



THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH

Advent Through the Eyes of Those Who Were There

Brent David Miller

The Dawn from on High

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of Those Who Were There

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Kindle and Print versions published by Kindle Direct Publishing, an Amazon Company. Printed in the U.S.A.

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This book is dedicated to my friends at Collingswood Arms. May the Light of Christ shine upon you always.

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*'The People that walked in darkness have
seen a great light...' – Isaiah 9:2 KJV*

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Introduction

I didn't expect to write this book. At least not when I did.

It was only five weeks before Advent when I took a week long study break from my job at church. I had other plans for my studies, but as the week began I felt the Spirit's urging to write a Christmas devotional. At first I thought that was nuts, and had visions of Charles Dickens racing to complete *A Christmas Carol* in six weeks (not that I'm comparing myself to Dickens!). But the idea wouldn't go away, and besides, I've learned over the years that when God calls you to do something, it usually does sound a little nuts. In fact, that's in large part what Advent is about.

So I pondered a bit, and what came to mind were some dramatic monologue sermons I had preached over the years. Those who know me know that I'm a bit of a frustrated actor, and that from time to time I

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don the costume of a Biblical character and deliver my sermons in the first person. Doing this has taught me a lot over the years, as I have tried to imagine the events of the Bible from the point of view of people who experienced them. Reading the Bible from your own perspective can leave you with a diminutive understanding of God and his ways, and so putting myself in another's shoes in approaching the Biblical text has helped me see things more expansively. I have been able to view the events of the Bible from the perspective of people whose life experiences have been much different than my own, from the point of view of the marginalized, the dispossessed, women, children, the good, the bad, and the aesthetically disagreeable (had to change that last adjective; don't want anyone to sue me for copyright infringement). In short, acting out the Bible hasn't only been fun, it's been educational. In fact, I believe it has made me a better follower of Jesus.

All of that is to say that some of the meditations in this collection of Advent stories were once

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delivered as sermons. Not all of them. I have not, for example, dressed up as Mary on a Sunday morning (although if someone dares me, I just might!).

I have modified these sermons in the hope of making them suitable for reading and reflection during the season of Advent. Advent, for those who may not know, is the period of four weeks leading up to Christmas, the day Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus. The word Advent is derived from the Latin word *adventus* which literally means 'coming.' Advent is therefore that period of time during which Christians prepare for the coming of the Lord, who is in fact always coming into our midst (seriously, he's as close as your next heartbeat). It is my prayer that these reflections will enable you to prepare for His coming this year in a fresh way, as you imagine Advent through the eyes of those who were there.

If you are a pastor, or someone else who preaches the Gospel (preaching is not the sole prerogatives of

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pastors you know) you may find in these meditations some useful sermon material. I encourage you to glean from these messages whatever is helpful to you in the preparation of your own Advent messages. You have my full permission to preach them just as they are, or to adapt them as you see fit. Nothing could please me more to know that these clumsy words of mine were used to help others know the love and grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. I only ask, in the interests of intellectual honesty that if you preach them verbatim, please acknowledge my authorship, and that if you adapt them indicate that as well. Beyond that, no further permission from me is needed to use these messages verbally in church services and worship. Permission is only needed if you intend to reduce these to writing or permanent recording as noted in the copyright notice in the front of this book.

At the beginning of each meditation, I have quoted a verse or two from the Bible to introduce the character's story. I invite you to visit the Nativity

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accounts in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke for the complete official story. My meditations are Biblically based, but also imaginative, and I have taken liberties in an attempt to present the eyewitnesses to Advent as fully formed characters (you may also notice an anachronism or two that I threw in to spice things up!). They are not therefore substitutes for the original stories in the Gospels. So check out the Gospel versions, and allow the Holy Spirit to guide you as you read both the originals and my imaginative take on things. Who knows? The Spirit might empower you to see something I missed.

Beyond the verses cited at the beginning of each meditation, I have paraphrased the Biblical text (both from the Gospels and elsewhere in the scriptures) in the course of each monologue, rather than actually quote a specific translation (the paraphrases in the shepherd's story will sound a lot like the King James Version; a certain classic holiday special has forever fixed that version's words in my mind). This was done to avoid the awkward

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interjection of Biblical citations into the flow of the story. This is yet another reason for you to spend some time reading the original Gospel stories from a good and reliable translation of the scriptures.

I have always stood in wonder before the story of Advent. The Incarnation, the story of God becoming human, is the most mind-blowing event in the history of the universe (way more cool than any big bang). I pray that these stories, told from the perspectives of Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, the Shepherd, Simeon, Anna, Herod, and Gabriel will enrich your Christmas season. I pray most of all that they will help you, at whatever point in your journey you are on, to go a little farther, and to know Jesus more.

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The Dawn from On High – Zechariah

‘When Herod was the king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah...’ – Luke 1:1

It is a terrible thing to lose one’s faith. I know because there was a time in my life when I had. Not entirely of course. In fact, my wife and I did our best to live as God taught in the Law of Moses. Had I lived in your day, I would have been the guy who went to church every Sunday, believed every line in the Apostle’s Creed, and drove around with the outline of a fish on my car. But for all that, I had lost my faith. I knew God *could* do amazing things. I just didn’t think he would. I guess you could say I was a functional atheist. I believed, but at the same time, I didn’t BELIEVE.

My problem was caused by two things. First, the silence of God in the face of my people’s oppression. The Romans ruled over us with an iron fist, taxing us, enslaving us, and defiling the land with their pagan

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ways. Through the prophets of old the Lord had promised a deliverer, the Messiah, but he sure was taking his time about it. It had been centuries since that promise had been made, and so, while I never ceased to believe God would keep it, I didn't expect that to happen in my lifetime. I simply did not believe I would live to see the day of his appearing. Perhaps sometime in the future, in the lifetime of my son...

That was the second reason I had lost faith. My wife and I had kept the Law. We loved the Lord with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength. But the deepest prayer of our lives, the prayer for a child, had gone unanswered. Well, that's not entirely correct. It seemed as if it had been answered, and the answer was a big fat 'No.' It was the heartache of our lives, though we did our best to conceal it. Everyone saw us as so righteous and devout. It would never have done (or so we wrongly thought) to let people know we had feelings too. And so, while I believed in God's

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promises, at the same time I didn't. Sure, they were true. But not for Elizabeth and I.

But then one day God did something that restored my fragile faith. This is my story – the story of how God made me a believer again.

—

It was the proudest day of my career. I had been selected by lot to burn incense in the Holy Place of the Temple. This was an honor many priests never experienced, and yet another blessing I believed had passed me by, but there I was, chosen to perform this sacred act. I would come as close to the Most Holy Place, the place that once held the Ark of the Covenant, where God himself dwelled in the days of our ancestors, as a priest such as myself was permitted to go. Only the High Priest could go further, into the Holy of Holies, and that was only once a year on the Day of Atonement. I was to stand right outside that most sacred space and burn

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incense to the Lord. It was to be the greatest moment of my priestly career.

I made preparation and entered the sanctuary of the Lord. Before me stood the altar, behind it, the curtain that separated me from the Most Holy Place. I had chills. I could hardly believe I was there. With shaking hands I presented the offering. I was so nervous I honestly don't know how I got through it, but somehow I did. I then prostrated myself before the altar, offered a prayer for the salvation of Israel and, still quivering, rose to leave.

Only I didn't leave. Because that's when I saw something I never expected to see.

It was an angel. I wish I could describe what he looked like, but honestly I can't. All I can tell you is that he was both beautiful and terrifying. Thinking back on the experience, I can only chuckle at the fact that I had been standing as close to the presence of God as I had ever hoped to come, and yet was surprised to encounter the supernatural. Like I said,

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I was a functional atheist. But I wasn't chuckling then. I was terrified. So there I was, shaking like a baby's rattle, when just as suddenly as the angel appeared, he spoke.

'Do not fear Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard!' My heart nearly seized up when he said that, for I had just prayed for Israel's salvation, for her deliverance from Rome. That alone was the greatest news I had ever heard. But deep within me, another thought competed for prominence: the thought that perhaps he was referring to my other prayer, the one my wife and I had offered so many times. I was no longer sure which of the two prayers he meant, but either one being answered would have been enough for me.

That's when the angel really bowled me over.

'Your wife Elizabeth will have a son, and you will name him John! You will be filled with great joy, as will others at the news of his birth. He will be great in God's sight, and will be filled with the Holy Spirit.

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Indeed, he will bear the spirit and power of Elijah, and he will turn the hearts of Israel back to God. And he will clear the way for the coming of God's Messiah!

O Sovereign Lord! How easy it is for me now to thank you for what the angel said then! Not only did you give me a son, but you made him the one to prepare the way for your Messiah! Every reason I ever had not to believe had been dispelled in that moment. Not only could you do great things, but you were doing them! And you were doing them through the likes of me!

But alas, at the time, after so many years of not truly believing, I didn't say anything like that. I said something else. Now please, before you judge me, put yourself in my shoes. My wife and I were hardly spring chickens. Sure, I knew about the story of Abraham and Sarah, and the miraculous birth of Isaac, but that had been a long time ago. And so, as

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I tried to get my mind around the angel's words, I blurted out the dumbest thing I ever said in my life.

'How can I know this will happen? I'm too old to have children, and my wife's right up there with me. How can I be sure you are telling me the truth?' Such a reasonable thing to say, don't you think? So rational. So well grounded in fact. It was an entirely logical question to ask.

It was also utterly dismissive of the power of God.

The angel certainly thought so. He seemed to grow in size, beauty, and terror as he spoke: 'I am Gabriel! The messenger of God! I have brought you good news, the greatest of all, and all you can say is that you're too old! Well let me tell you 'Mr. Too Old,' I stand in the very throne room of God. And if you did that for even one minute, you would not dare question what God can do. But since you have asked for a sign, I will give you one. My words will be fulfilled in their time, but until they are, you will not be able to speak!'

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I was struck dumb in an instant. I tried to respond but could not. But the punishment was fitting. I had been a priest for so long, but I had been all talk. When the chips came down, I did not believe. The angel's punishment was fair, and which is more, redemptive, for over the next nine months, I would have ample opportunity to quietly watch, learn, ponder, and pray as I rediscovered what it meant to believe.



When I returned home, I wrote with a stylus on a board of wax to tell Elizabeth what happened. This took some time, but the funny thing was, she didn't have nearly as much trouble believing as I had. She just smiled and wept. It wasn't long after that she told me the good news that she was expecting. Then we both smiled and wept.

Elizabeth went into seclusion for several months. You can understand why. Imaging going through the rigors of pregnancy while being eligible for Medicare.

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I doted on her hand and foot. And then, in the sixth month of her pregnancy, the most amazing thing of all happened. Our young niece Mary came from Bethlehem to visit. I stood nearby silently (what else could I do?) as Elizabeth rose to greet her. Mary shouted hello, and suddenly my wife winced, grabbed her belly, smiled, and broke into a song of Joy.

‘Oh Mary! You are so blessed! The moment you spoke, I knew, for my child leapt within me. Who am I that the mother of the Messiah should come and visit me?’

My heart leapt into my throat with as much force as my son had leapt in Elizabeth’s womb. Who was I to behold such things? To see the Spirit of God move in the life of my yet to be born son, and to hear the word of God from the lips of my wife. To know that Mary, young Mary, had been chosen to give birth to the one for whom our son would prepare the way!

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It was too much. I was about to break into tears when my wife shot me one of those sidelong glances (husbands, you know the look) as she said to Mary, ‘and blessed is she who *believed* in the fulfillment of the Lord’s words.’ ‘Oh honey,’ I thought, ‘please don’t rub it in!’ Mary, for her part, burst into song (there was a lot of singing in those days), as the Spirit spoke through her as well, weaving some of the most hopeful words I ever heard. And I was left to marvel that I, a priest of God, had been silenced, while God revealed his truth to the world through two miracle mothers.



In due time, Elizabeth brought forth our son. Eight days later came the bris, at which our son was circumcised, along with the naming ceremony. It was customary for the father to announce the name of the child, but of course, I was not able to fulfill this duty. Our presumptuous neighbors and relatives had no trouble stepping into my shoes, as they

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announced to the Rabbi with one voice that, of course, his name would be Zechariah. Elizabeth, knowing what the angel had told me (courtesy of our stylus and wax tablet) spoke up and said, 'No. His name is to be John.' You might think that would have ended the matter, but you know how family can be. They began to gesture to me (as if I could not hear them; for crying out loud, I was mute, not deaf) trying to make me nod my head in agreement with their choice of name. Some murmured that it was a sure sign that the times were going to Hades in a handbasket when a woman dared to usurp the prerogatives of a father.

That was all I could stand. I grabbed my wax tablet and stylus and wrote in huge letters, 'HIS NAME IS JOHN.' They sensed my indignation and backed down immediately. I suddenly felt a loosening in my vocal chords. I cleared my throat, and wonder of wonders, spoke. No, that's not quite right. I didn't speak. I sang. I sang the Hallelujah chorus I should have sung when the angel first spoke

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to me. I sang about the love and mercy of God. I sang until our guests weren't sure if I was filled with the Spirit, nuts, or both. People kept looking at me a little funny throughout the afternoon. I didn't care though. God had touched our lives, and doggone it, I wanted the world to know.



Later that evening, when Elizabeth and I were alone with our son, we sat pondering over what the Lord had done. After a while we rose and stood over John's cradle the way so many parents have stood over so many cradles, with tears in their eyes and lumps in their throats, listening to the breathing of their precious gift from above. As I stood there with my wife at my side, beholding the evidence of God's goodness and grace, I thought to myself how wrong I was that day in the Temple. Not just in the way I responded, but in the way I believed that, standing outside the Holy of Holies, I was as close to God as I would ever come. For now I knew that God was in

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my heart. I raised my eyes toward the heavens and once again sang:

‘Blessed by the God of Israel, who has cast his favor upon us. He has raised up a strong deliverer, Mary’s son, who will save us from all our enemies.’

I lowered my eyes once more and beheld my son. Reached down and stroked his cheek. And these were the words the Lord gave me:

‘And you John, will be a prophet of El Shaddai. You will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. You will tell of salvation and the forgiveness of sin. By God’s tender mercy, the Dawn from on High shall break upon us, to light the way for those walking in darkness and shadow, and to lead us in the way of peace.’

Oh people, listen to my story! God is an amazing God. He does not forget his people. He does not turn deaf ears to their prayers. His love is infinite. His

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ways are perfect. His plans are always better than our own. It is a terrible thing to lose one's faith, to come to the place where you believe God could do great things, but no longer expect him to do them. I know. I have been there. But I also know that by the grace of God, the Dawn from On High can break upon us in an instant, and make believers of us all.

Can you see it? It's here. It's all around us. Because he is here. Jesus. Emmanuel. God with us. The Bright Morning Star.

He has come.

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The Rebel's Song - Mary

'In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary...' – Luke 1:26

I know you all call me Mary, but in my language people call me Miriam. It means, among other things, 'rebellion' or 'rebellious one.' I always found that funny as a child. I didn't feel like much of a rebel. I pretty much did what I was supposed to do: obeyed and honored my parents, did my chores, said my prayers, and attended synagogue services with my family. So whenever I thought about my name, I would smile and think about the contrast between its meaning and my personality.

But as I got a little older, I became proud of my name. Because truth be told, I began to feel a little rebellious. Not in the way some of you may think, but rebellious nonetheless. You see, as I entered my teenage years I became acutely aware of what was

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going on around me. I saw the Roman soldiers as they passed through town, ordering my family and friends to carry burdens for them, taking our animals and goods, and fleecing us all of our hard earned wages. I saw mothers die of sorrow as their sons and daughters were taken away as slaves. I saw fathers die of shame because they had been unable to protect or provide for their families. I naturally joined my fellow Israelites in longing for the coming of the one who would set things right, the Messiah, the one who would scatter the proud, tear down the high and mighty, and lift up the poor and broken. The one who would send the powerful away empty handed but fill the arms of the lowly with good things. For this I longed, and in this, I suppose, I lived up to my name.

Of course, my longing for these things was a bit different from that of others. Most wanted and expected the Messiah to achieve all of this through war. I shuddered at such a thought. War, I believed, would only bring more heartache. You couldn't

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defeat the enemy by adopting his means. And so I longed for Messiah, but a different kind of Messiah. I longed for one who would deliver us from the Romans, but in a better way. In this, too, I believe I lived up to my name.



My part in the story of Advent begins when I was a young girl, on the verge of womanhood. It was that in between stage of a girl's life in which you still chase butterflies in the fields, yet entertain new and strange longings to enter the adult world. I had begun to notice boys, and boys had begun to notice me. I had caught the eye of one young man in particular, Joseph was his name, and wasn't all that surprised when he came to the house one day to talk to my father. I knew what the talk was about, and although I was terrified I was also exhilarated. Joseph was a fine man, handsome and strong, with a good work ethic and values. He was a man of God, and it would be an honor to become his wife. When

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they finished talking, they came to tell me of their mutual decision. It bothered me some that I had little say in the matter, but looking into Joseph's eyes, I began to melt, and by the time he got out the words of our people for such occasions, 'Mary, I go now to prepare a place for you, and when I do, I will return and take you to be with me, so that where I am, there you will also be,' I was a puddle on the floor. I fell in love in that moment, madly so, and could not wait for the day when he and I would live under one roof as husband and wife.

Waiting was hard, but somehow I found ways to pass the time. While Joseph was off working on the addition to his father's home that would become our own, I kept myself busy with household chores, long walks under the Galilean sky, and dreaming of what it would be like to be a wife and, by God's grace, a mother. Whatever God had planned for my future life, I was sure that with a man like Joseph as my husband, it would be stable, safe, and secure. You know, a traditional kind of life.

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One thing I have come to believe is that God must laugh when we make plans.



It was a day like any other. I was doing my chores, which at the moment meant walking to the village well to get water for our family's evening meal. It was warm, and when I arrived, I found I was alone. The sun was overhead, and as I went to draw water, I noticed its rays reflecting off the water's surface deep inside the well. It looked as if a coin, a denarius, had been tossed in and set afire. I dropped a stone into the well and watched as the ripples on the surface of the water contorted the sun's fiery reflection. It was a silly thing to do, and I thought nothing of it, when suddenly, the whole world was set aflame.

There was dazzling light all around me. I thought for sure I was going to die, that I would be consumed by fire. But after a moment, I realized there were no flames, only light. I was still terrified though,

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wondering if the end of the world had come, when I heard a voice. 'Greetings daughter. You are most favored by God. The Lord is with you.' This did not still my anxiety. My mind raced. I had of course heard of angelic visitations to my people in days gone by, and realized that this must be something along those lines. But I also knew that angelic visitations usually meant trouble. I knew the history of my people well enough to know that those who were highly favored by God were often asked to perform difficult tasks and endure lives of severe hardship. Moses had been asked to lead a cantankerous people to the Promised Land, and for all his trouble, was never allowed to enter it. Jeremiah had been thrown into a cistern and watched as Jerusalem burned. Isaiah had been sawed in half. And Abraham, father to us all, had been asked to sacrifice his own son (although, thank God, he was saved from having to go through with it). I knew very well that when miracles like this happened, trouble was usually just around the corner, and so whatever else

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this greeting might mean, I had the distinct impression that whatever dreams I had about a traditional life with Joseph had just up and flown out the window.

The angel must have sensed my distress, for his next words were, 'Do not be afraid. God is most pleased with you. You will conceive and give birth to a son whose name will be Jesus.' I remember thinking that if he thought that was going to ease my mind, he just didn't understand teenage girls. Getting pregnant while the ink on my wedding invitations was still drying wasn't the kind of thing I had been hoping for. Heck, he wasn't even going to let me pick the baby's name! But then came the angel's kicker: 'He will be great and known as the Son of the Most High God. He will inherit the throne of his ancestor David, and he will reign over Israel forever. His Kingdom will have no end.'

With those words, I knew what this was about. The angel was telling me that God had chosen me to

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be the mother of the Messiah. This was startling news to say the least. Good news, yes, but startling nonetheless. Mostly because I somehow knew that when the angel spoke of my being pregnant, he wasn't talking about after Joseph finished the addition and I had moved in. He meant right away. It just didn't make sense. I knew about the birds and the bees, and had no intention, thank you very much, of sleeping with Joseph or anyone else before my marriage was official (I may have been a rebel, but not in that way!). So I asked the angel a logical question: 'How? I have never known a man in that way.'

There was a deep pause before the angel spoke again. When he did, he spoke tenderly. 'Miriam, your pregnancy will be a miracle. The Holy Spirit will come over you, and the power of the Most High God will cause you to conceive. That's how.' He went on to explain that my Aunt Elizabeth, who I knew longed for a child but whose hopes had died years ago, was already in the sixth month of pregnancy, and

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punctuated this joyful news with the words, 'Nothing is impossible for God!'

Well, that at least I knew to be true. God could do anything. But I paused nonetheless before answering further. If I agreed to this, I wondered, what would my life be like? I knew that Joseph probably wouldn't believe me. He knew about the birds and the bees too. He would probably break off the engagement. And what would my parents think? My family would be disgraced. And what would happen to me? As a young girl, unmarried and with child? In a first century traditional Jewish town? I'd be lucky to remain alive. At best I'd be shunned by all my friends. I imagined the crude leers on the street. The comments about my virtue. I could almost hear them: 'There she goes. Miriam the rebel! Just goes to show you how careful you need to be when naming your kids!'

Yes, if I agreed to this, all of my hopes and dreams, any thought of a normal life, would come to an end.

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I would, like so many who had been highly favored by God, take on a life of difficulty and hardship. My life would not be my own.

But I suppose that was the point. My life was not my own. It wasn't about me and what I wanted. My life was about what God wanted. And so, I steeled myself up for all that was to come, looked straight in the direction I believed the angel to be standing, and echoed the prophets of old: 'Here I am, the Lord's servant. Let it be done to me according to your word. Not my will, but His be done.'

Just as suddenly as the world caught fire, everything was normal again, and I found myself still sitting, staring at the spot of small, rippling flame at the bottom of the well.

A few days later, I was off to visit Aunt Elizabeth. I just had to see her. With everything I was about to face, I needed to be around someone who might

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understand. When we met, my longing for understanding was more than satisfied. Elizabeth's child, whom I later learned was none other than the one the prophets said would prepare the way for the Messiah, leapt in her womb at the sound of my greeting. Elizabeth rushed to my side and spoke the most beautiful words, the words I so needed to hear: 'You are blessed above all women, and your child is blessed. Why should Adonai honor me so greatly as this, that the mother of the Messiah should visit me?' If I had harbored any silent doubts in my mind as to what happened at the well, those words dispelled them. Elizabeth and her unborn child knew: I was to be the one who would bring forth God's Messiah into the world.

I was so happy. Deliriously so. What does one do when they hear such words of understanding? What does one do when they know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is using them in His plan of salvation? Well, I don't know what others would do, but I know what I did: I sang. I sang a song, and it was a song

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that fit my name perfectly, for it was a song of rebellion.

I praise my God with all my soul!

My spirit leaps for joy at the thought of my Savior!

For he has looked upon me, his servant, and called me blessed.

The God who is One, mighty and Holy, has done great things for me.

He is tenderness and grace to all who stand in awe before Him.

His strong arm has done miraculous things.

He has brought down the powerful and run off the proud.

He has humbled kings and lifted up the poor in spirit.

He has satisfied the hungry, and sent the rich away empty handed.

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He is a promise-keeping God!

I knew the words were not my own; they were Holy Spirit inspired words. And I knew, as I sang them, that even as I sang, a radical reversal was taking place. The whole world was being turned upside down, or more accurately, right-side up. I knew that my son, God's Son, was going to change everything. He would convict those who were proud and bring them to their knees. He would break the chains that made people slaves. He would create a Kingdom where the least would find provision. He would judge the nations with equity and fairness, and create a world where there would be enough for everyone.

That was, is, and always will be the kind of talk that will get you branded as a rebel, a revolutionary. But in that moment I knew that was exactly what I was.

There remained a tough road ahead. I still had to tell Joseph and my parents. I still didn't know what

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life would be like for me. But as I knelt on the ground before Elizabeth, none of that seemed to matter. I only knew what my son would do.

My rebel son would change the world.

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A Father's Story - Joseph

'This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph...' – Matthew 1:18

Oh the joy in my heart! I was betrothed to Mary! Oh Mary, she could knock your socks off. Once matters were arranged, I looked her in the eyes – oh those beautiful eyes - and told her of the home I would prepare for us. She smiled broadly, the kind of smile that makes the sun come out on a cloudy day, and I hurried off to begin the addition to my father's house that would one day be our bridal suite. Such a wondrous time. The days were filled with expectation and longing. Just seeing Mary walk by on her way to get water from the well was enough to send my soul into the skies.

But then one day her father came by. He could not look me in the eye. He brought dreadful news. Mary was pregnant. I tried not to believe it, but there

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was no reason for him to lie. After a brief conversation he left, and I fell to the floor. I cried for hours. I felt as if the sun would never come out again.

Finally, I rose, resolved to see her, to hear of her betrayal from her own lips. I felt I deserved at least that from her.

Boy did she have a story. She claimed that an angel had appeared to her and told her that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit, and that the child she gave birth to would be none other than the Messiah who would inherit the throne of our ancestor David. Man, I had heard some whoppers in my day, but that one took the cake. I was no fool. I may have been young and inexperienced, but I knew where babies came from, and it wasn't the Holy Spirit. So I faced the fact: Mary had betrayed me. I was heartbroken. So was she. I'll never forget the look in her eyes as she begged me to stay. But I didn't. I turned on my heels and walked out the

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door. Mary had always been truthful, but I just couldn't believe a story like that. So I walked out of her life, believing I was doing so forever.



My ordeal wasn't over, however. There were legal details to arrange. My options were relatively straightforward. I could publically divorce her, thereby exposing her betrayal and bringing shame upon her and her family. I could call for her death by stoning for having broken the contract of marriage. Or I could quietly break off the engagement. The first two options were things I could never have done. Truth was that in spite of what I believed she had done I still loved her. And so I went with option three.

Even so, it broke my heart. It broke over the loss of Mary and the loss of my dreams. It broke as I thought of what Mary would endure as an unwed mother. What would become of her? At best, she would endure shame and humiliation. At worst, I

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feared, she might end up a beggar or prostitute. One thing was certain: our traditional community would not look kindly upon her predicament.

With such thoughts, sleep did not come easy. I tossed and turned throughout the night until finally, in the early morning hours, in that nether world between sleep and wakefulness, I had a dream. Or at least something like a dream. In it I heard a voice, 'Joseph, son of David!' I opened my eyes, or at least imagined I did, and saw before me a being wrapped in light. It was an angel! I was scared to death. But then the angel spoke again:

'Joseph, son of David! Listen to me. Don't be afraid to make Mary your wife. The child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will bring forth a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will be the One who will save people from their sins. Mary did not lie. She has told the truth.'

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I woke with a start, soaked in sweat from head to toe. I pondered the angel's words. Could they be true? Suddenly, as if by divine inspiration, the words of the prophet Isaiah came into my mind: 'Look! The virgin will conceive and bring forth a child. She will give birth to a son, and he shall be called Emanuel, God with us.' Tears erupted from my eyes. It was true! Mary had not betrayed me. She had been faithful. And, which was more, God was on the move. Mary's child was the Messiah who would save us all!

I knew what I had to do. Four in the morning or not, I had to see Mary. I raced to her father's house, pounded on the door. He greeted me with bed lines on his face, wondering if I had lost my mind. Maybe I had. But he let me in. When I saw Mary, I fell to my knees. I grabbed her around the waist, resting my head upon her belly, and thought, 'Oh my Lord, in here rests the hope of the world.' Mary knelt beside me and we held each other for what seemed an

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eternity, flooding the house with tears of joy. When we finally looked up, Mary's father was crying too.

In due time, I took Mary to my home, that where I was, there she would also be. Oh you bet there was a scandal. People counted on their fingers. Some laughed. Some snickered behind our backs. Some gave dirty looks. Others were rude, downright hostile. But we took it all in stride, and if anyone ever got too out of line with Mary, I gave them a talking to they did not soon forget. But for the most part we accepted the strife, knowing that nothing good ever happens without some degree of suffering, and if this was ours to bear in God's great plan of redemption, we were more than willing to endure it.

One day, as Mary was approaching her time, a Roman soldier, a herald, arrived in Nazareth. Caesar had decided to take a census, and everyone was required to travel to the city of their ancestors. This meant that I, a descendant of David, had to return to

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Bethlehem, the city of David. I nearly laughed out loud. Bethlehem was the place the prophets said the Messiah would be born. Little did Caesar know that he was setting the stage for the fulfillment of God's promise!

So off we went. I on foot, Mary, nine months pregnant, on our donkey. The eighty mile, several day trip was a rough one for one so heavy with child, but as Mary herself pointed out, who were we to argue with the ways of God? We completed the journey in the nick of time. We had barely touched the mezuzah on the doorpost of the house when Mary had her first contraction (oh, I know many of you think it was an inn, but that's a misunderstanding. Bethlehem was my hometown – I had family there). It was I who nearly fainted. We first thought to take Mary to the upper portion of the home, but that was a no go. The census had brought many of my relatives home, and the guest room was filled to the brim. My family would have cleared some space, but we realized that with so many

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people in the house, it would be best to head down to the lower level, the place where the animals were kept, since there would be more privacy (we folks in the first century weren't as squeamish as you are today about animals).

It was a long night. Mary's labor was hard. As I said, nothing good ever happens in the world without some degree of suffering. But eventually the glorious moment arrived, and Mary's son, God's son, was born. It was beautiful and miraculous, but at the same time unremarkable, like any other birth. The midwife cleaned him up, and while she tended to Mary, she handed him to me.

It was love at first sight.

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There is much more I could tell. Of shepherds and angels. Of the day we took Jesus to the Temple and met Simeon and Anna. I could tell of how Simeon, to whom God had promised he would not die until he

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saw the Messiah, took Jesus in his arms and declared that he had, and then handed him back to Mary. I remember his words as he did so, 'this child is destined to cause the rise and fall of many in Israel. He will be opposed.' Oh how his face darkened with those words, and darkened deeper still as with furrowed brow and sad eyes he told my wife that a sword would pierce her heart as well. I could tell you of how we later received a visit from Magi from the east bearing gifts, and of how an angel again warned me that King Herod was trying to kill Jesus. I could tell of our consequent flight to Egypt, of how we lived there as refugees for a time, and of how, after an angel told us it was safe to return home, we learned what had happened in our absence. In a mad attempt to kill our son, Herod had killed all the children under two years old in and around Bethlehem. Oh how Simeon's words resounded in my mind as I wondered what such a thing might mean for the future of my son?

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It has been a few years now. We live in Nazareth. Jesus is a toddler. Our lives have been, for the most part, uneventful. But still, on some nights, after we have tucked Jesus in and helped him say his prayers, I stand over him and wonder: what did Simeon mean? I reflect upon how Jesus came into the world, of Mary's difficult labor, and of how nothing good happens in the world without some degree of suffering. And I reflect upon the fact that Jesus came to do the best thing of all: to save the world. What pain and suffering must await him? I have seen what a maniac like Herod can do. What will others do when Jesus begins to fulfill his destiny?

My friends and neighbors believe that the Messiah will be a triumphant warrior. But I have heard the town Rabbi read the sacred words, of how the Messiah will be pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our sins. The punishment that will bring us peace will fall hard upon him. It will be by his wounds that the rest of us will be healed.

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Oh Father in heaven! What does that mean? What will happen to our son? How can I prepare him for his future? How can I teach him to be faithful and true, to stand when the time to fulfill his destiny arrives? Blessed Adonai, I am so inadequate to the task. Why did you ever choose me? How can I possibly be a father to the Son of God?

But I remember what the angel said. I am the son of David. The descendant of a simple shepherd used by God to do great things. And I think, maybe God can use a simple carpenter too.

Maybe, he can use anyone.

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As Precious as the Stars – The Shepherd

‘And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night...’ – Luke 2:8 (KJV)

To this day I can hardly believe I was invited. I mean, in my time, no one invited shepherds anywhere. People despised us. The religious leaders certainly looked down on us. We spent all our time taking care of the sheep in the fields, and so we didn't exactly make it to 'church' very often. Not that anyone wanted us there anyway. In most people's eyes, we were 'unclean.' I guess it was the nature of the job; we just tended to get dirty. Which also meant we smelled pretty bad. I guess I can't blame them for wanting us to keep our distance. Still, it always bothered me how everyone thought we were good enough to tend the flocks that would ultimately be sacrificed at the Temple for the forgiveness of their sins, yet we weren't good enough to rub elbows with. *C'est La Vie*. The bottom line is that we were

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outcasts. Not the kind of people to be invited to such a wondrous event. In the eyes of everyone who mattered we were, at best, insignificant.

But for all that, I have to admit, to this day I love being a shepherd. I love everything about it: the open air, the hills, the fields, the stars that hang overhead on a crisp, clear night. Most of all, I love taking care of sheep. Yeah, they are dumb and all, but maybe that's what I love about them. I love their vulnerability. They are just so precious and in need of attention. Each one is so special to me. My fellow shepherds and I have names for each one. Yes, we know each of our sheep by name.

They know their names too. They even come when I call. I love the way they respond at the sound of my voice, the way they turn and prance in my direction. I lead them to safe pasture, where they can frolic and play. I love leading them around, keeping my eyes upon them, making sure they don't race too far ahead or linger too far behind. They are

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troublesome, but they are such cute little devils that there is nothing they could do to keep me mad at them for long.

The toughest part of the job is protecting them. Sheep, as I said, can be kind of dumb, and they often wander off. There is great danger in that. There are predators - wolves, lions, thieves - who would love to make off with them. Even if they manage to avoid these, there are all sorts of pratfalls in the countryside, cliffs they can tumble down, thorn bushes to get tangled in. Sometimes they can just flip over and be unable to right themselves again. That's why, whenever even one gets lost, I go off in search of her, even if it means leaving ninety-nine in the sheepfold unattended. I am willing to do whatever it takes to find my lost sheep, even tangle with the predators if necessary. I would even lay down my life for them if I had to. I really mean that. Because, you see, I love my sheep. That might seem strange to you, but not to a shepherd. To a

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shepherd's eyes, each sheep is as precious as the stars.



Which brings me back to my story. It was an ordinary night, and I was doing what I typically did at night after the sheep were all accounted for and safely in the sheepfold. I was stargazing. In those days there was no light pollution, and looking at the night sky was like peering into the vault of heaven. It was what my friends and I like to call, the Shepherd's Cathedral. Well, that night I was in my cathedral, staring and praying and thinking, when it happened. Out of the night's sky came a flash of light unlike anything I had ever seen before. My friends and I were blinded for a moment and when we regained our vision, we noticed a strange luminescence around us. We were terribly frightened, quaking in our sandals, when out of the luminescence there came a voice:

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‘Fear not! For Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people! For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!

I thought, ‘Good News for all people? Unto you is born this day? Unto us! Shepherds? Was this for real?’ The voice simply continued:

‘This is how you will know who he is. You will find a baby in a manger. He will be wrapped in strips of cloth. That’s how you’ll know that you’ve found the Messiah.’

My goodness. We had always heard that when the Messiah came he would come suddenly, as a mighty warrior leading an army. But the voice told us we would find a baby. In a manger. A feeding trough for animals. Wrapped in strips of cloth. This was an image of poverty, not power. And while I was trying to get my mind around such a preposterous idea, that God’s Messiah would come in such a way, something even more incredible happened.

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Suddenly it was as if the canopy of heaven came collapsing down to earth. Ten thousand points of light exploded before our eyes and we heard the most beautiful voices singing as one, over and over, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven! And on earth, peace to all people!'

This went on for several minutes. Then, as suddenly as it began, the chorus ceased. There were no more voices. Everything became still. Silent.

We stood there for a while. The hair on the back of our necks standing on end. It felt like lightning had just struck nearby. You could feel the electricity in the air. We were dumbfounded. Finally, one of my friends spoke up. 'Uh, do you think maybe we should go to town?' The sheer ridiculousness of the question brought us back from our reveries, and we nearly launched ourselves out of our sandals as we ran toward Bethlehem with sheer lunatic joy.

We knocked on the first door we came to. We knocked on a lot of doors. 'Do you have a baby in

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there?’ we asked. Most people looked at us like we were harbingers of a zombie apocalypse. It’s a wonder someone didn’t call the cops.

Finally, we came to the right place. A woman, a midwife, answered the door. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘there was a baby born here tonight. Follow me.’ It was almost as if she expected us. She led us to the lower portion of the home, the place where the family kept their animals. I can see that room before me even now. A couple of cows. A goat. Some sheep. A fire. And...him. The baby. The Messiah. In a manger. Wrapped in strips of cloth. Just like the voice had said. His mother was laying at his side. His father rose to greet us. Tears flowed from our eyes. They were flowing from theirs too.

We told them everything that happened. They simply nodded as we spoke, as if it were just the sort of thing they should have expected. And then they told us their story. My goodness, it made ours seem almost boring. The child wasn’t just the Messiah. He

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was God's Son! He was Emmanuel, God with us. God as one of us. We understood then what had happened under the stars. The canopy of heaven really did descend to earth. In the moment when heaven entered our world in this baby, the angelic host, unable to contain themselves, had come down in a rhapsody of joy. It was the moment all of heaven had been waiting for: the coming of the Savior who would one day make earth and heaven one.



We stayed a while, but in time we left. Not that we wanted to, but we knew that both mother and baby needed their rest. But we didn't go back to the fields. Not after what we had learned. We raced all over town, knocking on even more doors, telling everyone what had happened. A lot of them still looked at us as if we were nuts. And who knows? Maybe we were. But here's the thing: we had been invited to the birth of God's Son. We knew that the Messiah had come. We had learned that we were

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accepted by the King of Creation. My goodness, we had learned that no matter what anyone else felt about us, we were significant in the only set of eyes that mattered. God loved us. God accepted us. God welcomed us. How in the world do you keep a revelation like that to yourself? You can't. When you discover that God loves you, you tell everyone. You have to pass it on.



The next Sabbath I did something I hadn't done in a long while. I went to a synagogue service. One of my friends covered for me with the sheep. I just felt the need to go, to express my thankfulness to God for inviting me to that manger. The rabbi took out the scroll to read a selection from the prophet Ezekiel's writings, and as he began to read, my heart danced within me.

'This is the word of Adonai: I myself will search and find my sheep. I will be like a shepherd on the lookout for his run away flock. I will find my sheep

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and rescue them from all the places to which they have run...I will tend them and lead them to a place of safety. I will search for my wayward ones who have strayed. And I will bring them home.'

I began to weep, right there in the synagogue. For I knew those words were about Jesus. The Son of God, come to earth, to find, tend, and love his sheep. And I realized that all the things I loved about being a shepherd, God Himself, in this child, would now do for me. He who knew my name had called me. He would lead me. He would go before me. He would come and walk beside me when I lingered behind. He would protect me. If I wandered, he would find me. He would even lay down his life for me. The Lord Himself had come to be my shepherd, and I would never again want for a single thing.

Oh my friends, hear my story! The story of one whom the world counted as insignificant. Have you ever felt that way? Did you ever think that you did not count for much in this world? That you simply

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didn't matter? Well, take it from me: you do. You matter more than anything. Just as I do. Just as everyone does.

Because in the eyes of God, and in the eyes of our Shepherd Jesus, every one of us is as precious as the stars.

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The Gift - Simeon

'At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout, and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel...' – Luke 2:25

I thank the good Dr. Luke for his kind words about me: righteous and devout. Yes, that's what people say, but honestly, I'm not even sure what those words mean. People read them and think of me as a holy man, perhaps a priest who worked at the Temple or even a member of the Sanhedrin. In fact I'm neither of those things. And as far as my 'righteousness' is concerned, I take no credit for it, nor do I even think I deserve the title. Oh, I've never killed anyone, but the funny thing about being called righteous is that it only makes you realize what a wretch you really are. I'd rather you just think of me as a regular Joe, someone who, like most of you, tries to do his best for the Lord, but as often as not fails. Which is why my story is so amazing. Mine is a story

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of amazing grace, a story of a God so wonderful that he bestowed an amazing gift on a tired old man who didn't deserve it in the first place. Today I want to tell you about the day I received my gift.



Like I said, I'm just a regular Joe. I spent most of my life working with my hands in my shop in Jerusalem. Like everyone else, I lived under Roman occupation. If there is any sense in which I would apply the word righteous to myself, it would be as a part of the phrase, 'righteously indignant,' for that's how I felt living under Roman occupation. I longed for the consolation of Israel, the day when the Messiah would set us free.

People in your time, I understand, sing songs this time of year, including one that contains the line, '*Come Thou Long Expected Jesus, born to set thy people free,*' and another that goes, '*O Come, O Come, Emanuel, and ransom captive Israel.*' That's nice and all, but with all due respect, I doubt any of

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you understand what you are singing. I cast no blame, but you can't really know what such words mean until you see with your own eyes hundreds of your fellow citizens hanging on crosses, or hear of the slaughter of infants in the city of David at the orders of Rome's puppet king. Let me tell you, for those who have experienced such things, those songs are not Christmas carols, they are anguished cries from the heart. Every day when I woke, and every night as I lay down, I would cry out, 'O Lord, how long? How long until you set your people free? Oh if only I could live to see the day of Israel's ransom!'

I prayed that prayer for years. My children grew and left home, and still I prayed that prayer. My hands grew brittle with arthritis, and still I prayed that prayer. My beloved wife passed from time into eternity, and still I prayed that prayer. And then, one night, on the rooftop of my home, while I stood under a sky full of stars, I heard a voice. Well, maybe heard isn't the right word. It was a still, small voice I

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could feel, a voice that spoke to my heart. ‘Simeon,’ the voice said, ‘I have heard your prayer. Soon, and very soon, you shall see in the land of the living, the hope and consolation of Israel. Soon, and very soon, you shall see...’ - the next word struck me with the force of thunder – ‘Messiah.’ My tears fell upon the rooftop like giant rain drops. ‘Thank you Lord,’ I prayed. ‘Let it be soon, that I might depart this world in peace, see my wife once more, and fall into your arms.’

I was excited to say the least. But you know, the Lord’s definition of soon is a bit different than our own, isn’t it? I thought he meant within a week. It was in fact a long time before anything happened. But I managed to find ways to make the waiting easier. First, I clung to God’s promises. I knew his promises were true. Every time I saw a rainbow, I remembered God’s promise to Noah and how he kept it. Every time I looked at the stars, I thought of Abraham, who though childless and old, had been promised descendants as numerous as the stars, and

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here was I, centuries later, one of those descendants. I held fast to the words of Isaiah, ‘those who wait upon God find new strength. They will soar on wings like eagles.’ I remembered these and other promises of God, knowing that all of his promises are true.

Secondly, I did my part. I figured that God probably didn’t want me moping around every day while I waited. He wanted me to do something. And so I did. Every morning, I woke with the roosters and journeyed to the Temple. I would observe the customary hours of prayer, and in between pray silently in the porticoes on my own. As I did this, I felt closer to God, which in turn helped me feel closer to the fulfillment of His promise.

Third, I waited with an open mind. God had promised that I would see the Messiah. Most people of my day would have taken that to mean that I would soon see a military warrior charging against the Romans, taking Jerusalem by force, and riding triumphantly into the Temple Courts to establish his

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kingly reign. Personally, I wasn't too sure about that. I had seen supposed messiahs of that kind come and go, usually with tragic consequences for everyone, and I was well aware of Isaiah's words about the Messiah's suffering and death, even if no one else wanted to think about that, as well as Zechariah's words to the effect that the Messiah would come in peace. Bottom line: I didn't know what to expect, and so I simply waited with an open mind, ready to receive the Messiah in whatever way God thought best.

Finally, I paid attention. Since I had no idea what to expect, or when to expect it, I took notice of everything. I stayed on guard. This turned out to be a very good move, because when the moment finally arrived, it arrived in a way that few would ever have noticed.

I was in the Temple, people watching. It was a dull day, and the priest on duty was doing what you folks

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might call infant dedications. Married couples brought their sons and made offerings prescribed by the Law. The priest went through the motions as if he were half-asleep. But I was paying attention, and this one couple captured my imagination. They were poor, as their offering of two turtledoves attested, but all the same they were happy. I saw the priest take the doves from the young mother, and ask perfunctorily the child's name. 'Yeshua,' the father replied. My heart began to race. Yeshua, or Joshua, or as you are used to saying from the Greek, Jesus, means 'God is my salvation.' I no sooner heard that name than I heard the voice from the rooftop again: 'He's the one Simeon! The Messiah! My Son!' I was on my feet faster than a man my age had a right to be.

Tears streamed down my wrinkled cheeks as I approached them. At first I could hardly speak. I could only stare at the child, and hold out my arms plaintively to his mother, as if to ask if I could hold him. The young girl smiled, and placed the child in

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my arms, in a perfect cradle close to my heart. He grabbed my thumb; the lad had a good grip. 'Good,' I thought, 'he would need it.' My heart soared on wings like eagles, just like Isaiah said. Funny how holding a child can make the whole world new again. I thought of how wonderful, how just like God it was to send the Messiah to his Temple in this way, so quietly, so unpretentiously, in defiance of everyone's expectations. For some time I simply remained silent, basking in the love I had for this child. And then, lifting my eyes in the direction of the Most Holy Place in the Temple, I found the words to say:

'Lord, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, just as you promised. My eyes have beheld your salvation. They have seen your glory, your light meant for the whole world, and for the consolation of Israel.'

I looked over at the child's parents, and saw there were tears in their eyes too. We found a place to sit and talk. Oh the things they told me! Stories of

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miracles, angels, and shepherds. We had a wonderful time, this little family and I, but when all was said and done, I left them with their child and made my way home again. I walked with a new spring in my step, I can tell you that much. Late that night, I returned to my rooftop to once again sit under the stars. There was one I hadn't noticed before. It was so bright I wondered how I had ever missed it. It reminded me of Isaiah's words, 'the people who walked in darkness now see a wonderful light!' It was the perfect punctuation mark to a perfect day. And I thought, just before going to bed that night, how wonderful it will be when the rest of my prayer is answered, and I depart in peace to rest in God's arms – just as that little child had rested in mine.

That's my story. But Oh – I guess I left one part out, didn't I? Forgive me, it's just that sometimes I wish I could forget. Truth be told, many would prefer

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me to do just that, because it reminds them of the reason why this child came in the first place. But tell it I must, for it is the most important part of all.

It was just before I handed the child back to his mother. I felt the voice again, compelling me to repeat the words I heard to the young girl sitting at my side:

‘This child is destined to cause the rise and fall of many in Israel. And to be opposed, so that people’s innermost thoughts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your heart as well.’

As I spoke, all the words of the prophets concerning the Messiah became clear. This child, this beautiful child, was no less than the Lamb of God who had come to take away the sins of the world. It would be by his wounds that we would be set free. It would be by his death that we would find peace. In my mind’s eye I could already see the not-too distant future of this beautiful child in my arms. His

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death loomed like a gruesome vulture circling its prey.

I weep for the child and his mother as I think of this. But what strikes me the most whenever I ponder this is that the child was to suffer his fate for one reason: that our innermost thoughts would be revealed. Brothers and sisters, it is our reaction to this child, to his life and his death that reveals who we really are. For if, after we have learned about him, he means nothing to us, indeed, if he means less than everything to us, then we have lost, not merely our humanity, but all hope of ever finding it again. Yet, if we can be touched by his life, if we can be so moved as to take him in our arms, then he will take us in his, and hold us forever.

This knowledge is the gift I received that day in the Temple. It is the gift I hold close to my heart, and especially now, as my eyes grow dim, and I look forward to the day when the world will dissolve like

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snow, and the sun forbear to shine. For this child, this God who loves me even so, will be forever mine.

I pray that my gift will be yours as well. Take this child, this Jesus, in your arms. Take him into your heart. Do this, and he shall be forever yours as well.

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Anna and Her King - Anna

'Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple...she never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshipping God with fasting and prayer...' – Luke 2:36-37

I can still hear his voice. It was our first night together. The night our betrothal ended and our marriage began. Softly and tenderly he sang over me the words of Solomon:

Arise my love, my fair one, and come away with me.

For the winter is past, and the rains are gone.

The flowers appear on the face of the earth, and the time for the birds to sing has arrived.

The cooing of the turtledoves is heard in our land.

The fig trees bring forth their fruit, and the grapevines are releasing their fragrance.

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Arise my love, my fair one, and come away with me.

The world was new in those days. We had our whole lives before us. Nothing was impossible. We were young and in love, and nothing, we thought, could steal our joy.

But after only seven years of wedded bliss, I became a widow.

Widow. It is an ominous word. It speaks of loneliness and loss and pain. It speaks of lost dreams and shattered hopes. Such things it has always spoken and still speaks. In my day, it spoke most especially of vulnerability. It meant that I was alone in a man's world, with no protector or provider. With no one to rely upon but God.

Who, it seemed, at least at first, had abandoned me.

When something like that happens to you, you have a choice to make. You can give way to

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bitterness and nurse your anger against God, or you can trust and serve him. At first, the bitterness was strong. So strong it would have been easy to choose the path of anger. But thankfully, in the stories of my people I found hope. In my youth my mother had told me, time and again, the story of Ruth, a Moabite woman who had been widowed at a young age. She had made the courageous decision to serve the God of Israel, and was rewarded with hope and a future. Indeed, God used her in a mighty way, giving her life eternal significance, as she became the great grandmother of King David.

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense to trust and serve God. That perhaps God could fill the empty place in my heart. And then one day, I heard a voice singing just outside my window: *Arise my love, my fair one, and come away with me.* Perhaps you think I am crazy, but I took this as a sign from God.

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I decided then and there that I would offer the shattered pieces of my heart to Him and see what happened.



I began to spend my days at the Temple, where I could be as close to God as I knew to be. Day and night, I worshipped, prayed and fasted within the Temple courts. Little did I know I would wind up doing this for sixty years! I have to admit, there were days I didn't feel like praying, especially in the early years. Even in the latter ones, I often wondered why God kept me around as long as he did. Things were especially hard on the anniversary of my husband's death. I had to fight hard at such times against the bitterness in my soul, dedicating myself more fervently to prayer and fasting. In my times with God, I found His peace.

When I prayed, I didn't just speak. I listened. And crazy as this may sound to some of you, I heard God's voice speak quietly to my soul. He would tell me such

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beautiful things. He would speak my name, over and over. Anna. Anna. Anna. My name, you see, means 'grace,' and in those quiet times I learned that God's grace was sufficient for my contentment. He would also remind me of the name of my Father, Phanuel, which means, 'the face of God.' At times it almost seemed I could reach out and touch his face. And he told me of my people, that I was descended from the lost tribe of Asher. Asher was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and one of the ten tribes that had been lost from the pages of history when Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel centuries before my time. The odd thing was that no one, myself included, had any idea who was descended from those tribes. But in my quiet times with God, I learned that God knew, and realized that even when we feel lost, God knows right where we are. Through all the years of loneliness and pain, God had never once had taken his eyes off of me.

My times with God were the most precious in the world to me. And often I would steal away with tears

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in my eyes at the sound of his gentle voice, as he whispered to my soul, *'Arise my love, my fair one, and come away with me.'*

God rewarded me in other ways too. In addition to his presence, He gave me a purpose. He bestowed upon me the honor of being His prophet. In a time when most felt that God had gone silent, I knew better. God would give me words of wisdom to impart to others, and I often had the chance to do so. The Temple had many visitors, among them young couples bringing their sacrifices as they dedicated their sons to the Lord. I especially enjoyed talking with these hopeful souls. I suppose this was because I could see the early dreams of my life reflected in their eyes. Often, God would give me special messages of hope and encouragement for them, and I did so with a thankful heart as I passed them along and prayed for God's blessing to fall upon them.

In such ways, I passed the days of my life until my eighty-fourth year.

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It was in that year that the world became new again. I had a friend at the Temple. His name was Simeon. He was a good man who spent almost as much time at the Temple as I did. He too received messages from God, and had been told by the Spirit that he would not die until he had seen with his own eyes the Lord's Messiah. This was great and extraordinary news, but I have to admit that since I had a few years on him, I wasn't sure this special grace granted to Simeon would be mine as well. But then one day while I was watching the infant dedications I saw Simeon approach a couple with tears in his eyes. I watched as the parents laid their infant son in his arms, and listened as Simeon, through his tears, announced that he had seen the Lord's salvation.

Can you even imagine? My heart danced within me. I clapped my hands for joy and dashed across the court to join in the celebration. They welcomed

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me as if I were the child's grandmother, and even allowed me to hold him as they talked with Simeon. As I held that child, I understood. Yes, I had known God's peace and purpose, but now I truly understood why I had been left behind all those years. It had been for that moment. The moment when I held in my arms the world's True King. It was the moment that I discovered my life's true purpose: to give my whole heart to that child and tell the world about him. I wasted no time in getting about the business of doing so.

I raced around the Temple telling everyone that Israel's King had come. This is the most remarkable part of my story. God had called me to be an Evangelist – a proclaimer of the Good News that the Messiah had come. What was so remarkable about that was that in my day, the religious folks would never have bestowed such an honor on a woman. But God did. He chose me, a lonely widow, to be a herald of the Messiah. Along with Mary and Elizabeth, I was one of the first to bear witness to the

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Messiah's presence in the world. Of course, I didn't think how significant that was at the time. All I knew was that I had found true joy, the joy of knowing Jesus, and I wanted to share it with everyone. And so I went around the Temple, in the courts, on the steps, shouting the Good News to everyone who would listen that the day of redemption had come. Some thought I was crazy. That I was just an old woman playing with the few marbles left rolling around in her head. But I didn't care. I knew better. People needed to hear. The Lord had come, and the world would never be the same.



That is my story. The story of a young woman whose dreams were broken. The story of an old woman whose dreams were fulfilled. The story of a God who never left nor forsook her, even in the toughest years, for a moment. Some would say I lived a long and lonely life. But I actually lived a God-filled life, one in which I was never truly alone. God

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was always with me. He held me together. He used me daily. And he gave me a special place in his great drama of salvation.

And now, as my days draw to an end, I spend most of my time, as I have for decades, in prayer. And in those quiet times, those special times, as I draw near to God my Savior, I can still hear His gentle whisper, which grows stronger as I approach the day when I will see his glorious face:

Arise my love, my fair one, and come away with me.

For the winter is past, and the rains are gone.

The flowers appear on the face of the earth, and the time for the birds to sing has arrived.

The cooing of the turtledoves is heard in our land.

The fig trees bring forth their fruit, and the grapevines are releasing their fragrance.

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Arise my love, my fair one, and come away with me.

The Disturbing Reality of Christmas - Herod

'Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod...' – Matthew 2:1

I suppose you're all having a merry little Christmas. Hope my coming doesn't spoil it for you. I am Herod the Great, and I am well aware that I am the last person you want to hear from at Christmastime. You were probably hoping for one of the Magi to tell this part of the story, but I am no less a part of it than they. In fact, if you want to understand Christmas, you need to hear from me. So let me begin by telling you a little bit about my favorite subject – myself.

I was born in Idumea, which was once known as Edom. I was half Jewish, and half Edomite. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, the man cheated out of his birthright by his conniving brother Jacob. Esau, the man whose descendants, they say,

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were destined to serve those of Jacob. In the eyes of the Jews, I was a half-breed Edomite, worthy only to serve, not to rule.

Well I showed them. In 44 BC, after Julius Caesar bought the farm, and his adopted son Octavian competed with Marc Antony for the right to rule, the Parthian Empire, Rome's great enemy to the east, took advantage of the situation. They moved westward and captured territory that included Jerusalem. I knew an opportunity when I smelled one, and so I traveled to Rome to seek the right to win the 'Holy City' back. The Roman Senate, rightfully recognizing my genius, declared me 'King of the Jews' and sent me back to Judea, where I raised an army and routed the Parthians. When Octavian won the civil war and became the Divine Caesar Augustus, he confirmed my title, and thus the descendants of Jacob became the servant of the descendant of Esau.

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I immediately set about the business of building my kingdom. I dispatched all of my enemies, killing all potential rivals to my throne. And then, to display my glory, I began to build things. I am especially proud of two projects. First, my palace, the Herodian. It was huge, the envy of every king. I positioned it just so, close enough to Bethlehem, the birthplace of David, Israel's favorite King, so that its citizens would know who the true King was. Secondly, the Temple. Not that I had any real use for religion, but I reasoned it would be a useful tool in controlling the population, religion being the opiate of the masses and all that. The Jews should have lauded me for building it, but such was their hatred for me, the Edomite King, that not even that grand gesture was able to win them over. I soon learned that the only language they understood was power, and so I wielded it liberally. I brooked no upstarts. Indeed, later in my life, when I suspected my wife and sons of plotting against me, I had them executed. I had worked hard to become King of the Jews, and

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no one – no one, was ever going to take that away from me. I would live and die as Herod the Great.



So you can imagine my reaction when I heard that some astrologers, or what you euphemistically call ‘wise men’ from the east were running around Jerusalem looking for the newborn King of the Jews. To put it mildly, I was disturbed. Actually, thinking back, my first reaction was incredulity. Parthian fools, they had seen that star that had been shining so brightly at the time and mistaken it for some sort of omen. They thought it meant that the Messiah, the King from David’s line whom Israel’s prophets said would one day set his people free and establish God’s Kingdom on earth, had been born. Superstitious hogwash! I nearly laughed out loud.

But then I got to thinking: what if people began to believe this? What if they were to somehow find or pass some violent revolutionary off as a descendant from David’s line and rally around him in a quest to

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supplant the half-breed King? Now that would be a problem.

To make matters worse, as I pondered this possibility I had an even more dreadful thought. What if the prophecies turned out to be true? What if Israel's God were real, and actually had a plan to create a kingdom on earth? What if the sons of Esau *were* destined to serve the sons of Jacob? Not that I believed this, but the mere possibility was too dreadful to contemplate.

I knew I had to act quickly.

So I came up with a plan to trick these 'wise men' into believing that I too wanted to find and worship this newborn king. I called in my counselors to ascertain the place where the prophets claimed the Messiah would be born. 'In Bethlehem,' they said, quoting an obscure passage from the book of the prophet Micah. I felt a chill run down my spine. The very thought that one who might supplant me lay within an hour's walk of my palace shook me to the

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core. But I kept my cool and called for the wise men to be brought before me. Oh you should have seen me. I was good. I could have sold them ocean front property on the east side of the Jordan. I wined them and dined them. I pretended to be as excited as they were (and they were pretty excited). I asked them when they first saw the star. I told them I wanted to pinpoint the exact date of the Messiah's birth that we might more expeditiously find him. 'Two years ago,' they told me. I once again nearly laughed out loud. The thought of those Parthian fools following a star all that time to be part of a folktale was just so comical!

In the end, I asked them to conduct a thorough search for the child in Bethlehem, and then return to me that I might go worship him as well. I was sure they bought it.

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Time passed however, and they did not return. I sent my own spies to Bethlehem, and they returned with disturbing news.

First, the people there were quietly passing around a story about how some time ago, a bunch of mangy shepherds had been directed by angels to a newborn king lying in a manger. What rubbish! As if angels, if they even existed, would have anything to do with shepherds! Or that the Son of God would be born in a stable!

But then they told me something that made my blood boil. The astrologers had found the one they were looking for. They had found him and bestowed upon him priceless gifts. And instead of returning to me, as they had promised to do, they had gone home another way.

I was furious! I, Herod the Great, who had defeated the Parthian Empire on the field of battle, had been duped by a handful of Parthian stargazers! And worst of all, there was a child in Bethlehem

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whom some were saying was the Messiah. I knew what that meant. That child was a threat to my Kingdom, and if what I have told you about myself so far has taught you anything, it should be that I know no limits when it comes to protecting what is mine. The Magi may have thought they had outwitted me, but they gave me all the information I needed.

The child had been born at some point during the past two years.

So I gave the order: kill every male child in and around Bethlehem under the age of two. Oh, you think I am so terrible. Blame the Magi! If they had done as I asked, only one child would have died. As it was, I had no choice. I had to eliminate the threat. The rest, as you moderns say in your so called 'just wars,' were simply collateral damage. And so it was that a cry arose from Bethlehem that rings in my ears to this day, and the people of that city, who had dared to talk of shepherds and angels and a newborn

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king, knew that I, Herod the Great, was the one and only King of the Jews.



Such was my role in the event you call Christmas. And now, I have to live in the light of what I have done. A few years have passed. I'm seventy now, and haven't been feeling that well lately. I begin to recognize my own mortality. All men must die, even Herod the Great. I have even made preparations for my death. I have issued orders that when my time comes, some of the more beloved citizens of my Kingdom will be killed. I want to ensure a proper atmosphere of mourning. My hope is that the Kingdom I have built will survive me, but I admit that my family dynamics are such that I begin to doubt it. And so it is that at the end of my life I am haunted by a lingering question: did I get him? Many a night I have awoke with the fear that perhaps the child escaped my power. Worse still, that he might be the

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one he is claimed to be. That he might indeed build a kingdom that will outlast my own.

Is such a thing possible? That the one born so close to my palace, into poverty, might be the True King, not only of the Jews but of the world? And if so, what would that mean for my Kingdom? Or any of the world's kingdoms for that matter? What sort of Kingdom would his be? What sort of Kingdom has the power to outlast the empires of the world?

It's too late for me to ask such questions. I've taken my stand. But before I go, I have one more thing to say. One more lesson to teach. Christmas is not the nice, fluffy, cozy holiday that you think it is. Christmas, if it is true, is the most disturbing reality there is: the reality that God himself has broken into the world. If you don't understand why that is disturbing, you are a bigger fool than I. Christmas, you see, disturbs the kingdom of every man and woman, be they monarch or peasant. If you think otherwise, it is because you have made less of that

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child born in Bethlehem than who he is claimed to be.

The claim, you see, is that he is God's Messiah. The King of kings and Lord of lords. That he is none other than the Creator of the Universe in the flesh. And if that's true, he most certainly did not come to confirm your kingdom and way of doing things. He came to establish His Kingdom and way of doing things. He came to turn your world, no less than mine, upside down. He came, not just to be your Savior but your Lord. He came to remove you from the throne of your life and sit upon it Himself. He came to take the crown off your head and cause you to bow down before Him. He came to make the advancement of His Kingdom, not yours, the primary purpose of your life. And he will accept no half measures. You are either all in or all out.

Do you get that? If Christmas means anything at all, it means everything. That child born in Bethlehem is a threat to your way of life. At the news

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of his coming, you have a choice: you can fight him as your enemy, or embrace him as your Lord.

I made my choice. It's time for you to make yours.

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The Messenger – Gabriel

‘Then the angel said, ‘I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this Good News...’’ – Luke 2:19

‘Do not be afraid!’ I find I have to say that wherever I go. It seems most people are a bit terrified at the sight of an angel. I suppose that makes sense. It isn’t every day that the light of heaven literally breaks into the world around you. Allow me to introduce myself: I am Gabriel, one of heaven’s archangels, a commander in the great angel armies of the Lord. My name means ‘God is strength.’ And that he is. I stand in the presence of God, and whatever pictures you may have of his awesome power and majesty, well, they don’t even come close. He has given me a lot of jobs over the years, but I am best known for my role as his messenger. I delivered messages to Daniel in Old Testament days, and of course, I delivered them to

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several folks in the time of the first Christmas. Those were the most amazing missions of my life.

Like I said, I stand in the presence of God, and I have seen a lot. I watched God create the world. I saw him spin galaxies from his fingertips. I saw plans made from before the foundations of time, things too wonderful for words. I saw dark things too, war in heaven, the fall of humanity. I was there when God wept over his fallen creation, and I, along with my angel armies, wept with Him. But of course, amidst our tears, we knew He had a plan. And so, for many years, centuries, millennia, we watched and waited. We watched as God called a people into existence, Israel, and as He taught them to show the world the way back to Him. We saw Israel's and all of humankind's stubbornness and refusal to listen. But we also saw God's steadfast love. It was so amazing to watch from our vantage point. Yet not nearly as amazing as what occurred when the fullness of time finally came.

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Heaven's arches rang with song on the day God made the announcement: 'The Time has come!' I was sent to deliver some rather important messages. It's the stories of how I delivered those messages that I share now, along with the lessons I learned in the process of delivering them. Yes, even angels can learn things. My first message was to an old priest named Zechariah, and what was reinforced for me that day was that nothing is impossible for God.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were good people, always doing their best to obey God's way of doing things. But they were sad all the same. They had always wanted a child, but never had one. They were, at the time of my interaction with them well past their prime and resigned to the notion that their dream would not come true. I'll never forget the moment I first saw Zechariah. He was on duty in the Temple, making an incense offering in the sanctuary of the Lord. Suddenly, I made myself visible (we angels are most often invisible to you, even when we stand at your elbow). The poor priest nearly fell

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over. ‘Do not be afraid!’ I said, for the first of many times that year, and went on to explain that he and Elizabeth would soon have a son. And not just any son, mind you, but the one the prophets said would prepare the way for the Messiah.

I thought Zechariah would be thrilled. That he would do a back flip on the spot. Instead, he folded his arms, looked at me cockeyed, and said, ‘How can I be sure of this?’ You human beings, you never cease to amaze me! You can have an angel at your side, and still you do not believe. God can do anything! And so, to give Zechariah time to think about that, I told him he would not be able to speak again until after all the words I had spoken had come to pass.

That’s exactly what happened. Zechariah was as dumb as a bag of blocks until the naming ceremony of his son John. But then, when he could talk, he sang the most beautiful song about the fulfillment of God’s promises. Old Zechariah had time to think

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things over, and he learned the lesson that nothing is impossible for God.



I have to confess that I felt a bit more sympathetic for Zechariah when I got my next assignment. I was to visit a young girl named Mary. My encounter with her taught me two things: that God moves in mysterious ways and that our response to God, no matter what he asks, must always be, 'Thy will be done.'

The message I was to deliver this time was even more astounding than the first. I had known God all my life, which is a long time. God was the eternal Three-in-One, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three persons in One Godhead, so intimate in their relationships with one another that they were 'one' in the fullest sense of the word. Now the Son was about to step from eternity into time into the womb of a young girl to be born as a human being, to live as a person, as God with human skin! The message

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itself was almost too much for even an angel to believe.

And then I saw Mary. She was so small! So young. So poor. A teenager. She had likely never been beyond the borders of her own small town of Nazareth. This was not the person I expected to be the mother to God's Son. But, it was not for me to question, and so I delivered my message.

'Greetings, highly favored one!' I said. Her eyes went wide as saucers. She was precisely what you would expect a teenage girl to be in such a situation: confused, frightened, and full of wonder. 'Don't be afraid,' I continued, and told her that she would bear a son who would be God's Messiah. Unlike Zechariah, she did not doubt God's ability to bring this about, but she did wonder how. 'How can such a thing happen,' she asked, 'given that I am a virgin?' And so I told her. I explained that the child would be conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit; that

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it would be a miracle. That her son would be no one less than the Son of God.

Her brow tensed as she took this in. She was a smart girl. She knew what this would mean: that no one would believe her; that her fiancé might abandon her; that her own family might reject her; that her townsfolk might even try to kill her. It would be a tough road and she knew it. But she looked me straight in the eye (no human had ever done that before!) and said, 'I am God's servant. I will do whatever he wants. Let it be.' And I, the commander of angel armies, was rendered speechless, silenced by this queenly young girl's courage to accept God's will for her life no matter the cost. Oh that the whole world might be like her! I had doubted when I first saw her, but no more. God knew exactly what he was doing when he picked Mary to be the mother to his Son.

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Then came the third message. This one was a real humdinger. I had to convince Joseph, the tradesman Mary was engaged to marry, to go through with things. Joseph reminded me that the call of God is to be brave, not safe.

Mary told Joseph what happened, and predictably, he didn't buy it for a second. Convinced that Mary had been unfaithful, he mulled over his options and decided to quietly break their engagement. I watched as the poor man went to bed that night, perhaps the saddest man on earth. I visited Joseph in a dream (we angels can do that too you know) and reminded him of his noble lineage. 'Joseph, David's son, don't be afraid! Go ahead and take Mary as your wife. She told you the truth. The child is God's Son. He will be called Jesus, and He will save people from their sins. You are the one whom God has chosen to be the father to His Son!'

Joseph woke up. He shook his head. He pondered the words. He knew that if he went through with the

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marriage, no one would believe the story. He knew people would count on their fingers and realize that Mary had become pregnant before the actual wedding. He knew he would lose his reputation, either by being branded sexually immoral himself, or as a cuckold. And he naturally wondered how he would ever be able to raise Gods Son.

But then he smiled and broke into laughter. He jumped out of bed and raced to Mary's house to tell her he loved her and that the engagement was back on. I never saw two people so ridiculously happy. They held to one another and wept tears of joy. They were in for it to be sure, but they understood what they were in for. Together, they reminded me that the call of God is to be brave, not safe.

Time passed, and I waited as the Son of God, now incarnate and living in the womb of a virgin, grew and thrived and waited to be born. The day finally came. Oh yes, I was there when he came into the world. Do

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you think I would have missed it? And as I watched, the lesson I learned is that God's wisdom is wiser than the wisdom of the world, and his weakness is stronger than the world's strength.

Augustus Caesar had ordered that everyone throughout the Roman Empire return to their birthplace to be registered for a census. I suppose he felt quite powerful issuing that order. Little did he know that it was all a part of God's plan to ensure his Son would be born in Bethlehem. Joseph had been born there, and so, he and Mary, pregnant as she was, loaded up their donkey and made the long trek to the city of David. They made it just in time. The home they were staying in was crowded, and so they took the lower portion of it to obtain privacy for the birth. You know, the place where people kept their animals.

The midwife was called in. Joseph paced back and forth, and all heaven with him. Creation held its breath as God himself slipped into the common skin

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of man. Joseph cut the cord. Mary smiled. They swaddled their newborn son and laid him in the cow's feeding trough. I was once again amazed. This was the place God chose for the birth of His Son. Not a palace. A stable. It was utterly foolish. The kings of the world would never have done anything like this. But from this humble, foolish beginning, God would save the world. Take heed my friends. Such is the wisdom of God: it is not by power that the world is changed, but by humility and love.



That same night, I was sent once more to invite some shepherds to see the newborn King. The lesson I learned this time was that everyone is invited to become part of God's Kingdom. Inviting shepherds made this quiet clear. They weren't exactly high on the social ladder. People didn't think very highly of shepherds. But God did. God loved the shepherds, just as he loves all outcasts and

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misfits. And so it was that the Lord above sent me to them.

I can still see them. Sitting around the fire, spitting and burping, swapping stories (with a little less than polite language I might add), when suddenly, I walked into their midst. I held nothing back, and the radiance of God's glory shone around them, drowning the puny light of their fire. They were scared to death. 'Don't be afraid!' I said once more, 'For today I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for everyone, even you! For unto you is born this day in the city of David, God's Savior, the Messiah and Lord! You'll find him wrapped in bits of cloth and lying in a feeding trough!' And with that, a whole battalion of heaven's army (the one I commanded) appeared around us, singing of God's glory and the peace that Jesus would bring to humankind.

The shepherds didn't need a second invitation. They raced off to Bethlehem, knocking on doors until

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they found the one they sought. They went down to the room where Jesus lay, and marveled at the sight of the Messiah in the straw. They felt quite at home there. And again I realized just how perfect Jesus' birthplace was. It was a place where everyone, even a shepherd, would feel warm and welcome. Yes, it was clear to me then, as it is to me now, that everyone is invited to become part of God's Kingdom.



That's my part in the drama of the events leading up to and including Christmas. I was the messenger. I told people Good News. To Zechariah, to Mary, to Joseph, and the Shepherds. And now I am telling you. You, who may be sitting right now in the valley of darkness and in the shadow of death. You, who may wonder even at this moment if you are good enough to dare approach the presence of God. You, who may doubt whether the story I tell is even true. You, with all your conflicts and doubts. All of you. To

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you, Christ is born! And to you, my message is the same today as it was over 2000 years ago: Don't be afraid! For to you, whoever you are, wherever you have been, and whatever you have done, there has been born, in the City of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord! The Dawn from on High has broken upon you. The Light has come to illuminate your darkness. He has come to set you free. To make you new. To give you a fresh start. This, my friends, is the Good News. And it is Good News for you.

May you, like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, Simeon, and Anna know this Good News. And may the Dawn from on High light your path from this time and forevermore, to guide your feet in the way of peace.

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Thank you for reading *The Dawn from on High*. I hope that it added something to the experience of your Christmas season, or whatever season it happens to be right now! If you enjoyed it, would you please be so kind as to take a moment to write a review either on amazon.com or whatever store's website you purchased this book from? Reviews help get the message of this book out to a wider audience, and help me as a writer. I would appreciate your feedback and encouragement. Thank you.

If you liked this book, you can check out other titles of mine on Amazon, including *Deleting Jesus*, *Grace at the Threshold*, and *Royal Mistakes*. Happy reading and God bless!

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost I want to thank my wife Megen, without whom I would not have written this book. When I brought up the idea of an Advent devotional a mere five weeks before Advent, instead of telling me I was nuts to try, she gave me encouragement and the space I needed to get it done (which means she kept the kids busy!). You are my encourager in so many ways, and I can't imagine life without you. Thanks for being my fair one, and for coming away with me.

I also want to thank the good people at the First Baptist Church of Collingswood, who afford me time for reflection and study throughout the year, part of which provided me with the time necessary for the completion of this book. Thanks as well for allowing a frustrated actor to preach a few of these sermons from your pulpit!

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While these stories were the product of my own imagination, I am sure I owe a debt of gratitude to many pastors, professors, scholars, writers, and friends who have shared their insights into the scriptures with me over the years. I have not quoted or used anyone else's work, but I am sure that your teaching has informed my Biblical imagination. Thank you for helping shape my faith and understanding of the Bible.

I suppose I should also thank John Newton for the last verse of his hymn *Amazing Grace*, part of which found its way into Simeon's story.

Most of all, thank you Jesus. You are the Dawn from on High. Thank you for breaking forth into our world. Thank you for breaking forth into mine.

The Dawn from On High

About the Author

Brent David Miller is the Senior Pastor at the First Baptist Church of Collingswood. Before going to seminary, Brent was an attorney and spent several years as a prosecutor. His goal in life is to share with as many people as possible the Good News that there is a God who loves them unconditionally and limitlessly, and that He has revealed Himself through Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of the world. Brent currently lives in Collingswood, New Jersey with his wife Megen, daughter Kaeleigh, son Caleb and dog Rossco. You can follow Brent's blog, *Stars Above Me* at www.thestarsaboveme.com.

If you would like to talk with Brent about making Jesus King of your life, or what it means to be a citizen of His Kingdom, please contact him at pastorbrent@fbcoc.com. He is always available to hang out in a coffee shop and talk about Jesus.

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Also by Brent David Miller

All of Brent's Books are available for free download at www.thestarsaboveme.com, or for purchase in Kindle or Print format on Amazon.

Grace at the Threshold: Reflections on Salvation, Hope and the Love of God

The Bible teaches that Jesus is the only way to salvation. Many believe this means that if a person does not accept Christ before death, they will be lost forever. Others believe there may be opportunities for repentance after death. Still others contend that, in the end, everyone will be saved. In *Grace at the Threshold*, Brent David Miller explores these possibilities in a series of reflections on the means of salvation, the nature of the Christian hope and the relentless pursuit of a God who never gives up. The result is an 'outside the box' take on the possibilities of grace that will lead you into a deeper understanding of both the love of God and the necessity for a relationship with Jesus. If you have ever wondered how far God is willing to go to save the lost, *Grace at the Threshold* is for you.

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***Deleting Jesus: Recovering Discipleship in
the Wake of 2016***

Deleting Jesus contrasts the Christianity of the early Church with the counterfeit version so prevalent today, and issues a call to follow the radical and loving way of Christ. Whether you are a believer stuck in the trenches of pop Christianity, or a non-believer confused by the antics of the so-called Christians around you, prepare to have your perspective rocked. Prepare to discover the real Jesus.

***Royal Mistakes: Life Lessons from Some
Seriously Messed up Judean Kings***

Explore the blunders of Biblical kings with stories that will leave you shaking your head as just how foolish people can be. Here you will find a treasure trove of learning that will help you avoid behaviors and decisions that will only bring heartache to you and the ones you love. Sit back, settle in, and take a journey through an ancient time when kings ruled, and folly was the order of the day.

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***The Challenger: Faith, Love, and
Resistance in the Gospel of Mark***

The story of Jesus is the revolutionary tale of a hero rising from the margins to challenge the imperial, religious, and demonic oppressors of humankind. This commentary on the Gospel of Mark is an exploration of that story, one that will take you beyond both the mild savior of domesticated religion and the aggressive champion of warrior evangelicalism to reveal the truly subversive Christ. In these pages, you will discover Mark's message for what it is: a revolutionary summons to join Jesus in his ongoing work of challenging the powers and revealing the just and peaceable way of God.