

The Kindness of Strangers--Townspeople

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 left a lasting impression, the happiness that danced in their eyes, as each one held Jesus close to his heart.

There were other visitors, too, knocking at the door of the stable [knock]... And each time, Joseph greeted them, “Come in, come in out of the cold.” People from the village had heard the news from the shepherds. News spreads quickly in a small town like Bethlehem. They wanted to see the new baby. Could it be true, what the angels said? Was this baby the King whom God had promised long ago—the king who would rule with justice and righteousness forever? Was he truly the Savior, the Son of God?

Mary remembered how the townspeople approached the sleeping child in the manger. It was clear they felt a love deeper than they had ever known. And then they would look around

the rough stable, as if wondering how God's son could be born in such poverty. They would slip quietly out the door, only to return a few minutes later—this time bringing gifts: a warm blanket, a toy for the child, a new pair of sandals for Joseph, to replace his tattered ones, a woolen shawl for Mary, a fresh-baked loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese wrapped in cloth, a basket filled with dates.

Mary had felt so alone, with only Joseph beside her. She missed her mother, her sisters & brothers, her aunts, uncles & cousins, her neighbors and friends. But these townspeople had welcomed her & Joseph with kindness, and rejoiced with them at the birth of the child, and brought gifts to help them through the coming days.

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 townspeople of Bethlehem... 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 townspeople. When Mary & Joseph were so alone, so far from home, with no one they could turn to for help, the people of Bethlehem welcomed them as neighbors.

That's the second half of the Christmas message for us. Most of us come from small towns... North Rose, Wolcott, Clyde... even a college campus is a lot like a small town. And in a small town, everyone is a neighbor. And yet, in the midst of our neighborhoods, there are people who are so alone, in need of friendship, encouragement, and a helping hand. If you were to name one person you could befriend, who would it be? And how would you start? What could you do? How could you be a true neighbor for them? These are questions to ponder at Christmas.

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.