

Christmas Morning Story 2017

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It wasn't Joachim's snoring that caused her to slip out of bed in the middle of the night. After over 30 years together, she was used to it, and could usually roll over and doze off again.

That was the luxury of sleeping in a bed, rather than on a straw filled mattress on the floor like so many others. Joachim's flocks and herds earned him a substantial living, both for the perfect specimens he could sell for sacrifice at the Temple, and for the less perfect ones that made festivals and marriage feasts such wonderful meals.

True the bed was not laid on a glorious ivory frame, as were known in Samaria and Galilee some 600 years earlier. But it was more than many in Nazareth had to sleep on that or any other night.

No, what woke her up and prevented sleep from returning was the question that kept repeating over and over in her mind: Did they make it? Did they get there? Before the baby was born?

It was thirty leagues, plus or minus, from Nazareth to Bethlehem. A strong man with a healthy donkey carrying a load of goods for trade could make the trip in three days.

The donkey that Joseph had borrowed to carry his pregnant wife to his home town was old and not all that healthy, and she was due to give birth any day now.

They had left four days ago and the registration that the Governor Quirinius had ordered just weeks before was scheduled in two more days.

Anne climbed the ladder from the second floor of their house to the roof. The ladder was especially sturdy, made for them by her cousin Joseph.

Cousin, you must understand, was a loose term to include pretty much anyone from their extended family, or from what might once have been a clan or a tribe.

He was, by universal account, the best engineer in the region.

His skill brought him as much work as he could handle, and he was by all measures a successful businessman. He could design and build homes – especially where one was to be built against a city wall or another house. He could carve a beautiful door or make a sturdy table. He quickly learned how to make window frames for the glass panes that Romans brought with them to the colonies, and his wealthiest clients could afford light filled rooms regardless of the weather.

The same Joseph who, years after losing his own wife to a wasting disease, agreed to marry their daughter Mary. The same Joseph who was rushing to Bethlehem with her, hoping to be present and in line as the census began.

The same Joseph who was worried sick about what would happen to them if the baby came before they got there, and with no plan about what might happened if the baby came while they were there.

Anne walked first to chamber at the corner of the roof near the street side and did what everyone does in such a closet, pouring a bucket of water down the drain once she was finished.

Coming out of the closet she was facing due west. Nazareth was built on a gently sloping hill, and from the roof of their house near the center of town, she could just barely make out the black stripe on the horizon which was the Mediterranean Sea, just 20 miles away.

But her gaze eventually turned south. And she wondered how they were doing. 30 leagues, 90 miles, more or less, to Bethlehem.

If irony had an aroma, that night it would have filled the air that Anne was breathing.

If it had a taste, it would have coated the inside of her mouth and throat every time she swallowed.

Anne was born in Bethlehem, a descendant of the great King David, whose family returned there after the Babylonian exile, rather than return to Jerusalem.

In many ways she longed to return there – especially this week to be with her daughter -- but her marriage to Joachim, who was born and raised in Nazareth, meant she had to stay here with him for the census.

Staring south in the nighttime darkness, she recalled the circumstances that brought her to this moment.

Like most Jewish families, her parents brought her to Jerusalem once or twice a year for the great Temple festivals, usually the feast of Pentecost, 50 days after Passover, and Succoth, the great harvest festival.

Gathered with families from all over Galilee and Judea, Anne's parents met Joachim's parents several times, and noticing that their children were of appropriate ages, the negotiations began.

By the time they were teenagers, Anne and Joachim knew that their parents were planning to have them marry.

That's how things were done.

And so, when the time came, after a week of feasting in Bethlehem, Anne left her family and traveled with her new husband to his home in Nazareth.

He was a Levite, and related to a highly ranked family of priests, which is how he came to manage the herds and flocks of animals that were raised for sacrifice in the Temple. Dozens of shepherds reported to him and he

regularly inspected the bulls, sheep and goats to cull out any which did not reach the standard for Temple sacrifices. Those he could sell as he wished, pocketing the profit, and so he became a wealthy man. Thus the fine house in Nazareth with the rooftop view of the great sea, and the comfortable bed.

Life in central Galilee was good, as Anne reported to her family, and so her cousin Joseph soon followed with his wife and children to take advantage of the work available to him.

Eventually, one son returned to Bethlehem to open his own engineering practice. A daughter returned to wed a bread baker, a marriage arranged at Temple festivals much the same as Anne and Joachim. James, not the oldest but probably the smartest, was invited to Jerusalem to study to be a scribe.

And so, when Joseph's wife took ill and then died, he found himself spending time with his cousin Anne, and Joachim, evenings and for meals.

Young Mary loved it when her uncle was around, especially when he brought a block of wood and took out his knife and carved her a doll or a dreidel or a new spoon while she watched.

She in turn became expert at spinning and weaving and delighted him once with a scarlet and white coverlet for a table he had made.

That's what Anne was thinking about when she heard the faint creak of wood bending behind her.

She turned back to see the head and shoulders of Joachim reach the top of the ladder.

He too went first to the cool roof chamber and then came and stood next to his wife, draping his arm around her shoulders.

"What do you think?" he asked.

She thought.

“My head is full of anxiety, but my heart is at peace. I know that God will take care of them, whatever happens.”

“Did they have a plan once they got there? With whom will they stay?”

“I don’t know. Joseph did not answer those questions when I asked. I’m not sure his children would be happy with him showing up on short notice in his new situation, with a bride-to-be so much younger than them and a child on the way. I’m not really sure he has told them much at all.”

Joachim nodded. “I don’t know how much of the story he is telling anyone, about his dreams, I mean. You have to admit it all seems unusual to say the least.

“We all admired him for raising children who were such strict adherents to the law. Who could know that the same law would now cause him such embarrassment.” His voiced trailed off as he said it.

“Truth is, for all I know, they are showing up unannounced to his children and family. Perhaps they will find room in the inn.” Anne shrugged as she said this, almost letting her fears win out over her hopes.

Joachim yawned, and turned back to the ladder to return downstairs and to bed.

“Be careful of the lamp on the shelf,” Anne said as he began to descend.

The question reformed in her mind, standing there in the silence of the middle of the night.

When they get to Bethlehem, what will they say?

Surely the census takers won’t care. But what about his son or his daughter and their families? What about the dozens of other cousins and nephews and nieces or aunts and uncles?

They all would have heard that Mary – so young -- was betrothed to Joseph, and that the marriage was to take place in a couple of months.

That she was pregnant and was about to bear a child already was scandalous, and all the more so since Joseph had apparently refused to put her away according to the Law of Moses.

He had confided with Anne and her husband about his dreams and the angels who sent him messages as he slept.

They, of all people, understood.

Standing on her rooftop, still gazing south towards Bethlehem, she recalled her own visit from an angel, more than a dozen years ago.

After almost two decades of childlessness, her hopes of raising a family with Joachim were about gone. That was not to say that she didn't pray every day for what was increasingly looking like a miracle.

The message from the angel was the answer to those prayers. "Anne, the Lord has heard you and will grant you your heart's desire."

The experience was thrilling. The voice of the angel was, well, angelic. It was surrounded by volumes of music, the like she had never before heard, and doubted that many other people ever had. And the light from the angel's face was brighter and clearer than sunlight itself.

Joachim was supervising his flocks far away from Nazareth.

That's what he was telling people anyway. The truth is that he was ashamed to be without a son or even a daughter, and found it easier to be away from town, and even away from his wife, for weeks or even months at a time.

So he was alone in the wilderness when the same message was delivered to him, maybe even by the same angel.

He returned home as soon as he could, finding Anne waiting for him at the city gate. They embraced there and wept in each other's arms for what seemed like hours at the news they had both received.

And in the way that some women have, Anne suddenly felt different, and knew that she was already pregnant.

She kept this experience a secret, as did her husband. The only person she confided in was her sister-in-law Elizabeth, married to Joachim's brother Zechariah – a priest who served at the Temple.

What would people say if they knew? What would they say if they heard that Mary's birth was a miracle in more ways than one?

So they encourage Joseph to be faithful to the messages he had heard, regardless of the cost to his reputation. Or theirs.

But what will they say in Bethlehem when Joseph and Mary arrive, perhaps with a child born in the wilderness *en route*? A child whose birth was announced by an angel? A child conceived by an even more miraculous circumstance than the mother herself?

Anne so wished she could have traveled with them to intercede with family and friends who would not understand the story of the angels' messages.

With that longing in her heart, she herself turned toward the ladder to return to bed, reminding herself to be careful of the oil lamp they left burning on the shelf on the wall.

As she turned, she saw something strange out of the corner of her eye. Turning back to the south, she stared hard across the hills and valleys.

Far in the distance, seemingly beyond the horizon, she saw the glow as of a bright light.

Anne thought to herself: the moon has already set this evening, and sunrise is still hours away and will come from the east, not the south.

She continued to stare at the glow, wondering what it was and whether it meant anything.

She wondered until the instant when she recognized the light's color. It was brighter and clearer than sunlight itself. She recognized the light because she had seen it up close herself, the day the angel spoke to her.

There must certainly be a lot of angels to make that light so visible at this distance.

What, she wondered, was happening in the south, in the direction of Bethlehem that would cause the light of angels to brighten the sky this night?

And was that music she was hearing?