

The Nativity Story

By Teri Ann Berg Olsen

More than two thousand years ago, a miraculous event that changed the course of history occurred in an area known as the Holy Land, a desert region located between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, in the Middle Eastern nation of Israel.

While most people in the Holy Land were Jewish, they were ruled by the Roman Empire. The Romans treated the Jews harshly. Herod the Great, the local king of Judea, was a cruel tyrant. The Jewish people never gave up hope that someday God would send a Savior to deliver them from their oppressors, as the prophets had foretold.

In the village of Nazareth there lived a peasant girl named Mary, who was pledged to marry a young carpenter named Joseph. Both Mary and Joseph were descendants of David, the second king of Israel. Even so, they were common people and were used to making do with what little they had.

One day the angel Gabriel appeared before Mary. "Do not be afraid," he said. "Blessed are you among women. God has chosen you to be the mother of His son. The child will be called Jesus. He will reign over the Kingdom of David. His rule will never end."

Another angel visited Joseph in a dream and said, "Mary is to be the mother of God's son. You should go ahead with your wedding ceremony, for you will be the guardian of His child." Joseph did what the angel commanded.

Soon after Joseph and Mary were married, the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus decreed that everyone must immediately return to the city of their origin to register as taxpayers. For Mary and Joseph, this meant that they would have to travel all the way to Bethlehem, a distance of over 70 miles. They could not delay the trip until after the baby was born.

Mary rode on a donkey as Joseph guided them down dusty trails to the sandy river valley, and trudged up steep winding paths over rocky hills. On the way, they saw mountain gazelles and desert foxes. The couple traveled by day under the bright glare of the sun, and camped out at night under a clear starry sky. The temperature dropped rapidly after sunset. Roaming jackals and wolves howled in the darkness.

After about a week of travel, Mary and Joseph encountered more people along the route. This meant that they were close to the city. Soon they could see Jerusalem up ahead and they knew their destination was just beyond it. The couple hurried through the noisy, crowded city in order to reach Bethlehem before dark.

By the time Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, the sun was setting and the village inn was already filled to capacity. They walked down the narrow streets looking for a place to stay, but could not find any. Finally they came to the edge of town, where a split level structure was built on a hillside. They climbed up the stairs to the main floor, knowing that this was their last hope.

The kind gentleman who answered the door offered to let them spend the night in the lower part of his house, which was used as a stable. Excavated into the side of the hill, it consisted of rough limestone walls on three sides, posts and beams supporting the upstairs floor, and a wooden overhang across the front.

Joseph cleaned up the cave-like room and made some beds of fresh hay. At least they had a roof over their heads. There, during the night, Jesus was born. Mary wrapped him snugly in strips of linen cloth, according to custom. Joseph filled an empty feeding trough with soft straw to use as a crib.

That night some shepherds were sitting around their campfire in a field outside the village. Suddenly, an angel appeared among them and said: "Fear not! I bring tidings of great joy. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord." Then the angel was joined by a multitude of heavenly voices, saying: "Glory to God in the highest; peace on earth, good will toward men."

The shepherds ran through the village, praising God and telling everyone what they had seen and heard. The townspeople were amazed by the news of this baby who was the son of God. As the word spread, people came from miles around to see the Christ child and bring him gifts. Mary gracefully accepted every present, no matter how small, while she quietly pondered to herself about everything that had happened.

Meanwhile, in different faraway lands to the east, three wealthy wise men were each gazing at a star in the sky that glowed much more brightly than any others. These men had no doubt that this signaled the birth of a great king. They had read the book of Daniel who 600 years earlier predicted the year in which the savior of Israel would arrive.

The three wise men set out independently to follow the star, believing that it would lead the way to this newborn king and savior. They each carried with them a valuable treasure: gold, a precious metal; frankincense, a perfumed resin; and myrrh, a fragrant gum. After traveling for a while, the three men met in the desert. Realizing that they were all on the same pilgrimage, the men decided to continue on their journey together.

As the three wise men neared Bethlehem, they saw that the star light shone just ahead of them. The closer they came to the stable, the brighter it appeared overhead. The wealthy men, dressed in their fancy silk robes adorned with jewelry, stepped inside the lowly stable. Upon seeing the baby Jesus, the wise men fell to their knees and worshipped him. Then they brought out their treasures and placed them on the dirt floor before the baby.

Thus, the ancient prophecy was fulfilled. A Savior had indeed been delivered unto the people. The coming of Jesus brought the good news of God's love to the world. God's gift of Jesus came for everyone – young and old, poor and wealthy, people of all races and nations. This is the reason for the Christmas season, that joyous time of year when we celebrate the birth of a blessed baby in a humble stable long ago.

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