

Joy to the World the Lord Is Born!

A Retelling of the Christmas Story by Evelyn Stroh

The country around Bethlehem was different from the cold countries where many people live. It was near the center of the earth so the sun warmed it longer and there was seldom any snow; the shepherds kept their flocks out on the hillsides feeding even in December. There was desert country too around Bethlehem, and people traveled over it on camels, for there were no roads that the shifting sands did not hide and only the great tall camels and the desert horses of the Arabs knew how to find their way in it.

Bethlehem itself was not part of the desert country. There were trees there, but not thick woodlands, and there were grain and cornfields where the people grew their food. And all over the hills in winter the grass came up green as it does many places in spring time, for the rains fell only in winter and the summers were dry and the hills brown. So we see now why it happened that shepherds kept their flocks by nighttime in the middle of winter.

Nearly a year before the Lord was born in Bethlehem, a young girl named Mary was living in a city of Galilee named Nazareth. She was a descendent of the house of David, betrothed to a man named Joseph with the expectation of being married in a few months.

Mary probably lived among her kinsfolk, working and serving in her house as the other young women did, perhaps grinding the meal, baking bread, bearing water from the well in the courtyard in great stone jars born upon her head. We can picture Mary as a lovely, innocent, gentle girl who served the Lord on the Sabbath days and remembered well the things she had learned from the priests.

One day when Mary was alone an angel appeared before her. Her spirit's eyes were opened to see him, but she did not know that and thought that he came to visit her and speak to her. We can imagine that he spoke to her in a deep and musical voice: "Hail. Thou art highly favored. The Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou among women."

And Mary felt troubled and amazed. Perhaps her eyes grew dark and wide with wonder as she looked at the angel's beautiful countenance and listened to his voice. Then the angel said to her, "Fear not, Mary for thou hast found favor with God. And behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus, "He shall be great and shall be called the son of the highest."

Imagine, this young girl filled with fear, and wonder, and great humility while the angel told her how this would come to pass, “The power of the most high shall overshadow thee; therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”

And when the angel had finished speaking, Mary said to him, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word.”

So we see that Mary knew before the Lord was born that He was to be a special child, unlike any other before or since. She would have carried the baby tenderly until the great day when He should be born, serving the Lord and wondering about this Baby that would be born of God. For Mary and all her tribe and household must have thought that Jesus was coming to be an earthly king like David. And yet, because of the most holy miracle that had taken place in her body, she knew He must be a different sort of king than any who had been born before. For never before had it happened that the power of the Lord had descended into the world to take form in the body of a little child.

Now let us follow Mary in our thoughts on that night when she and Joseph rode up to the inn in Bethlehem, going there with all the other people to pay their tax to the governor of the country.

Most likely the journey was hard for Mary, because it was near time for the child to be born, and surely Joseph was very kind and tender to her. For the angel Gabriel had talked with Joseph and told him to take Mary for his wife and care for her because the baby she was bearing was from God. Joseph had always loved Mary and now he held her in reverence as well as love, because she had been chosen to be the mother of the Son of the Most High.

Now can you imagine what things may have been like? Night was glooming down when they reached the inn and the arching skies were filled with purple shadows where the stars were one by one twinkling through. The hills about the city were soft with shadow and here and there a sheep bell tinkled or a shepherd’s voice called to his flock.

Being so close to giving birth, Mary would have been very tired, and Joseph would have been anxious about her. So when they came to the inn and found it overcrowded, he begged the innkeeper most earnestly to find room for them. So it was, because all the rooms in the inn were already filled with people, the innkeeper took them out to a cave in the hillside behind the inn, where the cattle and sheep were sheltered, and cleared a stall for them and filled the manger with sweet hay so that Mary could lie down. It was barely in time, for the Child was about to be born.

And so it came to pass that our Lord Jesus Christ, who was to become the Divine Human, God of heaven and earth with His Divine Love and Wisdom appearing before people in beautiful living form, was born among the gentle animals in the manger at Bethlehem. Can you see Him, lying there in his mother's weary arms, His beautiful eyes shining up into her tender ones? And perhaps Mary began to understand, just a little, that He was not just another baby, but an infinitely precious Being whose spirit was from God.

And then that wonderful thing happened—the heavens unfolded out in the dark night for the eyes of the simple-hearted shepherds on the hillsides around the inn. Their spiritual eyes were opened, and they saw an angel and heard him speak and heard and saw too the great choirs of heaven singing in exquisite harmony: “Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, good will to men.”

And far out, beyond the desert, beyond the hills, the journey of the wise men began that night also. Their spiritual eyes saw the great star which went before them, leading them on to Bethlehem for many months to come and worship the Child.

So, too, the Lord must be born to us. In our hearts He must find a little humble place among the kind and gentle affections which the good animals represent. And about Him the simple shepherds of our faith in God must kneel in acknowledgment of his Divinity. All the wisdom we have learned must come bearing Him gifts of love and praise and humility of heart, to acknowledge him as the only Lord God of heaven and earth. Then He may grow up in our hearts and become God with us to all eternity.