

## The Kindness of Strangers—Innkeeper

I can imagine that when Jesus turned one, on his first birthday, Mary & Joseph talked together about the night he was born. There was so much they remembered of that night—that night which was the first Christmas.

Mary thought back to the baby's first cry and the love which flooded her heart, as the midwife placed Jesus in her arms. There was the wonder of it all, that this tiny infant was God's own Son. She thought of Joseph that winter night, there beside her, strong & steady, keeping watch as she & the baby slept.

She recalled the knock on the door of the stable, [knock] and Joseph going to see who it was, and his hearty welcome, "Come in, come in out of the cold." Shepherds, then, five or six shepherds, she didn't remember exactly now... Two of them, wide-eyed, shepherd boys, and several old ones, leaning on their shepherd's staff. They told of an angel appearing as they kept guard over their flocks outside of town. And the message of the angel, "Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day... a Savior who is Christ the Lord." Mary had looked down at the baby—she held in her arms the promised King, the Savior. The shepherds went on to tell that the sky had filled with angels, praising God: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among men." The shepherds had come as quickly as they could to find the holy child, and now they knelt to worship him.

As Mary remembered that night of Jesus' birth, she thought of the music of that night—the most beautiful music she had ever heard, faint, yet clear, the same song the shepherds had heard

on the hillside. And the light... at first, she had not known why it was so bright in the stable, but Joseph had helped her up and as she hobbled to the doorway, she had seen the magnificent star, shining with brilliance in the sky right above them.

She had slept then, and sometime later heard someone knocking. [knock] She recalled how Joseph had gone to the door, and then his hearty welcome, “Come in, come in out of the cold.” 3 men—obviously men of wisdom and of wealth—from a foreign land—she had difficulty at first understanding their heavily-accented words. But no difficulty understanding their reverence for the child. As though approaching the Holy One, they knelt in worship. They brought him precious gifts of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And then they told their story, of seeing the signs of his birth in the night sky, signs of the greatest king in the history of the earth, they said, and journeying many days, following the brilliant star. But it was their joy which Mary remembered most, the happiness that danced in their eyes, as each one held Jesus close to his heart.

Oh, and one more treasured memory of that night, the innkeeper and his family—they had been so kind. When Joseph had first knocked on the door of the inn, desperate to find a place to stay there in Bethlehem, Mary was already in labor, the baby could be born at any time... at first the innkeeper had shaken his head, weary, downcast, with all the travelers for the Roman census, the inn was crowded, with no space left at all, and certainly no space suitable for giving birth... and then, a smile had creased his face... his stable out back... the warmth of the animals, clean straw, quiet, undisturbed. He helped them get settled... soon, his wife came out with fresh bread, and sweet honey... she asked about a midwife, and sent their young son to

fetch the woman from the village. Meanwhile, their daughter went to the well and returned with water, and then brought some clay lamps for light... The son got wood, and started a warming fire in the fire pit. Throughout the night the innkeeper's wife and daughter quietly helped wherever needed. And when Jesus was born, they brought strips of swaddling cloth to wrap him in, and sang an ancient lullaby of praise to God for the newborn child.

Yes... Mary had so many memories of that holy night. And interwoven with each one, the joy her son had brought into the world... and the love, the love that surrounded them, God's love, God's love for Jesus, for her and Joseph, and shepherds, and wisemen, and the innkeeper & his family... God's love for all the world.

And now, 2,000 years later, God's love made known in Jesus still fills the world. And like those who knocked on the door of the stable that night, we also hear words of hearty welcome, "Come in, come in out of the cold." We knock on the door of the stable of Bethlehem [knock], and God invites us to lay down our burdens and enter, and see the baby Jesus, sleeping in the manger. And we pause, and hold the child close to our heart, remembering that he is God's own Son, our Savior, our Teacher, our Friend, our Lord.

That's the first half of the Christmas message.

And then, there's something else important here for us... we find it in the kindness of the innkeeper and his family. There was no room in the inn for Mary & Joseph, but the innkeeper, his wife, their daughter, their son... they made room for Mary & Joseph, for these strangers from far away, desperately in need.

That's the second half of the Christmas message for us. People will come knocking on our door. Will we make room for them? For the kid at school who needs a friend... for the person in our family who's going through a rough time... for the neighbor who is lonely... for the young adult who needs a mentor... for the co-worker who is struggling.... Will we make room for them?

Christmas... from the stable of Bethlehem, to the world of today, we remember the love & light that have come into our lives through the birth of Jesus, God's Son, our Savior. And we share that love & light with others, not just at Christmas, but in all the days to come. Amen.