

# Mary's Story

## *No Doubt*

By

Brent J. MacDonald

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(Complete Edition Will Include 3 Parts)

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## Part I

*Lord, why is it taking so long?* It was a prayer that Mary had whispered dozens of times before.

Here, in the hill country of Judea, far from home, some of the events of the last few months seemed so distant. Yet sleep came hard and somehow these things were part of every waking moment. Yes, so much had happened...

... Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph...  
Matthew 1:18

Almost a year ago Joseph's parents, together with hers, had announced their formal betrothal. It was true the decision that they would someday marry was one that had been made many years earlier, without input from either her or Joseph, but in all she knew of her husband to be, her parents had made a good choice. He was a hardworking man, a carpenter, a godly man and respected in the community.

Her excitement was mingled with anxiousness. Would God bless her with a large family as every Jewish mother desired? What kind of mother would she be? Would she have good children?

Mary's thoughts immediately returned to the present. Children! No, the issue right now is one child.

...before Joseph and Mary came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.  
Matthew 1:18

The thought of being pregnant and not married still caused her to shudder. The stigma was one that she had been warned about since she was a little girl. Only those who would break God's law would do such a thing she had often heard. And, of course, that *they* got what they deserved was either expressed or implied as well. But, what about her? What had she done to merit this?

It had all happened so fast. Only a few months ago, as summer gave way to the slightly cooler weather of fall, she had gone to fetch water as she had so many times before. The choice was easy, either go toward the foot of the western hill to the smaller spring, or head to the hill north of Nazareth where the spring was much more plentiful and clear. North was the easy choice, with a glimmer of hope that she might meet some others her age on the same errand.

The man standing near the well was only a mild surprise. True, it was rare to see men fetching water unless flocks were near, but it could be that necessity drove him to the task. Curiosity quickly turned to concern, perhaps even a tinge of fear as she drew closer. There was no one else at the spring and the focus of this man seemed to be her. In that moment, as she debated turning back, his words interrupted her thoughts. Yes, his words... the first of many words she'd never forget...

Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you. Luke 1:28

She glanced over her shoulder to see if he might have been talking to someone else, but she was all alone. *Highly favored*, what did he mean? She was just an ordinary girl living in a town that most of the world either didn't know about or care about. Memories of how Judeans treated those from Nazareth were clear in her mind from trips to Jerusalem for the festivals. Even the

more subtle contempt other Galileans had shown, when they had traveled to the Sea of Galilee a few years before, had left an impression.

Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? John 1:46

Maybe they had some reason to think this way. Many in Nazareth seemed to live like they didn't care whatsoever about the God of Israel. From their crude speech to mannerisms and behaviors picked up from working at the nearby Roman town of Sepphoris, it seemed those who wanted to please God were definitely a minority. How can anyone from here be highly favored, much less me? His words broke into her troubled thoughts...

Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. Luke 1:30

The Lord is with *me* and I have found favor with God? Why would God want to send me a message? Yet this man is speaking to me by name. The words to not be afraid strangely seemed to provide strength... a good thing because of the words which followed.

You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end. Luke 1:31-33

A child? A son? One who will have the throne of David? These words were filled with meaning. Every

Israelite, in the midst of this Roman occupation, longed for a fulfillment of the prophecies that were proclaimed in the synagogues and temple. The One who would sit on the throne of David was the Messiah! He was the One who would restore the true monarchy that had been lost so many centuries before. Pondering these words and the promise now directed at her, brought a flood of questions. Fleeting thoughts and wonder over what he meant by saying that the Messiah would reign over the house of Jacob forever were pushed aside by a more pressing concern. The *big* question was how?

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" Luke 1:34

Of course this had to be following her future marriage to Joseph. How else could it be? The reply from the angel made her shiver.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Luke 1:35

Having a baby without being with a man... with God alone as the Father! Unbelievable, and yet this angel assures it will happen. The turmoil of her thoughts kept her grasping for words that never came, as the messenger spoke again.

Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." Luke 1:36-37

Elizabeth. It was only during the festivals in Jerusalem that she was able to see this relative on her mother's side. If something regarding the Messiah was going to happen it should be with her. Elizabeth's marriage had brought her back into the priestly tribe of Levi. Though she had been born a Judahite based on her father's lineage, her mother was originally from the Levitical line, quite specifically a descendant of Aaron. Many had felt that the Messiah would come through such a union. How else could he be both priest and king? And yet this very godly couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah, had grown old with no child – a bitter disappointment for her and a source of quiet ridicule for her husband.

But now, the angel was saying that Elizabeth was pregnant and six months so! If this was true, might she dare to believe that the Messiah would be born to herself; a virgin? Oh yes, she wanted to believe it all, for deep down she knew the angel's last words had to be true... Nothing was impossible for God. *Oh Lord, let it all be true*, she silently prayed before finally responding to the angel.

"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said. Luke 1:38

Before her very eyes, the angel who had called himself Gabriel was gone. It all had to be true! Her excitement to tell her parents was so great she forgot the original errand and hurried toward home. Of course, they would be surprised and excited too!

Surprised wasn't the right word. Shocked was more like it and disbelief filled their words. The very idea that she could be pregnant without being with a man – as the angel had said – was met with angry response about the disgrace it would bring on the family and Joseph too.

Joseph! In all this he had almost been forgotten. What would his response be to hearing about this supernatural pregnancy? After her parents reaction she now began to doubt whether he would believe. It didn't take long to find out as a meeting was hastily called with Joseph and his parents. Shocked looks and harsh words, many words, prevented almost any defense. Joseph was pressed as to what he was going to do.

Joseph's eyes blazed with anger as he finally spoke. No amount of pleading for him to listen to the whole story, to listen to the truth that there had been no other man seemed to matter. If only he would listen to all of what really happened, surely he would understand. Reluctantly, with a sigh and a shake of his head, Joseph motioned that everyone should listen.

The look in Joseph's eyes showed that a complete recount of the events from earlier in the day had made no difference. He didn't believe. *Lord, why don't they believe? Why won't you make them believe?*

Though Joseph was unsure if there even was a pregnancy, he was sure that if there was, there had to have been another man involved. Of course, as a devout Jew, he knew what was required by the law... and if he hadn't, his parents were quick to point it out again.

... the adulteress must be put to death. Leviticus 20:10

Perhaps Joseph wanted to believe, or maybe it was because he still cared. It was his idea that she be sent here. Perhaps it was for no other reason than to give time for him to make a decision on what would be done. The expressed reason he gave was to find out for sure that there was a pregnancy – as nothing was showing yet.

Joseph considering her a liar hurt greatly. Another reason he gave was one that offered a small glimmer of

hope. He also wanted to find out if the unlikely claim about Elizabeth was true – and this was one that could be quickly verified. His final words, that if Mary was pregnant he could see no choice to at least have a divorce, burned in her mind.

Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. Matthew 1:19

While the parents discussed this among themselves, she had mulled over the stigma that would come from a divorce. Mary had never seen the proceedings of a divorce, but had heard that it was simply being presented with a formal document ending the marriage – and in this case, a marriage that had never really had a start. It didn't matter that they had never finished the marriage process; a betrothal was so binding that a divorce now would be no different than had they had been married for years.

Everyone finally agreed that she would be taken to Elizabeth and Zechariah's home, to stay there until summoned. Only then would Joseph's decision be made known. Those escorting Mary were to return with news of whether there was truth to the story that barren old Elizabeth was pregnant. To minimize whispers and rumors, it was also decided that urgency was needed. She would have no opportunity to talk with her friends; their little group was to leave early the next morning.

Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea... Luke 1:39

It wasn't the first time Mary had traveled long. The three day journey to Jerusalem for the festivals took her the exact same way. Yet Jerusalem wasn't where they

were going. Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in Hebron, the city of the priests.

... towns were assigned to the descendants of Aaron... They gave them Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron), with its surrounding pastureland, in the hill country of Judah. Joshua 21:10-11

It was on the second day after reaching Jerusalem that they arrived in Hebron. This was the first time she had ever seen this honored place. It was here that Abraham was given the promise of a son and here that Abraham and the other patriarchs were buried. How ironic that because of her promised son that she should end up here. If they traveled only a bit farther down this road they would be in Beersheba, about as far away as she could get from her home and still be in Israel.

Meeting them at the gate, a servant brought greetings. Perhaps it was the impropriety of hearing that Zechariah would not be greeting them or the statement that Elizabeth too could not come out as she was great with child, that those escorting Mary abruptly announced that they must leave immediately. The expressed reason was a desire to find a favorable place of lodging on the return journey toward Jerusalem. There was truth in their musings, as they turned and left, about how dangerous the roads were in this hill country at night.

Mary's thoughts had turned toward Elizabeth and Zechariah. What would their response be to hearing her story? Believed or not, she was here to stay for a while. The letter her parents sent likely wouldn't help. That queasy feeling had returned to her stomach as the servant beckoned her inside. The thought on her mind as she stepped through the door was not a new one: *Lord, why me?*

She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. Luke 1:40

The sight of seeing her aged relative very pregnant was both a shock and an excitement. What the angel had said had been true – she had seen it with her own eyes – an old woman having a baby!

Mary had barely spoken a few words when Elizabeth grasped her protruding stomach at an obviously strong kick from the baby inside.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! Luke 1:41-42

Blessed? Mary felt anything but blessed at this moment. More like an outcast. These feelings gave way to the thought, the question, of how Elizabeth knew about her unannounced pregnancy. Not only does she know, but she's saying that the child will be blessed! No one had said anything remotely close to that other than the angel. Elizabeth continued her greeting, with a question...

But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Luke 1:43-44

Favored! Here again were words like those from the angel. For the first time in days, Mary's thoughts had returned to how special her child was going to be. Yet it was hard to imagine that Elizabeth's child could know this, while even in the womb. Elizabeth had continued...

Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" Luke 1:45

Yes, Mary did believe and now here was someone else who obviously did too. Her excitement had been hard to contain. *Thank you Lord*, she prayed silently. It was more than relief she had felt. It was like God was filling her very being. She couldn't help but speak.

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." Luke 1:46-55

Mary had never done, or said, anything like that before. Yet she knew the words she had spoken were true. She did believe. Things had to get better now, if Elizabeth could believe others would have to also.

She had so many questions for Elizabeth, the greatest being about her own untimely pregnancy. Elizabeth's obvious pleasure in finally being pregnant shone through her response.

"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people." Luke 1:25

The fullness of the complete story that Elizabeth told answered Mary's other question as to why Zechariah was being so unsociable. Her account began more than six months before, when Zechariah's priestly division of Abijah had its' appointed time of service at the temple in Jerusalem. During the feast, Zechariah had been chosen by lot – a great honor as it signified the priest of God's choosing – to go into the temple and burn the incense. Mary own memories filled in details from being at these feasts. How well she knew the words from the law that commanded:

If you bring a grain offering of firstfruits to the LORD, offer crushed heads of new grain roasted in the fire. Put oil and incense on it; it is a grain offering. The priest shall burn the memorial portion of the crushed grain and the oil, together with all the incense, as an offering made to the LORD by fire. Leviticus 2:14-16

A number of times Mary had seen the multitudes of worshippers bow before God as the priest entered the temple for this task, making it easy for her to imagine Zechariah's actions. Elizabeth sounded like she was reciting a written account as she continued her story in great detail.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do

not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Luke 1:11-18

Mary's thoughts had interrupted Elizabeth. Zechariah had been told by an angel that he would have a special son, giving his name in advance, even as an angel had spoken to her! This son of Zechariah and Elizabeth was the prophesied one who would come before the Messiah; her own son. The words Zechariah had heard even echoed the often talked about prophecy of Malachi.

"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." Malachi 4:5-6

In Mary's excitement over hearing how this other promised son would have much to do with hers, she seized on Elizabeth's words that Zechariah had questioned the angel, even as she had. If her much older

and godly relative – a priest – could have doubts, it somehow made her feel a little better over her own. Elizabeth continued to recount the events of Zechariah's experience.

The angel answered Zechariah, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. Luke 1:19

Mary had to get Elizabeth to repeat the name again as she could hardly believe her ears. Gabriel! Zechariah had seen the same angel! Elizabeth used the interruption to remind her that this was the same angel that God had used to speak to the prophet Daniel many centuries before.

It was only now that Mary learned why Zechariah was not greeting visitors; he was ashamed over his disbelief. He, a priest, had doubted a heavenly messenger and had been rebuked for it.

And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time." Luke 1:20

Zechariah had stayed in the temple far longer than normal, partially because he wondered how he could explain these things to the waiting crowd.

When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. Luke 1:22

Following the completion of Zechariah's time of service he had returned home, and sure enough, Elizabeth found herself to be pregnant not long after. Since the angel had told Zechariah that her son would be born under the vow of a Nazarite she had secluded herself for the last five months, not wanting to ceremonially pollute her son through unintentional contact with anything, or anyone, unclean.

It was only now, with Mary's arrival, that Elizabeth had seen anyone besides her husband and their servant. Mary wondered aloud about a Nazarite vow not being the choice of the person who would be under it. Both agreed that it was a very special thing, but Elizabeth knew it had happened before. She then continued on to speak of Samson as being her example – the legendary strong-man who had lived at the time of the Judges. With the similarities of these pre-birth Nazarite vows, Zechariah believed Elizabeth should do no less than what Sampson's mother had been commanded to do.

She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her." Judges 13:14

In the weeks that followed, Mary had busied herself helping Elizabeth with chores and preparations for the birth of John. It was during this time that she was given an extra reminder of the child she was carrying. Elizabeth assured that the morning sickness would only be for a few weeks and so it was. Yet, while it lasted, more than once, Mary's prayer had been another question: *Why do you let me feel this way Lord? He's your son too.*

She often thought of Joseph and her parents, as the weeks had turned into months. Could it be that Joseph would never want to see her again? Maybe her parents

meant to never call her back... Could it be God's will that His son be treated this way? Why doesn't God just send them a messenger as he did Zechariah and herself? Questions. Far more questions than answers.

Even here in Hebron, there were rumors and gossip. With her pregnancy now clearly showing, more than one conversation had stopped as she approached the communal well. She'd learned her lesson though. It was easier to not talk about it than to get people to believe her miraculous story.

*Lord, why is it taking so long to hear anything? Am I meant to give up all my dreams for You?* She truly feared that Joseph was gone for good. Even if, by some miracle, he would still have her as his wife, this protruding belly guaranteed that her dreamed-for wedding celebration was sure to never happen. Elizabeth provided a sympathetic ear and some comfort to her troubled thoughts. Clearly she and Zechariah believed. But, how could Elizabeth ever really understand? She already had a husband and a home.

Nearly three months had passed and Elizabeth's days of waiting were almost over. The birth of John could be any day now. Mary was glad she would be here to witness this marvelous event – and to help Elizabeth, who so greatly needed it.

The messengers from Nazareth arrived without warning mid-morning, bearing a letter from her parents that she was to return with them immediately to Nazareth. That was it. Not even a hint of what decision was made. The desire to know what was decided was tempered by thought that she was leaving before John was born. *Lord, after all these months, why now?* The messengers were insistent that they depart immediately, again for reasons of safety and lodging. After a hasty packing and tearful goodbyes, they were all too soon on their way. One last glance towards Elizabeth's home, as they cresting a hill,

brought a warm flood of memories to Mary before her thoughts turned to the journey ahead.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. Luke 1:56

The journey was uneventful, though those accompanying her complained more than once of the number of stops Mary felt necessary to take. Traveling while pregnant was certainly an inconvenience. Her first glimpses of Nazareth were mingled with excitement and fear. What are people saying? What would her parents and Joseph say? She knew she would find out all too soon.

Word of their arrival had reach Nazareth before them, enabling Joseph and his parents to be at her home as they entered. The greeting from her parents seemed warmer than she expected, which she hoped was a good sign. It was Joseph who formally spoke first and directly to her! His apology for not believing her spilled out in a torrent, overwhelming her as totally unexpected. Though both his and her parents had already heard it, Joseph spoke of what had happened since she had left.

He had spent months agonizing over what to do, feeling it necessary to divorce her, yet not being able to come to the point of saying that he would have nothing to do with her ever again. The return of those who had escorted her to Hebron, with news that Mary had spoken the truth about Elizabeth's pregnancy, had weighed heavily on him. How could he call her a liar about other things – no matter how far-fetched – when that which he could test had proven to be true? And if he believed her, how could he face the people of Nazareth who had long since drawn their own conclusions? In the midst of this prolonged indecision, something incredible had happened only slightly more than a week ago.

... an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us." Matthew 1:20-23

Mary was elated! God had answered her prayers and sent an angel to Joseph too. All his doubts appeared to have been removed, as the angel had confirmed her story of how special her son would be. He also understood that she had been faithful to him, as the fulfilled prophecy said; this child was to be born to a virgin. Joseph even began to refer to the baby as Jesus, the name the angel had given him. *Thank you Lord for sending Joseph an angel and making him believe!*

Though she still felt all of their parents were perhaps a bit skeptical, they gave their consent for Joseph to take Mary home as his wife. The marriage celebration was a far less public affair than normal, not to mention shorter, with only close family attending. Yet, Mary was pleased beyond belief that she would have a husband and a home for herself and her son. It was more than she had dared to hope for during those long weeks in Hebron.

Mary spent many alone moments talking with Joseph about their angelic messages, mulling over what they meant. Both had heard that this child would save his people from their sin. As the Messiah, of course he was coming to save Israel from the Romans, but why would the angel speak about sins?

One thing that Joseph had made clear to her, though he had taken her home as his wife, he would continue to consider her as his betrothed until after Jesus' birth. This made sense to Mary too, as it would only be then that they could consummate their marriage – the normal conclusion to the wedding celebration.

Joseph did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son... Matthew 1:24-25

Two messages came to Nazareth during the next month. The first was proclaimed by messengers on behalf of the Roman government, that Caesar Augustus had decreed that the Roman world was going to be taxed. Taxes! There was nothing new about taxes; the Romans had been oppressing them for years with taxes. What was new was the declared method, that everyone would be required to go to their ancestral home town to be registered. Leave it to the Romans to not care about how many lives they would be disrupting in the process. For Mary and Joseph, it would mean going to Bethlehem – a trip that would take them further than Jerusalem. The set time for this registration was still a long way off and Joseph felt it best that they wait until after Jesus' birth for any travel. Mary appreciated that Joseph was trying hard to calm her anxieties over all this uncertainty. His words, that the baby should come before then, were a hope that she clung to. She assured herself that God would want his Son born in a loving home and not some far away place.

The second message was far better. It had taken almost a month to arrive but Elizabeth had sent a letter announcing the birth of John and giving details as to everything that happened surrounding it. Even those who

had trouble believing someone as old as Elizabeth could be pregnant had rejoiced in the announcement.

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. Luke 1:57-58

Zechariah had been still unable to speak, a source of continued frustration to him. It also had given room for other relatives to try and name the baby Zechariah, after his father, at the formal naming ceremony accompanying the baby's circumcision. When it seemed that no one would listen to Elizabeth, who had protested that she had called him John from birth, Zechariah had come to her aid...

He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him. Luke 1:63-66

Mary understood well what Elizabeth had written next. She said that Zechariah had felt like God had taken control of him when he next spoke.

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of

salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us- to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." Luke 1:67-79

Mary was excited for Elizabeth and Zechariah, and she often thought of them in the days that followed. As for herself, life could be considered almost normal, if being pregnant counted. The whispering even seemed to have died down, at least in her presence. Growing greatly in size and feeling her son move within her thrilled her as she looked forward to his birth. Joseph was everything she had hoped for in a husband, a hard worker who provided well for them, and clearly loved her.

All their relatives had long since left for Bethlehem, since she and Joseph were both from the line of David. Joseph waited until the last possible week, before the Roman deadline, but still the baby had not come.

The rumor circulating around Nazareth – likely true – was that anyone caught not following the Roman edict would be put to death. Not going wasn't an option. Joseph finally decided that they had no choice but to start

out for Bethlehem. In her condition there was no way she could walk that far, so Joseph sold some of their few belongings to purchase a donkey... at a highly inflated price with all the travel going on. *Lord, why couldn't Jesus be born before we leave?* The prayer felt too little, far too late.

Faced with silence, which felt all too familiar, Mary busied herself in preparations for leaving. The idea of traveling, while so far pregnant, weighed heavily on her mind.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. Luke 2:4-5

The journey had been hard though the weather had been fair. At least Rome had scheduled the taxation census for spring and not the cold of winter or in the heat of summer. If the ones escorting her back from Hebron had thought they had to stop often, while she was moderately pregnant, Joseph was a hero for silently putting up with her state now. Her prayer had changed. *Lord, please help me to not have this child until we reach Bethlehem.* The thought of giving birth without a place to stay was perhaps her worst fear. Four days to Bethlehem would have been normal, it had now taken six – and still it was very late in the day as they arrived.

Bethlehem looked like it was bursting at the seams, with tents on its' outskirts and the extraordinary press of people filling its' streets. As dusk was fast approaching, everyone was hurrying to their place of lodging and the evening meal. Joseph and Mary continued through town seeking out homes of relatives, learning that each was full

to overflowing. It wasn't a surprise. Everyone else had traveled days before, unlike their last minute arrival. Of course the upper guest rooms of each home would have filled up first, likely with more important or aged guests. Most had also shared their lower living quarters with even more. Joseph finally expressed his concern that they would run out of options as they approached still another home. Night was now upon them and the unthinkable happened. Mary was in labor! The owner of this house, a relative none-the-less, immediately offered what he had available – the stable adjoining the lower level of the house. In this case, it was a cave enlarged from the hill behind the house. No one expected, or considered, asking the esteemed company in the guest room to abandon it for a young couple – even one about to have a baby.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the guest room. Luke 2:6-7

The women of the house set about making Mary as comfortable as possible with a bed of hay and prepared a make-shift crib for the baby in the nearby stone manger. A midwife was sent for immediately, as Mary's contractions came stronger and more frequently. Like any devout Jewish man, Joseph would not be present for the birth, until after the afterbirth was cleaned up. Mary still wished that he could have been there as she didn't know anyone who attended to her. The intensity of the contractions shocked her. Sure she had heard that there was pain in childbirth, but somehow she thought it wouldn't be that bad – after all it was God's son she was having. *Oh Lord, please let the pain stop.* After what seemed like forever, but was only a few hours, Jesus was

born. The midwife cut the cord and then the attending women immediately bathed him in water, rubbed him in salt, and then wrapped him in strips of cloth. Only then did they place him in Mary's arms. At this moment she had forgotten all the pain before. *Oh Lord, my son is beautiful. Our son is beautiful.* The joyous cry that a boy had been born brought Joseph to the scene. The look of joy and pride on Joseph's face surprised and pleased Mary. Anyone watching wouldn't have known that Jesus was not his son.

Though very tired, Mary giggled when she was alone with Joseph. It had struck her that God's son was born to common folks, in a common way, in the most common of places in a home – someone else's home at that. There was no special treatment here. Things had been so ordinary that she wondered for a moment if God knew His son was born.

Mary was glad they had left her many strips of cloth, as it wasn't too long before it became necessary to change them.

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger... Luke 2:7

The promised son is here was the last thought she had, before dozing off for a much needed rest alongside the manger. It didn't last long. Though it had been a deep sleep, the commotion at the door of their host's home had been enough to wake her. Glancing at Jesus, she hoped the noise would not wake him. Who would be at the door this late at night? Could it be that someone had been traveling even later that they had? As much as she was grateful for the lodging they had been provided, trying to share this small stable with anyone else would be a stretch. The crowd now heading her direction certainly didn't look like travelers.

Shepherds! Sure King David had been a shepherd before becoming a king, but shepherds weren't usually looked upon as being upstanding members of the community these days. Shepherds were often a rough lot, especially the hired hands needed to guard the large herds kept around here for temple use. Their sheepskin robes, complete with fleece on the inside to provide extra warmth on cold nights, made them look big and bulky. Add to that visual the large staff and sling each carried and they looked downright dangerous.

As the rabble of shepherds approached, they unexpectedly all fell silent. Their eyes were wide with amazement as they stared past Mary and Joseph to her son who was still asleep in the manger.

They found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. Luke 2:16

It was Joseph who broke the silence, asking how he could help the shepherds. Mary noticed that Joseph had instinctively positioning himself between the shepherds and herself and the baby. One shepherd stepped forward to respond, beginning with an apology for disturbing them this late in the evening. But, he continued, we were told that the child would be here.

Mary was perplexed. Who could have told them and why would they care? She listened intently as the shepherd continued. It didn't take her long to realize that his account began only a few hours ago about the same time she had been giving birth. The shepherds had been on a hillside outside of town watching their flocks, when suddenly an angel had appeared to them in a brilliant light. Needless to say they had been scared out of their wits until the angel spoke.

The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:10-12

Another angel! What a birth announcement! God had certainly known that His son was born. But it wasn't just one angel, the shepherd continued with their story...

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host [had] appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds [had] said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." Luke 2:13-15

It was now that the one speaking unexpectedly bowed to the ground, with the others all following. "We have seen Him with our own eyes!" were the last words the shepherd spoke, before thanked Mary and Joseph for allowing them to see the baby. They then silently headed back out into the night. Mary was grateful that they kept their shouts of excitement for outside, as they were still quite audible even at a distance.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. Luke 2:20

Mary remembered her thoughts from earlier, about how common Jesus' birth had been – born to common folks, in a common way, in the most common of places in

a borrowed home. She then mentally added; and announced to the most common of people – shepherds.

But this birth announcement was anything but common. A host of angels all together in one place was almost more than she could imagine, as being in the presence of one had been overwhelming to her. Certainly, it could only happen for God's son. Mary had much to think about as she nursed Jesus who had just woken up.

Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:19

The next day, Joseph returned from the market with stories he had heard. People were all abuzz that some shepherds had claimed to have seen the Messiah. Some were eager to believe that the Messiah could be here, but most were skeptical of the shepherds' claims that he had been found sleeping in a manger. If God's Messiah was born, one of them had said, he surely would have been announced first to kings and prominent people instead of some lowlife shepherds. Joseph hadn't tried to set them straight. Where would he even begin? – Besides, there's no way Mary or the baby would get any rest if everyone came to see. Mary loved him all the more for his wanting to protect them.

When they had seen him, the shepherds spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. Luke 2:17-18

The next few days were exhausting. Mary couldn't believe how little rest she seemed to get... a whole night's sleep was a distant memory. At least they were over the Roman registration, the reason they had traveled here.

Her own parents had found them and had visited for a while prior to heading back to Nazareth. With Bethlehem rapidly emptying, as most were returning to their hometowns, they were soon offered a guest room. A borrowed cradle took over from the manger.

Mary now began to focus on the big event coming up. She knew well what the Law of Moses required in having a son.

On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised.  
Leviticus 12:3

It was also on that day that Jesus was to be formally named. At least, being here in Bethlehem, they wouldn't have a lot of relatives pressuring them to name him Joseph, or Jacob after his grandfather, like Elizabeth had experienced with the birth of John. There was no doubt in her, or Joseph's, mind what he was to be called; Gabriel had made sure of that.

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. Luke 2:21

Believing Joseph to be the father, he was handed the knife. Mary noticed that he didn't even hesitate as he stepped forward to perform the ritual. It was Jesus' crying that made her heart ache. Though the cutting of the foreskin was quick, it didn't feel so for Mary. He's bleeding! She just wanted to hold him. While she didn't fault Joseph for what he had to do, the blood made her think of Zipporah's words to her husband Moses.

"Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," she said. Exodus 4:25

It took a while to calm Jesus' pitiful cries after he had been returned to her arms. Mary was relieved it was over. Jesus was now truly a Hebrew, part of God's covenant with the nation of Israel. She knew it was because of this covenant and God's care for Israel that the Messiah was here. She longed to see the great things her son would do for Israel.

Mary, herself, had been considered unclean under the law until this day. In this she was glad that she had not had a daughter.

"Say to the Israelites: 'A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Leviticus 12:2, 5

Though no longer considered unclean under the law, it would be almost a month before she could be ritually purified. And this would require traveling again.

Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. Leviticus 12:4

While Jerusalem wasn't that far away – a short day's travel – Mary knew that a sacrifice was required by the law. Already the costs of this trip had consumed almost all they had, requiring Joseph to sell their donkey to a family leaving for home a few days ago. There was no way they could afford to buy a year-old lamb. Mercifully the law provided for a substitution for those who were

poor. This they could afford and Mary knew they could purchase them from the ever-present sellers at temple.

"When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. He shall offer them before the LORD to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood. "These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl. If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering..." Leviticus 12:6-8

The walk to Jerusalem carrying a young child was very tiring. Yet, not only the law demanded it, but Mary knew that this trip to the temple was for more than her. As a first born male child, it was necessary for Jesus to be presented to the Lord. Taking Jesus to the temple would be formally presenting him to God... his Father!

The LORD said to Moses, "Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal." Exodus 13:1-2

Though late afternoon before they arrived, they headed immediately for the temple mount. Their destination had been visible from some distance way, as the brilliance of the white stones and gold had shone in the afternoon sun. Mary thought about how great God was to have a temple like this. As Messiah she was sure that her son would one day spend much time here – and

perhaps then all these ever-present Roman soldiers would be gone from this city and nation.

The crowd entering the gate was far less than those she remembered from attending the annual festivals. This lack of clientele gave reason for the sellers to be more insistent that their wares be considered. Haggling consumed many minutes, but their lack of money demanded that Joseph get the lowest price.

"It's no good, it's no good!" says the buyer; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase.  
Proverbs 20:14

Necessity had made Joseph a shrewd barterer and he was now pleased with his purchase. With the caged birds in hand they continued toward the main courts of the temple.

Not halfway there, a man hastened directly towards them. Mary wondered out loud if it was someone that Joseph knew. It was not. Though older, he was not elderly, and she had a fleeting thought that he might have been a priest except for his ordinary robes. Somehow he seemed to know them.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. Luke 2:25

His introduction as Simeon ben Hillel brought instant recognition, at least to his name. Who in Israel had not heard of Rabban Hillel, the aged and esteemed teacher of the Sanhedrin? Simeon, his son, was known for other reasons, not the least of which was that he was supposed to have the gift of prophecy. This by itself was controversial, as the rabbis had taught for years that after

the latter prophets the Holy Spirit had departed from Israel. God was said to have fallen silent, following Malachi, over four hundred years before. Yet in recent years there had been some who had become known for speaking prophecy, words that could not be confounded and with signs that had always come to pass. Simeon was perhaps the best known of these. With a highly respected father who had led the Sanhedrin for many years, Simeon was known to be godly – a father himself of the youth Gamaliel. For a time Simeon had taken over leadership of the Sanhedrin, by his father's consent, but had been publicly dismissed from that body for vocally proclaiming that the Messiah was not coming to set up an earthly kingdom. His words had divided the people, for most expected the Messiah to be a king, one who would set them free from the Romans – even as Mary still hoped. His removal from the Sanhedrin did not stop him from speaking, and he prophesied often that he would see the Messiah with his own eyes before he died.

Mary did not know what to think of his teaching regarding the Messiah's kingdom, but she now knew that he would see the Messiah – her son. By Simeon's words it was no accident that he had come that very moment and found them with Jesus among the crowds.

It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. Luke 2:26-27

When asked, Mary willingly offered Jesus to Simeon, strangely feeling comfortable with this prophet of God.

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my

eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Luke 2:28-32

The look on Joseph's face perhaps expressed the amazement she too felt at Simeon's words. Mary had been thinking of the Messiah in regards to Israel, but here was Simeon speaking even of Gentiles. It was a lot to think about.

Simeon placed Jesus back in her arms and then blessed them all with a priestly blessing by saying...

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace." Numbers 6:24-26

Looking directly at Mary, he continued:

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Luke 2:34-35

What did he mean by that? It seemed to contradict the blessing he had offered before. What does a sword piercing my soul have to do with peace? As Simeon turned to leave she would have thought more about this, and perhaps have discussed it with Joseph, but another figure approached.

The woman moved slowly, hindered by her years. She had obviously seen many of them. Introducing herself as Anna, daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher, her name also brought recognition. She had been

pointed out to Mary during one of the festivals years before, especially since she was from Galilee as well. She too, was known to speak on God's behalf with infallible words. Indeed the controversy that there were prophets again had become all the more vigorous when she had become known as a prophetess. Mary remembered thinking her story such a sad one as a young girl. It was said that her husband had died only seven years after they were married and that she had been left with nothing, not even children. His death had happened while they were in Jerusalem for one of the festivals and that she had remained here, at the temple, all these years. Her prayers had grown more fervent as the corruption in Jerusalem had increased, as she earnestly desired the coming of the Messiah to set things straight.

She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Luke 2:37

Now Anna, like Simeon, had seen the Messiah! She could not keep her eyes off of Jesus and in the loudest voice she could muster she began to pray.

... she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. Luke 2:38

Overwhelmed and a little embarrassed, Mary and Joseph excused themselves saying that it was necessary they offer their sacrifices and present Jesus. At the appointed place, the priest accepted the offering and took the birds away. Mary knew what the law demanded be done with them.

If the offering to the LORD is a burnt offering of birds... The priest shall bring it to the altar, wring

off the head and burn it on the altar; its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. He is to remove the crop with its contents and throw it to the east side of the altar, where the ashes are. He shall tear it open by the wings, not severing it completely, and then the priest shall burn it on the wood that is on the fire on the altar. It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD. Leviticus 1:14-17

While celebrating life, the life of her son, it struck Mary as ironic that their innocent birds had to shed their blood. Of course, she knew it was because of sin – this she had been taught from an early age. Words she had heard before flooded her mind – “he will save his people from their sins.” Could this mean her son would bring a change to all this? She pushed the thought aside, knowing how ancient these laws were. It would take a lot for anyone to change this.

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." Luke 2:22-24

The trip back to Bethlehem was quiet as Mary had a lot on her mind. Joseph likely did too and perhaps along a slightly different line. She knew he was worried about their dwindling resources. The prayer was new. *Lord, please provide for your son.*

Mary had longed for the day that Joseph would consider them to no longer be betrothed but actually

married – when she could lie in his arms as husband and wife. As Joseph had promised when he had taken her home, he had remained true to his word to treat her as his betrothed in this regard. He had been a perfect gentleman. With her purification now finished, Mary hoped that their marriage could now be complete as well. She was pleasantly surprised, the first evening back in Bethlehem, to find that Joseph had been thinking the same way. Jesus even cooperated by sleeping through the night.

It was hard to believe that a year and a half had past since Jesus was born. Only a few anxious days after they had returned from Jesus' presentation in Jerusalem, Joseph had been provided work on the construction of a near-by house. His wages were enough to enable them to move to a home of their own. With the quality of his work, it quickly led to offers of more immediately following.

For Joseph, the known opportunities here in Bethlehem far outweighed any idea of returning to Nazareth. Mary also was quite content to stay as she had made a number of friends here in Bethlehem, a few being mothers like herself. Come to find out, Hannah had given birth to her son, Mattathias, a few weeks before Jesus, and Rebecca had been blessed with twins about a month after. Whenever possible, Mary, Rebecca and Hannah, took Jesus, the twins Jacob and Matthan, and Mattathias to the market together. It was a refreshing break from household duties and a chance to compare children – perhaps to even brag a little bit. Jesus had been the first to speak and it was no surprise that his first word was mother. Mattathias, a hardy and large baby was the first to walk. Now they were all rambunctious toddlers. Daily life had become almost routine and for this Mary was thankful.

Though Joseph spoke of them having more children, he never let it stand in the way of being a father to Jesus. Mary was not the only one taking pride in watching Jesus reach these early milestones. Yet she could only imagine what Joseph was thinking that first time Jesus called him Abba.

The knock on the door of their modest two room home startled Mary. Jesus had woken up before sunrise and she had just finished nursing him, hoping he might doze off again before waking Joseph. Who would be here at this hour? Lacking servants, Mary had little choice but to get the door herself. With Jesus resting on her shoulder, she pulled open the door and peered into the gathering light of dawn. A group of richly and exotically dressed men were standing there in front of a caravan of camels.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Matthew 2:11

Joseph, roused from his sleep by the commotion and only now coming to the door behind her, looked as shocked as Mary. But Jewish hospitality prevailed as he immediately invited them to come in. It suddenly became very crowded in their little home. The men introduced themselves in broken Aramaic as Magi. Though they had rattled off the specific places they were from, Mary wasn't really thinking about those details at this moment. Magi! These men were known from the captivity, a class of honored wise men throughout the Persian lands to the east.

These Magi revealed themselves to be of the Hartummim class. Unlike the Ashaphim, Mekashephim, and Gozerim who were conjurers, magicians, diviners, and astrologers, they were those entrusted to expound the

sacred writings and interpret signs. Many years ago they had found ancient writings speaking of a king who would be born – one that would rule over Israel. Mary wondered if those writings might have been from the prophet Daniel who had once ruled over the Magi in the days of Nebuchadnezzar.

King Nebuchadnezzar your father-your father the king, I say-appointed Daniel chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners.  
Daniel 5:11

The Magi had diligently looked for a sign that the time had come for this king to be born – one that they had spotted among the stars months ago. Their delegation had been assembled to follow this unique star and seek out the promised child. Only a few days ago their journey had taken them to Jerusalem, the seat of power, a logical place to look for news of this royal child. It had not taken long to gain audience with King Herod.

King Herod. The words made Mary shudder. This Idumaeen, who pretended to be a Jew, had made himself a king over Israel with Roman support – conquering Jerusalem in the time of her parents. His cruelty was legendary and it was known that he was willing to kill anyone who might stand in his way. This included his former wife, Mariamne, and a number of his sons, who were all killed for fear or rumors. It didn't matter that Herod had built many great buildings and fortresses, and even paid to restore the temple in Jerusalem; everyone knew he was not to be trusted. Rumor had it that he had only wanted access to the temple so that he might destroy the genealogies stored there, to assure that any Messiah's lineage could not be proven. Herod feared anyone who might challenge his rule. The priests had wisely refused

to let this one who also built temples to the Roman gods have access to the sacred site.

Mary listened intently to find out what the Magi would have told this despotic king. Believing that all Israel would have celebrated his birth, they had simply inquired...

"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." Matthew 2:2

Herod had looked visibly upset – not to mention the officials standing in his presence. The Magi had then been abruptly ushered from his presence and told to return the following day. They had been surprised when a royal official had approached them late that evening asking for them to come and speak privately with Herod. Only one question had been asked.

Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. Matthew 2:7

The follow day, they learned that Herod had been disturbed because he had not been aware that a king was born – though he had correctly assumed it was the prophesied Messiah. His inquiry into the matter had been extensive.

He had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will

be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" Matthew 2:4-6

Herod had dismissed the Magi with a request that sounded more like a command.

He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." Matthew 2:8

Accustomed to traveling by night to keep watch on the star, though they had not seen it for a few days, they had waited till evening to depart. Only after leaving Jerusalem had they again sighted the sign star.

And the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. Matthew 2:9-10

They were certain that the star had brought them here and that this child was the fulfillment of the sacred writings! Mary had not felt this way since the shepherds had come, what now felt like so long ago. When Simeon had called Jesus a light for revelation to the Gentiles she had never imagined that God would have announced his birth in such a far away land.

Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. Matthew 2:11

Gifts fit for a king, Mary thought, as she gazed at costly Arabian spices, frankincense and myrrh, not to mention more gold than she had ever seen except at the

temple. Still shy at the sight of these strangers, Jesus clung closely to Mary seemingly oblivious to the extravagant gifts that had just been given. Her thoughts returned to Herod, and she inquired of the Magi what they would now tell him.

They assured her that they would not be telling Herod anything – because of the dream. As they had slept waiting for evening to leave Jerusalem, the strangest thing had happened; each of them had woken from the same dream. From this warning they had agreed among themselves to leave immediately after finding the child, so as to not bring unwanted attention.

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Matthew 2:12

Joseph didn't go to work that day. Even after the Magi had left, they spent much time talking about what all this could mean; including how they should use these gifts Jesus had been given. Nothing had been decided when Mary finally shut her eyes to sleep.

When the Magi had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." Matthew 2:13

Mary felt like she had hardly been asleep, when Joseph abruptly woke her up. Urgency filled his voice, as he quickly filled her in on what the angel had told him. Joseph then disappeared into the night with some of the gold coins they had just been given, while Mary packed a few belongings, some food, and a few of Jesus' things.

How to carry everything? Mary had her answer when Joseph showed up a few minutes later leading not one, but two donkeys. She now knew why God had wanted these gifts to be given.

She helped Joseph load one donkey with belongings, including the remaining gifts, and then settled onto the other cradling Jesus in her arms. Mary wondered what neighbors Joseph had bought the donkeys from at this late hour and how shocked they must have been seeing him hand them gold coins in payment. Neighbors! Her friends, Hannah and Rebecca, immediately came to mind. Joseph was insistent that they had no time to say goodbye to anyone; the risk that Herod's soldiers could come at any moment was very real. It wouldn't take long for him to realize that the Magi were not coming back.

As they headed down the starlit road, Mary clung tightly to Jesus... it wasn't only Herod's soldiers she was worried about. Traveling at night on these roads was never a safe thing. *Lord, keep us safe* she prayed. Only moments later it struck her that that was exactly what God had done in sending the angel to Joseph.

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, Matthew 2:14

They pressed hard that night as Joseph wanted to be south of Hebron before stopping to rest. Mary longed to be able to stop and see Elizabeth, Zechariah and baby John, but Joseph felt it best that no one know where they were going. Until they were out of Herod's territory beyond Beersheba he believed no stop would be safe.

The following days blurred together in exhaustion. Sleep was a luxury she longed for. If only Jesus would want to sleep when they needed to... Their provisions, though meager, appeared to be sufficient and they had enough water because Joseph had risked stopping long

enough in Beersheba to buy extra water skins. Though their chosen route traveled through the wilderness, they had selected it before Hebron as the fastest way out of Herod's reach. Only in the desolate landscape beyond Beersheba, could Mary finally stop thinking of what was behind and start focusing on where they were going.

Egypt. Every Israelite knew of their ancient captivity in that land, as well as God's miraculous provision in bringing them out. Mary was certain she wasn't going to like living in Egypt. In fact, she was quite concerned about how she was going to keep these Gentile worshippers of false gods away from her son. There was no way she wanted him to be influenced by pagan practices and customs. In the midst of other earnest prayers for safety she added, *Lord where are we going to live and how long do we have to stay there?*

Before reaching Egypt they meet a caravan of Jewish traders and merchants headed back towards Israel. Joseph inquired of them where they should consider going and especially where he might find work. It was a pleasant surprise to learn that there were thriving Jewish settlements, in the eastern Nile delta region, surrounding el-Yehudiyeh. Later, when stopped, Egyptian border guards didn't even question why, when they gave that area as their destination. But then, a couple with an infant was hardly a threat.

Joseph was able to find them lodging and purchase tools to replace those he had left behind, all through the gifts the Magi had given. As a newcomer, work was harder to find. Mary was pleased that many here, in this foreign land, could speak Aramaic. It made being so far away from Israel easier to bear.

It had not been three weeks since they had fled, when word of shocking events in Israel reached their Egyptian town. The story circulating was that king Herod had been upset over some foreign rumor that the Jewish Messiah

had been born. His anger had turned to rage when he could not find out specifically where, only that the prophecies said Bethlehem in Judea. And then, even for this cruel tyrant, he had ordered an unbelievably horrific and heinous act.

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." Matthew 2: 16-18

Mary was distraught, completely inconsolable. When Jesus hugged her it caused her to cry all the more. Memories and thoughts flooded her mind. Without a doubt, it was because of them that Matthathias and the twins were dead. How could she ever face Rebecca or Hannah again? Even Joseph was speechless as he held her softly.

That dozens, if not hundreds, of toddlers and infants had died – while Jesus had lived – weighed heavily on Mary for days. *Why God? You warned us, couldn't you have warned them?* It was a hurt that would take a long time to heal. Mary remembered the strange words Simeon had followed his blessing with and wondered if perhaps this might have been the sword that would pierce her own soul. She couldn't imagine that it would ever get any worse than this.

Less than a year later, word arrived that King Herod was dead. Most agreed it was quite fitting that he had died a lingering and painful death. With the one wanting

to kill Jesus now dead, Mary wasn't sure what she wanted; to return to Israel or continue on here. In fact, living here in Egypt hadn't been that bad. Joseph had work; the climate was good and their small home comfortable. True, she hadn't made many close friends, but then again she hadn't really tried. Being able to attend the festivals and worship God at the temple was the best reason she could muster for returning. Seeing friends and family was second, but it didn't take long to again think of those in Bethlehem – and it was all she could do to keep back the tears. Her quandary seemed to be for nothing though, as Joseph was very clear that they shouldn't even consider returning until God told them to. He reminded her that the angel who had warned them to flee had instructed them to stay in Egypt until told to return.

Mary couldn't help but think of how their lives seemed to get turned upside down every time an angel had brought them a message. It was hard to imagine what another appearance would bring. She didn't have to wait long to find out. Joseph woke her early in the morning excited to tell her of another dream.

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." Matthew 2:19

While there didn't appear to be any reason to rush, it was a command none-the-less. On this Joseph was adamant; they would leave this very morning. Having a few more hours to pack this time didn't seem to help much. No matter how she did it, only about the same amount of things could fit on the donkey... again, some things would have to be left behind. She wondered how

much the Israelites would have left behind when they left with Moses during the Exodus.

And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." Matthew 2:15

Joseph used more of the Magi's gifts to purchase supplies for the return trip. They had been careful to save some, knowing this day would come. He was also pleased that he was able to sell some of his tools, this time, which they'd otherwise have to leave behind. Well before midday, they were on the road. As a two year-old, Jesus was full of energy and the novelty of riding on the donkey quickly wore thin. It was going to be another long trip.

So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. Matthew 2:21

Joseph was leaning towards returning to Bethlehem, mostly because he figured he could again find work. This prospect did not excite Mary in-the-least, but she felt it best not to protest his choice. All this had been hard on Joseph and he would certainly need the work – the Magi's gifts were almost gone. A passing traveler from Israel, a day later, gave them news that Herod Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, was now king over Idumea, Samaria, and Judea. This visibly worried Joseph. Yet, it took Mary some time coax him into telling her what was wrong. His concern was simple; the son may be a lot like his ruthless father.

When Joseph heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Matthew 2:22

Why hadn't the angel been more specific? The instruction had been to return to Israel, but no details on where. Mary's prayer that day was that God would show Joseph where they should go. And God did! That very night Joseph was told they were not to return to Bethlehem, but to live outside the territory controlled by Archelaus. The choice was now quite limited, to remain in Israel outside his territory left mostly the Decapolis or Galilee.

Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee. Matthew 2:22

They had decided that if they were going to return to Galilee, they may as well return home. Their new route took them further along the Great Sea. Unlike their departure that had taken them inland through the Judean wilderness, this road was much more heavily traveled and food or lodging readily available – but certainly not cheap. The trip was far more bearable than Mary had imagined.

Having chosen to return to Nazareth, Mary wondered what type of greeting they would receive, especially beyond their own families. Might they have forgotten all the rumors that had circulated before Jesus' birth? She could only hope. Illegitimate children were often ostracized and Mary knew that she could not bear it if Jesus was treated that way.

They returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. Luke 2:39

Their welcome in Nazareth thrilled Mary. Many had feared that her child was one of those killed in Herod's madness at Bethlehem. Having heard nothing from them

for so long, and not seeing them at the festivals, most had feared the worst concerning them all. Now, with welcoming relatives all around, it was easy to settle back into life at Nazareth.

And he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.  
So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."  
Matthew 2:23

Over the next few years, Mary and Joseph were blessed with the beginnings of the large family Mary had dreamed of. God was still being good to them! Jesus was now the big brother, of younger sisters and brothers – and certainly a help to Mary around the house.

Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us? Mark 6:3

The rhythm of day-to-day life dulled the memories and some of the trauma of those early years. Now, more often, Mary found herself thinking about the man Jesus would grow up to be. He truly was different than other children, even his own brothers and sisters. She had not realized how good Jesus had been as a toddler, until having more. Even now his caring spirit and honesty set him apart from his friends. Mary heard these same things from others too.

And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. Luke 2:40-41

While Mary and Joseph felt safe at the festivals in Jerusalem, time had not diminished their fear of Herod's son in regards to Jesus. So that none would question, Joseph made it clear to all the children, and their relatives, that none of their sons would go up to Jerusalem until they were counted as adults at the age of twelve. This was acceptable practice as the law only required the adult men to appear before the Lord.

... all your men must appear before the LORD  
your God at the place he will choose: at the Feast  
of Unleavened Bread... Deuteronomy 16:16

The rhythm of everyday life never stopped Mary from wondering what Jesus would do for the nation of Israel. Though it seemed so far off, she was certain that as the Messiah he was destined for great things. But today, her child was growing up, once again at another milestone. On this day he was accompanying his father to work for the first time. Jesus – carpenter in training. The future looked so bright; surely all the trials, uncertainty and grief where things of the past. No doubt about that!

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