

He Who Walks Uprightly
A Re-telling of the Christmas Story - Luke 2:1-20

By Jane Lauber (Stony Brook, L.I., N.Y.)
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A glaring sun flooded the Judean countryside and its distinguished travelers, as if Heaven itself were spotlighting the scene. A young man led a donkey on which rode a young woman. Small clouds of powdered dust comprised their entourage.

Joseph relaxed the donkey's rope. "Just a second, Grey One. Give your weary legs and my Mary a moment's rest."

He lifted the waterskin from his shoulder and offered it to his wife. While she drank, he scanned the bright sky, hoping to see even a small cloud which might temporarily relieve the intense heat. Disappointed, he readjusted his headpiece, attempting to supply more shade to his tanned face, now etched with trails of perspiration.

He splashed them all away with a handful of water, before replacing the waterskin.

"It must be almost noonday," he observed, as they began walking again. "We'll stop soon and rest a few hours. You'll feel better then, Mary."

"Don't worry so, Joseph, I'm fine. But I must admit I'm looking forward to finding a comfortable couch in Bethlehem!" She laughed, "I know now why people don't stuff pillows with donkey bones!"

"She is some good sport," mused Joseph with admiration. This trip would try the patience of a patriarch, and Mary talks of pillows and donkey bones! But I know good and well she doesn't feel as fine as she wants me to believe. I've seen her face wince with pain in unguarded moments. She's just being cheerful for me. It's strange – how loving someone increases courage.

"I only wish she didn't have to make this miserable journey now. That census couldn't have been ordered at a worse time! Even if the baby *doesn't* come for a few weeks, to have to leave the women in Nazareth who will help when the child is born, is no small loss of comfort to Mary – or to me! What in the *world* would I do should her time come!" He was stunned by a stab of fear.

Quickly he summoned all his logic to subdue his anxiety. "But it won't come this soon. She isn't due just yet." He argued with his apprehension. "It couldn't possibly happen."

His apprehension answered, "Why not?"

"God would not allow it! It's contrary to all reason, even to think that the Messiah of Israel might be born without adequate assistance. God had able care for mother and child, waiting in Nazareth, and it is merely a lack of trust on my part to have such a fear. I will have more faith!" Joseph determined with all his strength. His animal's heavy hoof-beats emphasized each word of the resolution.

His mind reassured and his faith reinforced, Joseph turned his attention to a large juniper a few yards off the road ahead. "Look, Mary! There's our oasis! Step lively Grey One," he encouraged his donkey. "Carry my lovely lady to that splendid spot of shade!"

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The shadows of Bethlehem's buildings, which usually by dusk were stretched lazily across the cobblestone streets and were lying quietly for the night, this evening appeared disturbed and agitated with activity as Mary and Joseph entered the town.

“I’ve never seen such commotion here!” Joseph said in amazement as they threaded through the crowd to the long-awaited inn. He hesitated at the door to catch his breath. The arduous miles had tired him more than he would admit. He knocked hard.

No one came. “What a racket in there!” he thought. “Perhaps they didn’t hear.” He knocked harder.

The door opened and before Joseph could voice his request, the innkeeper slapped both his hands to his head. “Oh, no! Not more customers! How I hate to turn them away! “We’re full – full to the brim, my good man. Not a square foot left! Oh, *why* can’t you people space your visits to my inn throughout the year! Instead, you all come at once for the census, and I have to lose good clients! I hate to say it, good man, but we have no more room!”

“But, Sir!” Joseph exclaimed. “Can’t you see, my wife is with child and near her time. Surely you have some small spot for us – even just for *her* to have a bed – anywhere she can rest! We’ve had a *very* hard journey, and she desperately needs to lie down!”

“I am honestly sorry, good man. I’m sorry for you. I’m sorry for her. I’m sorry for me! But every room is wall to wall with as many beds as I could find to accommodate this mob, and all are full! This place is a regular madhouse tonight!” His statement was underlined by a long loud series of heavy laughter which poured through the open door. He turned his palms skyward, shrugged his shoulders, and said, “So, what can I do?”

“And *what*, Sir, are we to do!” Frustration and dismay were evident in Joseph’s voice.

“Just a minute, let me think, let me think.” The innkeeper’s face frowned into grooves. “You know I don’t *want* to disappoint you and your good woman! Pleasing people is my business! It’s just that there is no room – anywhere. The travelers are all crowded together like this (he crisscrossed all his fingers). Even their animals are crowded!”

“Animals – wait – wait just a minute. I have an idea!” The grooves changed places as he smiled. “Only this afternoon, I had my boy put fresh hay in the stable for the extra animals, so it’s comparatively clean. You *could* stay there – hardly luxury accommodations, but hay *is* softer than cobblestone, and the cave would offer *some* protection from the night air. Beside – I’ll only charge you the fee for your donkey! What do you say?” He lifted his eyebrows into half-moons.

No Choice

“I guess we have no choice,” Joseph conceded with a sigh.

“Then, follow me.” The innkeeper indicated with a quick toss of his head the direction of the stable.

“Come on, Grey One,” said Joseph as he gave his donkey a gentle tug. “You’re sharing your room with us tonight.”

After locating the stable and depositing the coins in a bag which hung from his waist, the innkeeper swished his long robes down the path back to his many guests.

Joseph helped Mary to the ground, then led the way into the cave. “Well, here we are, my Love. It’s no Roman villa, but it’s all ours – ours, and Grey One’s and his assorted friends’. Meet our roommates – to the right we have the donkeys and goats, to the center and left we have the cows and sheep, and all around we have a good number of creeping, buzzing crawling things...”

His attempt at levity was quickly tinged with sarcasm. To be sincere was better. “In fact, it’s a wretched place. I’m sorry, Mary. I am terribly sorry. I had hoped that our stay in a nice inn would be a pleasure for you – but here we are, stuck in a smelly stable.”

“Joseph, to tell you the truth, I’m too tired to worry about it,” said Mary as she waved the flies away from her face. “And at least the tenants of our inn will be less noisy than the laughing men we just heard!”

“True,” Joseph agreed. “I suppose all we can do is make the best of it. Let’s eat now, and then I’ll arrange the hay so you can sleep.”

“Thank you, Joseph.”

“Think nothing of it, good woman,” said Joseph, lightly mimicking. “Pleasing people is my business!”

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The night chill came quickly, when the sky lost the sun. Mary, covered with Grey One’s blanket, had been lying on the hay in the darkness for over an hour.

Joseph sat with legs crossed at the entrance of the cave. He looked at the sky – a dark field, lavishly strewn with a profusion of bright seed – and he thought of the Great Sower and His ways. The words of Scripture, “No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly,” came to his mind and his brow creased with confusion.

“A room at the inn would have been good, but it was withheld. Mary and I do try to walk uprightly and to obey God’s laws. Mary – of all people – chosen by God to bear Messiah – if she’s not upright, who is? I can’t understand why things worked out like this. Maybe if I were more upright, I wouldn’t be deluged with doubts so often.” He shook his head. “It’s beyond me!”

“Joseph!”

He was startled by the complete lack of drowsiness in Mary’s voice. He thought she had fallen asleep long ago. He hurried to her side.

“Joseph,” she said again softly. “Don’t be alarmed – but I’m quite sure the baby is about to be born.”

Joseph’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Mary, *no!* Not now! Not here in this stench! It can’t be! We know of no one in Bethlehem who could help you!” His voice was not loud. “It just can’t be! Surely you wouldn’t tease me so unkindly!”

He will help us

Mary, hurt by his accusation, said sharply, “Of course not! Don’t talk like that, Joseph! The baby will be born whether you consent or not. We know God. He is in Bethlehem and He will help us and I will tell you what to do when necessary. Please, don’t shout at me!”

“I’m not shouting!” Joseph shouted.

They were both silent.

Joseph composed himself, “For her sake, I must at least disguise my distress.”

“I’m sorry, Mary. I was just upset. You are right. God is here and everything will be all right.”

His lips formed the words, but in his heart, fear, anxiety and doubt raged in roaring protest. “How *could* You, God! How could You let this happen now! Mary needs *capable* help – particularly with her firstborn! I’m no midwife! These are carpenter’s hands, not physician’s! What if something should go wrong! Why did You do this to us? I *trusted* You!” he hurled his anger to Heaven.

And back, into his storm-racked consciousness, thundered the familiar words of God, “My thoughts are not your thoughts... neither are my ways, your ways... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

And, as streaks of lightning, spearing and searing their way into his soul, came a rapid succession of promises –

“Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.”

“Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you.”

“He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.”

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help...”

“Be still and know that I am God...”

“Fear not; I will help you.”

Joseph felt ashamed, but his soul was stilled. His prayer was earnest. “Forgive me, God. Forgive me and help me. I’m depending on You... I guess You’re depending on me, too.”

“Mary?”

“Yes, Joseph.”

“Are you afraid?”

“A little – but mostly excited.”

“Me too.”

He took her hand firmly, in both of his. “But God is here,” he assured her, “and everything will be all right.” This time he meant it.

* * *

The joy of participating in a miracle permeated Joseph’s being as he watched Mary wrapping the baby in bands of cloth, torn from his inner cloak. After holding the baby close to herself once again, she handed Him to her husband. “You could put Him there, Joseph, in the manger – it’s a perfect crib – complete with straw mattress! We should all try to sleep now – all three of us.”

As Joseph took the Christ-Child in his big hands a wave of wonder engulfed him. “He’s so tiny,” he marveled. “Such a little thing to hold all the hopes of Israel – so small and weak to be our strong Deliverer.”

Suddenly he turned to Mary, “*I delivered the Deliverer!*” The wonderful, beautiful irony of the thought caused Joseph’s eyes to blur. “God’s ways are not our ways,” he said aloud, but to himself: “For years, I have heard His Word. And yet I know so little about Him. He wanted me, not only to be Messiah’s guardian, but to be part of His entrance into earth, and I doubted His kindness. His wisdom is larger than logic – even larger than the dictates of my faith.”

“I know so little,” Joseph again confessed, as he gently placed the baby in the manger and blew out the lamp.

* * *

Mary and the Child were quiet. Joseph still listened to the buzzing flies, zooming through their swooping circuits around the stable. But his thoughts were the real cause of his sleeplessness.

“Mary, are you awake?”

After a few seconds, she turned over. “Yes, I am now.”

“I didn’t mean to wake you, Mary, but I keep thinking... How should we go about letting people know that the Messiah is born? All Israel has waiting for Him so long, and it would be such comfort for them to know. Also, it seems only proper that even as a baby, he should be honored. Yet – to whom should we go? And how shall we prove our claim? Who will believe us?”

“I don’t know,” said Mary. “In both of our families – the people who know us best – only Elizabeth and Zechariah *really* were convinced of the Child’s identity.”

“I think you’re right, but I can’t say that I blame the others,” Joseph admitted. “As long, and as well as I have known you, Mary, when you told me you were with child by the Holy Spirit, it seemed preposterous! I was sure that either you couldn’t face the truth, or else you were afraid to admit it to me – so you had to imagine some sort of holy explanation. I even wondered if you were losing your reason. What *tortured* days those were, and how grateful I was for the angel’s visit to me! I should never have questioned your integrity and truthfulness, but I did – just as everyone will question ours!”

I’d love to run into that inn, right this minute, and shout, ‘Men! Come and see your Savior! My wife just gave birth to Messiah – witnessed by your donkeys!’ But they would think I was raving drunk – or else insane. And yet, it *must* be our responsibility to inform Israel, and it worries me.”

In the darkness, their obligation enlarged the longer they considered it. The utter happiness they had experienced just after the birth seemed slightly diluted by duty.

“Oh, Joseph! What’s *that*?”

Joseph whirled around, and saw a waving lantern, swinging its way into the cave – followed by a cluster of inquisitive faces, straining to see through the darkness. He was on his feet in an instant demanding, “Who are you? What do you want? What do you mean frightening my wife?”

“We didn’t mean to frighten anyone...”

“We’re shepherds...”

“We’re looking for the Christ-Child...”

“We thought maybe...” They all spoke at once.

The light of the lantern danced and darted in abstract patterns across the stable. As it glanced past the manger, the shepherd gasped, rushed forward and steadied the lantern for a better look. “He’s here! The Christ-Child is right here in the manger – just as we were told!” he cried with intense delight.

Forgetting manners and explanations, the excited group surged past the animals, encircled the manger, and knelt in silence. Only the shepherd with the lantern still stood and his desire to join his friends was obvious.

Joseph stepped forward and offered to take the lantern.

Now all the shepherds were on their knees. Some bowed their heads, others closed their eyes. All worshipped.

Joseph didn't understand how the shepherds knew, and the look on Mary's face told him that she too, was puzzled. But as he held the lantern and observed the reverence of the rugged men before him, he was saturated with gratitude. Gratitude, and relief as he realized, "God Himself heralded His Son's birth! God somehow has shared our secret with Israel. God again has accomplished His plan, in His 'higher' way."

"How merciful, yet how inscrutable are His ways," thought Joseph, fixing his eyes on the manger's tiny occupant and adding to the shepherds' worship the adoration of his heart.

"His name is Jesus," he said.

"Jesus – Christ the Lord," a shepherd replied.

As Joseph considered his Savior, his spirit and his voice echoed the words of his ancestor David: "My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord and let all flesh bless His holy name for ever and ever."

The shepherds had told their story and gone. It was dark again in the stable. The flies still zoomed through their swooping circuits; the animals occasionally shifted, moved, and made the music appropriate to their respective breeds. But none of this disturbed Joseph, who had seen God at work and was at peace.

"If only I can learn to praise when I *don't* see," he wished prayerfully.

He listened a moment to the quiet, rhythmic breathing of Mary and the Child, then he too lay down on the hay and slept.