wife, he explained, had cancer and he was oh so familiar with what Jan was going through. He identified with her and now when his face shows up on television, she simply smiles and says, "There's my friend."

Jesus didn't come to earth just to fix the mess we made. The things He did - like forgive sin, heal the sick and raise the dead - were not the main intent behind His coming. He came to *be with us*. Not to do what we needed or perform a heavenly chore but to simply and completely be with you and me. He came to heal our aloneness.

The writer of Hebrews plainly states the facts,

“We don’t have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He’s been through weakness and testing, experienced it all - all but the sin.” Hebrews 4:15 MSG

Would you take something with you in your travels today? Whether that means chasing kids and cleaning house, dealing with big business and bigger egos, or just being more quiet and alone than is comfortable, throughout the day, would you speak these words to yourself... “He experienced it all.”

The Ever Present Help, the Lover of your soul is a breath away.

There’s your Friend.

Day Five

But when the right time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that He could adopt us as his very own children. And because you Gentiles have become his children, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, and now you can call God your dear Father. Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, everything he has belongs to you. Galatians 4:4-7 (NLT)

“*When the right time came.*” Following that statement are the sacred details of sending, submission and subjection. Next, outcome is described in the broadest terms of freedom and adoption. Finally, the results...

- my heart is filled with acceptance,
- my station in life transforms from slave to child of God,
- my future changes from empty to the inheritance of royalty.

The writer captures the entirety of redemption in a handful of words but what could not be described is the great heartache of heaven that waited for all of the pieces to finally be in place. The old language is “fulness,” describing not only the completeness of the moment but the anticipation of the event. Little Mary waited nine long months, but the womb of redemption waited for 4,000 years - from the Garden to the manger - and was filled with dark days absent of the grace that was to come.

You are probably waiting for Him right now... waiting for a change, a blessing, a healing. The beauty of the redemption story is that God only waited as long as was needed for the full measure of grace to be released to this world. You wait on One who created a holy purpose in waiting. You wait on the One who promises the inheritance of royalty for those who wait.

David the shepherd king said it best.

I waited patiently for the Lord, He turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.

“Teach me, Lord... Teach me, Lord... to wait.”

Day Six

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist.

2 John 7

When I was a child, waiting for Christmas was a full time job. We would count the days on the Advent calendar and plan the big day through the Sears toy catalog, our “Christmas Bible.” In my simple young mind Christmas was the best day ever. When else did you celebrate someone’s birthday and then go home with the presents?

Right next to the Christmas tree was a little manger stuffed with straw that made the inside of the manger look like a jungle. The shepherds, cows and sheep were scattered throughout with Mary and Joseph holding silent vigil over an empty space directly in the center of it all.

That is where the Baby Jesus would be on Christmas morning. Sometime in the night after the six of us were tucked away, Mom would place the babe in His place and we would awake to both the tree and the baby who made it all possible. It was simple, so simple that even a child could understand. Jesus came into the world like you and I. Even as a little child He looked like one of us.

The early church faced a crisis of belief not unlike the church today. The crisis in the first century was that people were saying that Jesus came as a spirit but not as a man. The crisis today is that people say that Jesus came as a man but not with the spirit and nature of God.

John's words were the clarion truth... Jesus, the Christ, came in the flesh.

- He was Jesus. In Hebrew, *Yeshua*, meaning 'he will save.'
- He was the Christ. The greek word *Christos*, meaning *anointed* and is a translation of the Hebrew word for Messiah.

These two bring together the miracle of Jesus which is that He is fully God and fully man. He, the Messiah, came as a man, Jesus in the flesh.

Christmas is the time when we not only celebrate the Baby who came in a stable but God who came in the flesh.

Don't be deceived by the tinsel and the lights. This Season is more than a birthday, it is the reminder of who He is and what He did. He is Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Day Seven

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth... For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. John 1:14&17

The greatest writers in history cannot match the Holy Spirit's simple description of when Heaven came to earth. After all, how could human words catch and hold eternity incarnate? John says the Word that created us became the One who dwelt with us. Indescribable glory was hidden within that manger when grace was punctuated with truth. Heaven's glorious Son came to give and not get.

But I am captured by one phrase. John reaches into his memories of the Master and describes what it was like to follow His footsteps. He says,

Grace upon Grace.

Jesus began his journey here on earth in the kind of place where many often live. Not the quaint little manger that sits next to the Christmas tree but a stinking stable dug from the hillside far enough away that no one heard or cared when the shock of childbirth erupted the innocent world of His teenage mother. "*He kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son*" has implications beyond the romanticized figurine in blue and white that kneels in your little Christmas manger.

But He left the manger to deliver heaven's promise of *Grace upon Grace*. Can you trust that the grace is for you also?

- *Grace upon Grace* that rolls into the barrenness of your soul like mighty breakers on the sea.
- *Grace upon Grace* that has continued since that silent night was punctuated by the cry of the One who was and is *God with us*.
- *Grace upon Grace* that rallies the angels to serve, supplies my every need, captures every tear, prepares a place for me, suffers with me, comforts abundantly, and continues on till His Kingdom comes.

His grace meets the need. It is not me. Not you. Not the book read or the sermon preached. His grace that was delivered into the arms of Mary as she gave birth to the One who dwelt among us. It is sufficient because it is *His fullness*. It is *His fullness* because it is *Grace upon Grace*. And that grace once given is abundant!

For ours is no High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses – He Himself has shared fully in all our experiences of temptation, except that He never sinned. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with fullest confidence, that we may receive mercy for our failures and grace to help in the hour of need. Hebrews 4:16, J.B.P.

Day Eight

There are two occasions in a person's life where they are due to receive recognition and honor, those times being a person's birth and a person's death. In every culture, these two events are noteworthy. In the life of Jesus it was different. What should have been a high point was mostly forgotten and what should have been a shameful tragedy was universally celebrated. Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, the Jewish prophet, Isaiah, wrote,

"He had no appearance that we should be attracted to Him. He was despised and forsaken of men... and we did not esteem Him... Yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." Isaiah 53:2,3,4

In these few words Isaiah described Jesus' birth, life and death.

- *No appearance that we should be attracted.* His birth was an unwelcome interruption except to the angels and low-class shepherds who they told.
- *He was despised and forsaken of men... we did not esteem Him.* No honors, no recognition, no courtesy extended in His short sojourn among us.
- *Yet we esteemed Him stricken... smitten... afflicted.* The word "esteem" is repeated. It means that mankind considered it justified to do what they did.

His brief 33 years was orchestrated with divine empathy and purpose. Like a new harmony played on an old guitar, the instrument was common yet the tenor and tone had not been heard since the Garden. Even so, mankind was deaf to Heaven's chorus and ignorant to the beauty of God's love song. So His life began in obscurity, ended in infamy, yet resulted in God's ultimate glory. God's greater vision for your life and mine began on that windswept Bethlehem hillside in the miserable filth of a stable. He wasn't trying to be the worst by the way, just the least.

The story began in a broken down sheep shed separated from the humanity that needed everything He came to give. Utterly submissive to the cruelty and indifference, our Creator left all of glory behind intent on rescuing those who refused to give the least bit of care. “Humility,” someone said, “begins when I admit that I do not have and ask for what I cannot earn.” And that was Jesus, showing me the way to receive from Him.

Jesus demonstrated by His birth that He was the Creator God who came to show the way to prideful mankind. Mind you, nothing much has changed.

Pastor Dick Foth eloquently said,

“He left His place,

To come to my place,

To take my place,

To take me back to His place.”

There is a hymn whose true author is unknown yet the words of the refrain are certainly known by all. It is the song *Adeste Fideles* and each of the eight verses end where I must now begin. My prayer is that you will join with me this season. Let’s begin by giving the honor due that was not given...

“Oh come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him,

O come let us adore Him, Christ the King.”

“He left His place to come to my place.” The mountain was impossible to climb and so He came to me. And that is the story of Christmas. To You and You alone, Jesus, I give my worship.

Day Nine

“In the fullness of time...” Galatians 4:4

Our friend, Jenny, was pregnant. Very pregnant. She was due in a matter of weeks but when you asked the exact date she would draw a breath and say, “I am ready now.” She was walking the path of “the fullness of time” and time was not yet complete.

Fullness means that there is nothing left to do but go to the next step. It is the end of a process, the final step, the completion of a thoughtful and deliberate march that is “made full” by careful achievement.

The mysteries that are worked in the fullness of time are knit in secret and shared with no one. David said, “*I was made in secret,*” and no matter how much we think we know, certain matters are held tight between the pages of His Book. And so it is with the child of God. The womb of waiting is the workshop of real life.

Into that secret place God poured the seed of deliverance for his lost children. Forced from His presence, the banished citizens of Eden had no hope left in the life they had known. The last words were curses, the final memory a blazing sword that swept the landscape of the Garden with fiery separation. Yet from this scene of disaster the children took in their heart of hearts a trust that the very One who banished them was also the One who sought them.

Secretly hidden from all was the tiny Hope that would be “made full” after man had exhausted himself of deliverance on his own terms. For 4,000 years the children of Adam and Eve waited... for what they did not know.

But then...

- An angel and a maid.
- A young man and a commissioning.
- An eighty mile trek on the back of a donkey.
- A wicked king who sought to kill.
- Shepherds, an innkeeper, a dark night of the soul when all seemed lost.

And the Fullness of Time came. He who had walked creation's path and scattered the stars in the sky was reduced to a quiet miracle that caused the angels to sing.

Jesus was born in the night far from the gaze of the crowd that would seek Him and kill Him. He was born into a culture already despised, born into the humblest of circumstances. No room in the inn, no bed to lay his head, all of this so those who sought him could find Him.

The ancients named this season Advent to point people to the birth of the Messiah, yet His birth, though a worthy celebration, is in the past. The true Advent of the church is to prepare for His return.

So remember, won't you? Remember that when the fullness of time comes again, He will come as a reigning King, not a Babe in a manger. Remember that He did not leave us with a curse but a promise; not with a fiery sword but an empty tomb. And though we celebrate His birth, the real celebration is that it is one day less until His return.

God never forgets. He always keeps His promises. And when the fullness of time comes again, it will dawn an eternally new day.

Day Ten

*“I am a king. For this I have been born,
and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth.”
John 18:37*

I’ve never stood before a king. Without a name or a big time reputation, standing face to face with royalty is not likely. On the other hand, Jesus often stood before royalty. There were the three Kings of the East, the high priest of the Jewish nation, Herod and finally Pilate who was the lowest rank of all and yet assumed authority over His life. He did not seek out any of these encounters, mind you. Others sought Him.

The three Kings of the East came seeking the answer to the riddle of the star of Bethlehem and knew it would lead to a king. What they found was a peasant couple and a little baby in a dust bowl of a town, but they knew they had found no ordinary ruler. This was royalty of a different kind. This was the royalty of heaven that had come to earth.

The scrolls they read in their native lands of Persia, Arabia and India described a birth that would change the fabric of history. Three separate journeys converged at some trade route crossroad where they joined hands and trekked on to Bethlehem. You know the story... a baby found, worship given, gifts fit for a king, an angel to protect them, and then they fade quickly from the picture. The King grew and found favor with God and man. The three Magi were never the same again.

You have to be somebody to have an audience with a king. You have to trust the best information you have and seek him out. You have to offer something to him when you see him.

And that is the message of Christmas.

- You are “somebody” because God loves you.
- You have the best information in history, the Bible, that draws a map to the manger of grace.
- The only thing - the best thing - you have to offer is your worship.

Be sure to not miss your audience with the King. It is true what they say, *wise men still seek Him*. He waits to be found by anyone who comes to offer their worship.

Day Eleven

Mary's Song

"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior."

Luke 1:46-47

Observe, this morning, the sacred joy of Mary that you may imitate it. This is a season when all men expect us to be joyous. We compliment each other with the desire that we may have a "Merry Christmas." Some Christians who are a little squeamish, do not like the word "merry." It is a right good old Saxon word, having the joy of childhood and the mirth of manhood in it, it brings before one's mind the old song of the waits, and the midnight peal of bells, the holly and the blazing log. I love it for its place in that most tender of all parables, where it is written, that, when the long-lost prodigal returned to his father safe and sound, *"They began to be merry."*

This is the season when we are expected to be happy; and my heart's desire is, that in the highest and best sense, you who are believers may be "merry." Mary's heart was merry within her; but here was the mark of her joy, it was all holy merriment, every drop of it sacred mirth.

It was not such merriment as worldlings will revel in to-day and to-morrow, but such merriment as the angels have around the throne, where they sing, "*Glory to God in the highest,*" while we sing "*On earth peace, goodwill towards men.*" Such merry hearts have a continual feast. I want you, ye children of the bride-chamber, to possess to-day and to-morrow, yea, all your days, the high and consecrated bliss of Mary, that you may not only read her words, but use them for yourselves, ever experiencing their meaning:

"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior."

Charles Spurgeon

Day Twelve

His name shall be called Emmanuel. . . . God with us (Matt. 1:23 RSV)

A few years ago a striking Christmas card was published, with the title, "If Christ had not come." It was founded upon our Savior's words, "If I had not come." The card represented a clergyman falling into a short sleep in his study on Christmas morning and dreaming of a world into which Jesus had never come.

In his dream he found himself looking through his home, but there were no little stockings in the chimney corner, no Christmas bells or wreaths of holly, and no Christ to comfort, gladden, and save. He walked out on the public street, but there was no church with its spire pointing to heaven. He came back and sat down in his library, but every book about the Savior had disappeared.

A ring at the doorbell, and a messenger asked him to visit a poor dying mother. He hastened with the weeping child and as he reached the home, he sat down and said, "I have something here that will comfort you." He opened his Bible to look for a familiar promise, but it ended at Malachi, and there was no gospel and no promise of hope and salvation, and he could only bow his head and weep with her in bitter despair.

Two days afterward he stood beside her coffin and conducted the funeral service, but there was no message of consolation, no word of a glorious resurrection, no open heaven, but only "dust to dust, ashes to ashes," and one long eternal farewell. He realized at length that "He had not come" and burst into tears and bitter weeping in his sorrowful dream.

Suddenly he woke with a start, and a great shout of joy and praise burst from his lips as he heard his choir singing in his church close by.

*O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
Come and behold Him, born the King of Angels,
O come let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord.*

Let us be glad and rejoice today, because “He has come.” And let us remember the annunciation of the angel, “Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10–11)

He comes to make His blessing flow, Far as the curse is found.

May our hearts go out to the people in heathen lands who have no blessed Christmas day.

*“Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions unto them
for whom nothing is prepared” (Nehemiah 8:10)*

Steams in the Desert

Day Thirteen

The Star Of Bethlehem

Not to the king the Star,
Flaming in light afar;
Not to the king on his throne apart,
With fear and hate in his evil heart,
Speaking smoothly with lying ruse
To find the new-born King of the Jews;
Not to the king the flame,
The light and the glory came.

Not to the seers the Star,
Shedding its beams afar;
Not to the seers with their downbent looks,
Poring over their ancient books,
Searching where and pondering when,
He should be born who is Saviour of men;
Not to the seers the flame,
The light and the glory came.

Not to the sword the Star,
Glowing and bright afar;
Not to the sword that sought where He lay,
Callous and cruel and eager to slay;
Never were bearers of sword so led
Where helpless and innocent blood was shed;
Not to the sword the flame,
The light and the glory came.

But to the wise the Star,
Lighting their path afar;
Unto the wise who truly sought,
With reverent worship and loving thought,
These to the Child the Star could bring,
To lay their gifts at the feet of the King;
Unto the wise the flame,
The light and the glory came.

Annie Johnson Flint

Day Fourteen

God Changes Impossibilities

“For nothing is impossible with God.” Luke 1:37 NIV.

A few words at the end of a commercial immediately caught my attention, *“The impossible, true story.”* That describes Christmas perfectly, at least the real Christmas, the celebration of the Savior’s birth rather than pictures with Santa at the mall.

God coming into my world and yours, indescribable. A child born to a virgin, impossible. A Savior who has come for sinners, incomparable. Christmas truly is the *“impossible, true story.”*

Centuries before Jesus was born, prophets foretold of Israel’s Messiah who would come. Isaiah wrote the most impossibly true words,

The Lord Himself shall give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel, God is with us! . . . for unto us a Child is born and unto us a Son is given . . .” Isaiah 7:14/9:6-7

A Son would be born in Bethlehem; a Savior would be given at Jerusalem. His listeners must have puzzled over Isaiah’s words. Christmas remains *“the impossible, true story.”*

Christmas is the perpetual reminder of the Almighty God who changes impossibilities, Who delights in confounding the wise by doing what others say cannot be done. Our God, unlike any other!

“Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God. This ‘foolish’ plan of God is far wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God’s weakness is far stronger than the greatest of human strength.”

1 Corinthians 1:24-25 NLT.

For you this Christmas, the Angel’s bold declaration to Mary is still true, *“For nothing is impossible with God.”* Luke 1:37 NIV. The situation that appears impossible to you - the need that exceeds your ability or resource - the obstacle that defies your efforts - the sinful habit that seems indomitable - the failure you think stole your future - all are well within the immeasurable bounds of God to redeem. *“Who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.”* Ephesians 3:20 NIV.

This Advent, invite Jesus into your heart and home as Savior and Lord.

Allen R. Randolph

Day Fifteen

Looking for Jesus

A truth in your heart can set the course and priorities of a lifetime.

"I have seen the Savior You have given to all people." Luke 2:30 NLT

Simeon was a man looking for something more than that with which others were content. *"Simeon . . . was just and devout . . . and the Holy Spirit was upon him."* Luke 2:25-35. What little is known about Simeon is remarkable; his testimony was that God had spoken to his heart that he would live to see the Messiah. Generations in Israel had waited for the promise of Messiah. God's whisper in Simeon's heart set the course and priorities for his lifetime. While others busied their days with concerns of personal gain and gold, Simeon had a heart with a single purpose, to see Messiah, Israel's hope and salvation. He was single minded, clearly focused.

That word in his heart brought Simeon to the Temple precisely at the moment Joseph and Mary arrived with the baby, now only days old. His life-long search was over as he held the Savior in His arms. Imagine Simeon's joy, *"Lord, now I can die in peace! As you promised me, I have seen the Savior You have given for all people."* Life is never complete until you hold the Savior in your heart.

That's Simeon's story, but my concern today is about your story and mine. This Christmas cannot be what it could be, unless Jesus is the heart of your celebration. There is no better place, ever or anywhere, than when and where your search successfully concludes with giving yourself to the Savior, who gave Himself for you.

This Advent, the Angel's announcement to the shepherds is to you,

*"I bring you good news of great joy that will be to all people. Today . . . a Savior
has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord."* Luke 2:10-11 NIV.

Christmas is about Good News too precious not to be faithfully shared, and
an event too glorious not to be celebrated with joy.

A.R.R.

Day Sixteen

Right on Time, All the Time

“When the time had fully come, God sent his Son born of a woman.” Galatians 4:4 NIV

Christmas is a good time to review the pace of your life. With overcrowded schedules and little time to spare, lives are lived in a relentless hurry. When you reduce the hurry, you lessen the worry. God’s calendar rarely matches yours. He is eternal, but time matters to Him. God does not submit His plans or calendar for approval. Get used to it. But God is never late; sometimes it just feels like He is.

The psalmist learned to trust God’s timing, *“I trust in you, O Lord; I say, ‘You are my God. My times are in Your hands.’” Psalm 31:15 NIV.*

Your objective is to adapt your calendar to God, not struggle to persuade Him to adjust to yours. Learn this: *“The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way.” Psalm 37:23 NKJV.*

God is never unfeeling, never uncaring about your dreams and desires. The calendar of eternity is only aligned with the purposes of God, not the random clocks of mortal plans. Your Father knows best how to fulfill your prayers, and precisely when and where His eternal plan will intersect your dreams and hopes. The issue is trust; *“But as for God, His way is perfect.” Proverbs 18:30.*

Zachariah and Elizabeth were elderly, long desiring a child they could not have. Year by year their dream faded, replaced by physical realities. Unknown to them, their long-held dream only awaited God's time until,

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John . . . to bear witness of the Light, that all through Jesus might believe.” John 1:6-9

They wanted a child to love; God intended a son for them who would announce a Savior.

While they thought the answer to their prayers was late, God was right on time, exactly on time. Christmas came precisely, *“When the time was fully come, God sent forth His Son. . .”* Whatever your circumstance may be at the moment and however long it has been, when it is God's time He is not restrained from doing what He wills. That is true for your life as well. God works the *“same yesterday, today, and forever.”* Hebrews 13:8 NIV.

This Advent, expect God will come to you at any time; wait for Him every time.

A.R.R.

Day Seventeen

Christmas Questions

Trust allows you to rest your well-being in God's providential care.

"Mary said . . . let it be to me according to your word." Luke 1:38 NKJV

For Mary, the Christmas drama began with an initially troubling visit from an Angel. His announcement of a child born supernaturally presented bewildering impossibilities. Mary had questions. A child born to me? *"How can this be?"* It was contrary to every natural process of conception or social order. And she foresaw Joseph's questions and the personal consequence of cruel whispers and misunderstanding awaiting her. Explanation of how the impossible is accomplished never helps, just raises new questions.

What was the Angel's explanation?

"With God, nothing will be impossible."

The literal translation is this: *"No word of God is without power!"* At that, Mary's trust allowed her to yield every question, fear, and doubt. She simply accepted God at his Word.

"Mary said . . . let it be to me according to Your word." Luke 1:38 NKJV

How simple her faith, yet how profound. The ultimate trust is submission. Trust in God allowed Mary to rest in His Word. Assurance does not precede acceptance, never has, never will. Acceptance brings assurance. Mary didn't know how all this would occur, but she knew the power of God and trusted His character. She completely rested her heart and her future into God's providential care.

At that point, Mary placed everything into God's hands... her personal consequences, Joseph's decision, her parents' understanding, or others criticisms. Place, time, and circumstance were all left to God. Her surrender was total. Her submission willing. Her assurance secure.

This Christmas could be your time to place your heart in His hands, and trust Jesus with any questions still unanswered or a future yet unclear. Here's what God says about His Word,

“So is My Word . . . it will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

Isaiah 55:11 NIV

This Advent, choose a new level of trust in God and find a new place of rest in His love.

A.R.R.

Day Eighteen

First Things First

Character and obedience always matter first to God

“Joseph, [Mary’s] husband, being a just man . . .” Matthew 1:19 NKJV

Joseph is easily under-appreciated in the Christmas drama. Yet God chose Joseph as carefully as Mary. God saw that “Joseph, [Mary’s] husband, was a just man.” Matthew 1:19 NKJV. Would God have chosen any less a man to model spiritual devotion for Jesus? Joseph faced a choice. Read Matthew 1:18-25 NKJV. He could protect his good name or provide a home for Mary and this miracle child. He could not do both.

Mary would need a just man to accept and protect her, to stand firmly between her and whispers of disapproving friends and family; Jesus would need a just father to teach Him the ways of God. God chose Joseph, a just and righteous man. Character and obedience always matter first to God. When God has something important to be done He chooses those who consistently put God first.

My Dad, a pastor, often “preached” this principle to me, “First things first!” When asked to do something, I usually had an option I preferred. I intended to do as he asked, as convenience and circumstance allowed. Care to guess how that worked out for me? Not so well. To my Dad, that was not an acceptable response; as an adult, I learned why that is not a wise strategy.

Priority evidences importance. You choose to put first who you consider to be first.

Jesus put the Father first because the Father was His priority. Jesus modeled this,

“I always do those things that please [the Father].” John 8:29 NKJV

Christmas - the celebration of the Savior’s birth - seems a perfect moment for an honest inventory of how you and your family reflect this practical issue of keeping “first things first.” Christmas is a good time to be reminded,

“He has shown you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Micah 6:8 NKJV

This Advent, do God’s will first and foremost, then all else will find its proper place.

A.R.R.

Day Nineteen

Christmas is Amazing!

“They spread the word . . . about this Child, and all who heard it were amazed.”
Luke 2:17 NKJV.

An amazing life is what every person longs for - an amazing job, amazing marriage and family, amazing relationships, and an amazing faith experience. People yearn for life out of the ordinary, an exciting adventure that makes one's heart beat faster and dreams feel closer.

A lot of things are described as amazing. Really, there aren't many times such descriptions are accurate. Things don't always live up to the hype. The NBA advertises itself as *“where amazing happens.”* Entertaining, yes. Amazing? Not really. But I know where amazing can happen; amazing happens in your heart when you invite Jesus there.

Listen for God's whisper in your heart, *“No matter where else things have been ordinary in your life, Christmas can be where amazing happens!”* The Bible says,

“When they had seen Him, the shepherds spread the word . . . about this Child, and all who heard it were amazed.” Luke 2:17-18 NKJV

The real story of Jesus still amazes hearts who hear it. Christmas is amazing because a child conceived and born miraculously was God's one and only Son who became your Savior, dying on a cross to express God's astonishing love and grace in order to give you the amazing life you long for, abundantly now and eternally forever. Your amazing life is your choice.

The Apostle Paul wrote,

*“When the right time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman . . .
so He could adopt us as His very own children.” Galatians 4:4-7 NLT*

Now that’s truly amazing! Deep in the heart of each person is their soul’s yearning for a Savior. Every effort of your own will fail to provide the needed forgiveness, cleansing, and newness. Christmas is all about a Savior! With Jesus, amazing happens in your heart. John 3:16-17.

Christmas is God’s promise that the deepest longing of your heart can be realized. You cannot repair the damage sin has done to your soul; you cannot just start over and do better. You need a Redeemer. Now that’s when and where amazing really happens, not just at Christmas but any and every day.

This Advent, spread the glad word about this amazing Jesus.

A.R.R.

Day Twenty

The Mystery and Majesty

“When the angels had gone away . . .” Luke 2:15 NKJV

I love the Christmas season and His celebration. I love the carols and decorations - children’s faces while opening presents with thankful hugs - singing *“Joy to the World, the Lord is come; Let earth receive her King”* with the Church family - Christmas Eve Communion and Christmas Day dinner with family and friends. I love Christmas!

Most of all, I love the mystery and majesty of Christmas, a story so inexplicable only God could envision it. How do you describe the wonder this miraculous season can bring - a worried king jealous of his throne, wondering shepherds rushing from their flocks, wandering kings with royal gifts from afar, and a worshiping couple still pondering the angels’ startling pronouncements. No wonder Mary *“pondered all these things in her heart,”* and all who heard the shepherds’ stories *“wondered at their words.”*

Not much remains a mystery anymore. Christmas is and will remain so. Paul ponders the mystery as he wrote,

“Without question, this is the great mystery of our faith: Christ appeared in the flesh . . . was seen by angels and was announced to the nations.”

1 Timothy 3:16 NLT

This *“great mystery”* is...

- Where would the Savior come - to Bethlehem not to Rome, to a stable not a palace.
- How would the Savior come - an infant miraculously born with our shared humanity, not a ruling conqueror.
- For whom would the Savior come - for the worst and best among us, sinners all, not the religious.

And how did this grand introduction to your world occur?

“There were shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock. And an angel of the Lord stood before them . . . ‘Do not be afraid; I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you today a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the Heavenly Host praising God and saying: ‘Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.’”

The shepherds could have remained with their flocks and retelling marvelous stories about angels. Instead, they rushed to become eyewitnesses of the Savior.

“When the angels had gone away into Heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us now go and see this . . . which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby lying in a manger.” Luke 2:8-20 NKJV

Inevitably, Christmas will pass, but the Savior can change your life forever. Then the mystery of His birth becomes the unequalled majesty of His life and purpose in your own heart.

When the angels have gone away, will you stay as you were or will you seek a life-changing encounter with the Savior? Christmas is not about listening to the angels' song; Christmas is about wanting to know the Savior. You have not experienced Christmas until you have personally found the One, *“born to you this day, a Savior which is Christ the Lord.”*

This Advent, you can be an *“eyewitness of His majesty . . . until the Morning Star rises in your heart.”* 2 Peter 1:16-19 NKJV. Amid your celebration, quietly reflect on the mystery and majesty of a Savior.

A.R.R.

Day Twenty-One

Sharing the Joy

Wherever the Good News is untold, there, great joy is unknown.

"I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all people." Luke 2:10
NAS

"Merry Christmas!" An all too familiar greeting, but *"merry,"* seems a bit underwhelming when you are talking about Jesus' birth. Merriment is a good thing that comes from good times and good friends. But God has more for you, much more. I think *"Joyous Christmas"* is His intent. This Advent, **open your heart and home to be overwhelmed by, "an inexpressible and glorious joy."** 1 Peter 1:8 NIV. The experience and expression of the Savior's birth, life, and sacrifice deserves no less.

Such joy did not begin with the first Christmas; Christmas simply dramatized the eternal intent of the Father for all His creation to know glorious joy. Christmas' celebration underscores the essence of our experience of His inexpressible joy every day. *"In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore."* Psalm 16:11 NKJV.

However intended for us His joy may be, great joy is not automatic. **Joy is a gift God gives and a choice you make to receive.** Nurture joy in your heart because it is not natural to fallen natures. Mature joy until a more settled disposition of your spirit, as you constantly draw on unending, spiritual resources.

A.R.R.

Part Two

In the Fullness of Time
A Seven Day Family Devotional

The First Day

Mary, Sweet Mary

*Mary, sweet Mary,
how fearful it must be
to leave the home of your dear birth
in the hills of Galilee.*

*Did sweet tears fall from your eyes,
did your breaking heart turn cold?
Or did you ponder the angel's voice
and the mystery he told?*

*Mary, sweet Mary,
now travel the lonely road.
Bless you child, for in your womb
the Lord of Grace you hold.*

“Sweet Mary...” Joseph’s voice was the only comfort in the black night of early morning. She had been lying on the little pallet most of the night awake and waiting. Her hands ran over her tummy, swollen with the life of her unborn son. The grief had been so public and her joy so private these past months. Without a word, she took Joseph’s hand and struggled to her feet.

Her parents had left with the others of the household of David the week before to register in Bethlehem. Joseph thought it best to let the others go ahead. Such is the price of carrying a baby whose father was not known.

She was barely fifteen. He was in his twenties. There was no send off. No farewells. No traveling mercies granted. No blessings of safety given.

No children ran ahead of the little donkey to usher them from the village, only the day's first light and the "good riddance" glances of the early risers.

Hiding her tears behind her veil, she spoke the words of a child grasping for hope. "Joseph, tell me again about how it will all be." Without turning from the path, Joseph told the tale again.

"Bethlehem will be a much better place to live than Nazareth," he began. "We'll find a little home there. And I'll find plenty of work! In the evenings, I'll build you the finest furniture in all of Israel. In fact, the wealthy women will all be coming to your house just to look at the fine furniture you have. My sweet Mary, it's going to be a wonderful life!"

My sweet Mary. It was Joseph's way of showing his deep love for the young girl. *He could have had me stoned,* she thought. *He could have had me shamed by the whole village.* But Joseph had heard an angel, too. And his righteous heart not only protected her, but loved her as no other man could.

And now an eighty mile trek lay ahead of them. Traveling east to Scythopolis and then turning south along the Jordan Valley, they would reach Jericho in four days. From there, they would cross over the treacherous road that leads to Jerusalem and finally reach Bethlehem before the Sabbath.

And, hopefully, the baby would wait.

The Second Day

Little Donkey

*Clip Clop, Clip Clop
is all my donkey speaks,
his little feet so close to mine
my pace he humbly keeps.*

*Clip Clop, Clip Clop
do you know the one you keep?
It is the Creator of all the world
His Majesty so meek.*

Mary was exhausted. Her first night's stay in the countryside had been too painful to sleep. Even though Joseph had stopped repeatedly the day before, her legs and back continued to spasm and cramp throughout the night.

Mary tried to hide her pain. How she wished for her mother to be with her! She remembered the times as a little girl when she would rub her back and sing to her. It did not seem that long ago, actually.

It had been so difficult to tell her about the angel and the words that he spoke. At first, her mother was sure some evil man had hurt her, some Roman soldier had forced himself on her. But then she heard of the miracle of old Elizabeth and somehow in her heart she knew Mary was telling the truth.

"Come on, Mary. We're ready to go." Joseph lifted her up on the donkey, which stumbled for a moment under the weight. *Poor old Ben*, Joseph thought to himself. He wondered if the tired old animal would make the journey. Worse than that, he wondered what would happen if he didn't.

Mary was close to tears before the sun was over the treetops. Her tears, though, were not from the pain of the travel. They were not from the heartache of having left the only home she had ever known. Her tears fell in fear of what lay ahead for her and Joseph. What if this was all just a horrible mistake? What if old Ben was not able to carry her? What if the baby came, so far out here in the countryside? But then a voice spoke deep inside her with words that were strangely familiar. *Nothing will be impossible...* Mary couldn't quite make sense of it.

Nothing will be impossible with God.

They were the words the angel had spoken to Mary about her cousin Elizabeth! *Nothing will be impossible with God*, the words turned over and over in her heart. They became truth. They became hope. They became healing to the bruised young soul simply trying to follow the commands of Jehovah God.

Clip, clip, clip, clop. The rhythm of the little donkey's feet against the stone path reminded Mary of an old song her mother had sung to her.

Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!

Nothing is too difficult for Thee!

Little Ben picked up his pace. Joseph, off key but singing nonetheless, joined in Mary's song. And even the baby, tucked beneath the heart of sweet Mary, rejoiced in his own unseen way.

The Third Day

Mary's Lullaby

*Hidden in my womb so deep
Safe beneath my heart,
Be still, Little One, for very soon
your life from me will part.
Who will you be
O Son of mine
Is it true what the angels say?
I care not, as long as soon
in my arms You safely lay.*

The valley of the Jordan River borders the land of Samaria to the west and the Decapolis to the east. Running fifty or so miles due south to the Dead Sea, it was the most common travel route to Jerusalem and beyond for the Jews who lived in the beautiful area of Galilee. The more direct route to Bethlehem would take the young couple through Samaria, but no Jew would dare cross over the border of their vowed enemy. Crossing over the Jordan near Scythopolis, Joseph and Mary turned south, following the Jordan River for many miles.

Only speculation would allow us a glimpse of the life on the road. But consider these things.

- The road was also used by the occupying army of the Roman Empire, whose cruelty and harshness was a constant threat to all Jews.
- This was possibly the first time that Mary had ever ventured this far outside the familiar surroundings of her home in Nazareth without her parents.
- All of their food, clothing, and supplies would have to be carried with them, severely limiting the amount and quantity they would have.

- They would have to cross several rivers before reaching their turning off point northeast of Jericho.

Mary was only days away from delivering her first child. During this trip she would be subject to the added discomfort that naturally occurs before childbirth--swelling in her feet, hands, and legs, added back pain, shortness of breath. She experienced all of this while either walking or sitting on a donkey for four to six hours a day. And remember... Mary was a girl, who in today's world, would not be old enough to even drive a car.

One can only imagine the physical strain and punishment that Mary was experiencing. Think also of the emotional strain that was on young Joseph. Probably in his early twenties, he was responsible not only for his young bride but for the baby she was carrying that he had not fathered. All they knew was what the angels had told them. Unlike us, they did not have the story line written out for them.

They had no idea that the week before Mary would have her child they would be traveling the 80 miles on foot to a city where they knew no one, had no lodging prepared, and no work to provide daily food and shelter. Without exaggeration, it was the worst possible circumstances that any young couple could find themselves in.

Little did they know that God considered it
the fullness of time...

The Fourth Day

*Have you ever thought
how strange of Him
to introduce His Son
through the appearance of a sin?*

Mary could not take much more. Joseph feared for her...over the days her voice was tinged more and more with pain. And he feared for the baby. Would Mary have the strength left when the child chose to be born? He was too young, too inexperienced, for this.

After all, a Jewish man was not supposed to know about babies being born. In the village, the midwife was present along with the mother, grandmother and many others. The men just moved aside. "Why me?" Joseph thought, "Oh God, why did you choose me, of all the men of Israel!"

The sun was not even high over the Samaritan hills when Mary cried out. Joseph, lost in his own thoughts, was so startled that little Ben almost fell backwards when he whipped around to face Mary.

"Joseph, I can't go any further, I have to ... aaaahh!" Joseph was aghast. What he had feared more than Roman soldiers, robbers, or dark nights appeared to be imminent. The baby would come here in the Jordan Valley far from any city. Without the help and care of a midwife, chances were slim that Mary or the baby would survive.

He helped Mary from the donkey and quickly spread out the bedding in the shade of a large oak tree. "Come Mary. Lie down. Everything is

going to be all right.” But his face betrayed the fear of the moment. The pains continued to come. Would all that the angels told end here?

But what is that? Coming from the south. Voices. Laughing. The dust people kicked into the air gave Joseph enough time to hide their belongings and the donkey as best as he could. Robbers and scoundrels no doubt. Joseph was so intent on Mary that he never noticed the little children that had gathered around the makeshift tent. When he looked up, there they were, staring at the frightened couple as if they had discovered a great treasure. Then one of them, a little girl with a toothless grin yelled out, “Aunt Mary!” Turning, she ran up the road followed by the others, yelling to the adults, “It’s Mary and Joseph! We found Mary and Joseph!”

Mary’s family and the others from the village were returning to Bethlehem and happened upon the couple. And what a time to find them! All thoughts of shame were instantly gone as the women rushed to little Mary’s aid. Her mother now sat with Mary’s head cradled in her lap, her tears falling as she gently caressed her daughter. The mid-wife of the clan examined Mary with the skill borne from many births. Joseph stood with her father and the other men off at a distance, and offered prayers to Jehovah for the safe delivery of the child. But no child came. The pains slowly subsided. Finally, Mary was asleep.

No, there was no baby born that day. But something else was birthed. In the fear and excitement of the moment, everyone forgot about the shame of Mary’s circumstance. No one cared, in the moment of need, about anything other than Mary and the baby’s safety. The rest of the day the poor Jewish peasants rejoiced--for the first time openly--at the soon coming birth of Mary’s baby.

The Fifth Day

*Wee little Mary who all thought good
believed the angel's word,
but what thought those who with her stood
when of her blessed womb they heard?*

There was much joy in the camp along the road to Bethlehem that night. Mary's mother never left her side. Her father, Heli, continually doted over their care, setting the example for the rest of the family. The family, he said, had suffered enough shame and now it was to be over.

Mary's strength improved throughout the day. Her mother's home cooking certainly helped but the tenderness and concern of her family was the real medicine.

And now it was time to leave. Heli gathered the clan together and placed Joseph and Mary in the middle. His old calloused hands placed firmly on their heads, for the first time since the supposed sin was discovered, he pronounced his blessing.

"Hear O Israel! May the womb of my daughter be blessed! May her children rise and call her blessed! May this child..." his voice broke with the strain of love withheld, "May *my grandchild* be great in all Israel!" A great shout went up from the little band of Jews gathered near the Jordan River that day.

The young couple was now covered with the kisses and well wishes of the family. Everyone dug into their belongings and supplies, blessing Mary and Joseph with so much that Heli gave another donkey to carry it all. With Mary as comfortable as possible on old Ben, the two started south as the children ran ahead to usher them on their way. The others shouted their blessings after them. Traveling mercies were given until the voices could no longer be heard.

The joy of acceptance filled Mary and Joseph. Mary softly hummed her little song as Joseph walked ahead, intent on reaching Jericho by nightfall. And then with a voice full of hope, Mary said, “Joseph, tell me again how it will all be.”

Tears of joy were caught in the corner of Joseph’s eye. *Everything is going to be all right!* he thought, and then he began the familiar story. “My sweet Mary, what the angels told us is true! It’s going to be a wonderful life...”

Christmas Eve

The Innkeeper's Wife

*"No, there's no room for the likes of you,
and yes, I can see your wife.
Now get from the door, let the others by,
don't trouble me with your life.*

*Besides the fact, have you no sense
to bring her so close to time?
Why in God's name would you have a child,
there's quite enough of your kind!*

*If you must there's a cave, a place for sheep,
out back on the hillside near.
Go out there, don't bother to pay,
just don't let my husband hear."*

*And so it was that God's cruel plan
to enter our broken estate,
was greeted with the best we had
and that, almost too late.*

*God's precious Lamb, spotless and pure,
born in a cave out of sight.
For no room in the hearts of lost mankind
could be found that silent night.*

Jericho had been kind to the young travelers. An elderly shopkeeper and his wife took pity on the couple as they watered the donkeys in the town

square. A good meal and a soft bed was all Mary needed to be fast asleep in a matter of moments.

The old shopkeeper took Joseph aside after Mary was settled. “Now Joseph, as you leave Jericho, don’t stop until you reach Jerusalem! It’s a treacherous road filled with robbers all along the way. Try to band together with other pilgrims, and stick to the main road. No shortcuts, Joseph! They’re sure to mean disaster.”

Before the sun was up, Joseph had the donkeys ready and loaded. The old couple sent them on their way with dried fish and matzoh cakes. Fortunately, a number of other travelers had also waited till first light making a sizable group with whom the two could travel.

The others would spend the Sabbath in Jerusalem, but Joseph knew that Mary’s time had run out. He had to reach Bethlehem by nightfall. The shofar horn, beginning the Sabbath, sounded as the two reached the city gates of Bethlehem.

“Joseph, what now?” asked Mary. Her breathing was labored. Her face smeared with the dust of many bone jarring miles on the back of the donkey. Joseph could sense that the labor pains had begun once again. “We need to find an inn that will keep us, Mary. Let’s try over there.” Making their way past the city gates, they joined the crowds of people who had come to register for Caesar’s tax.

Everyone, it seemed, had come to register. From one door to the next, the two asked for lodging. But it was obvious. No one wanted to board the dirty peasants from Galilee. One look at their dress and that was all it took to say no. The last door presented the same story.

An old lady, the matron of the inn, greeted them with the same indifference as the others. “Yes, I can see for myself that your wife is about to have a

baby, but that doesn't change the fact that we have no room. Now get along with you!"

Tears welled up in Mary's eyes. The pain, weariness, and loneliness was too much. Her first child would be born on a street corner and not survive the night. Joseph was panicking. *Oh God*, he thought, *please don't abandon us now!* Turning to go, Joseph looked into Mary's pain-filled face. He didn't have any more answers to give.

"Wait a minute, you two."

The faintest tone of compassion came from the doorway. Joseph turned to face the woman who quickly glanced over her shoulder before she spoke.

"There's some old sheep pens out behind the inn. You're welcome to stay up there if you want. Go around back, and I'll show you the trail. Well, do you want it or not?"

Before Joseph had time to speak, Mary cried out a response. "No time left. Hurry, please let's just go."

Around the back and up the trail, a wide cave was dug out of the hillside. Joseph lifted Mary from the donkey and placed her on a quickly made bed of straw. Soon, he had built a little fire to ward off the chill of the evening. The pains were quickening. There was no time left to find a midwife. The stars sparkled over the beautiful Judean hillside as Joseph held Mary's hand and listened as she told him what to do when the baby finally came.

And so a poor, young carpenter and his child bride cried alone in the night waiting for God to appear.

Silent Night

Silent night, holy night

All is calm, all is bright

Round yon Virgin Mother and Child

Holy Infant so tender and mild

Sleep in heavenly peace

Sleep in heavenly peace

Silent night, holy night!

Shepherds quake at the sight

Glories stream from heaven afar

Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!

Christ, the Saviour is born

Christ, the Saviour is born

Silent night, holy night

Son of God, love's pure light

Radiant beams from Thy holy face

With the dawn of redeeming grace

Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth,

Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth. "

Christmas Day

*What did the angels say
when you stripped away Your glory?
Did they turn away in shame?
Did they recognize You?
Did some stare in horror
as God became like...me?
It was not enough though, was it,
for you to become like me.
You who lived before eternity
and walked the heavens
and held the constellations in Your hand
were reduced to a clump of cells
tucked into the womb of a child.
For me.
And that, dearest Lord, I do not understand.
Marvelous are Thy works.*

The baby Jesus was born sometime in the night on a hillside outside of Bethlehem, the same hillsides that provided the choicest grazing in all Israel. It was on those hillsides that the lambs were raised that would be used in the Temple sacrifices. Most likely, the “stable” in which Jesus was born was part of a series of caves dug from the hillside that kept the sheep and other livestock in the small town. The lamb of God, born in the very pens that kept the sheep used for the Temple sacrifices. How like God to do such a thing. There is no mention of anyone who ventured out to help or assist. Surely if there had been, Mary would have noted their names or descriptions to the Gospel writers.

But no one came. And in majestic irony, God appointed the heavenly birth choir to sing to a group of shepherds keeping their flocks at night. Surely they, of all people would recognize the spotless Lamb of God.

I wonder what Mary and Joseph thought when the scraggly unkept shepherds showed up to marvel at the child! Were they to be evicted now from the stable? Did Joseph stand up to defend his family against the intruders? Did he understand their rough dialect as they described the scene of angels who had appeared to them?

I wonder what it must have been like.

Over the course of the next several days, Joseph registered his little family with the Roman tax collectors. He had to find decent lodging, or maybe just make the stable more tolerable until he found work. They would stay in Bethlehem for a year or so until an angel would give Joseph instructions to flee from Herod's sword.

It would be years before they would see their beloved Galilee again. Those years were spent by Joseph and Mary faithfully protecting the baby Jesus from the serpent.

Jesus knew the same hardships of any other child who is homeless, poor, and an outcast of society. He was the son of an unmarried teenage girl and born into an ethnic group that was only several generations away from complete slavery. He was like us. Then again, He was not like us at all, because He chose to identify with the worst our world could offer. He chose to be the least of men so that no man would have reason to reject Him.

And that is why we worship Him this day.

Merry Christmas, Jesus.

HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING

Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new born King,
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with th' angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new born King!"

Christ, by highest heaven adored;
Christ, the everlasting Lord;
late in time behold him come,
offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail th' incarnate Deity,
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new born King!"

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new born King!"

Go your way and rejoice, but in your feasting, think of the Man in Bethlehem; let him have a place in your hearts, give him the glory, think of the virgin who conceived him, but think most of all of the Man born, the Child given. I finish by again saying, ---

“A HAPPY CHRISTMAS TO YOU ALL”

Charles Spurgeon