**The Christmas Story**

**in Ten Monologues**

**by James Archer**

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**Author’s comment**

These monologues tell the Christmas story afresh while remaining true to the relatively brief narratives in the gospels. They are told from the perspective of ten different characters – some who play a role in the story as told in the bible, some who are fictional bystanders – trying to imagine what it was like for them, seeing the story (or part of it) through their eyes.

These include quite a bit of imagination and in some cases updating to a modern context to make it more accessible. In bible times, there were obviously no telephones or newspapers, let alone talking dogs. So please treat these as biblical fiction rather than as gospel history.

In a number of cases I have carried the characters through several bible scenes. The epilogue continues the stories of two of the characters through to later in Jesus’s life.

I hope that you enjoy them and find that they help you to see the Christmas story afresh.

James Archer

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**Introduction**



Come on a journey. Let us travel in our minds, in our imagination, back in time and space to the hill-top village of Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago.

Come to a land governed by a tinpot dictator, a strongman put in place by the Romans, the military superpower of their time, who put down any hint of dissent with a display of power and who stripped the land of its wealth through heavy taxes.

Come to a people who were chosen by God, but whom God seemed to have abandoned. The last of the prophets had been killed 300 years before, and since then, only silence. Where was the promised Messiah? When would he set his people free?

Come to a land where a few faithful believers clung to God’s promises, while the rest had long since given up on God except as a concept to motivate the masses and a nationalistic icon.

Come like a child, and hear afresh the Christmas story. Forget what you know, forget sentimentality and schmaltz, forget childish myth, and become like those who were there, who glimpsed only a part. Share in their bafflement, their anger and their fear, their wonder and their joy.

Come!

**Gabriel’s visits – part one**

*Gabriel stands at the front and addresses the audience.*

I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God Most High, to whom be glory and praise for ever, worshipping night and day. He sometimes sends me as His ambassador to carry messages to His people. The busiest time was when His One and Only Son, to whom be glory and praise for ever, was planning to visit them Himself.

My first visit was supposed to be the easiest, but it didn’t turn out that way. A message of joy, the answer to his prayers over many years, to a holy man of God, in the house of God, at the time when he had consecrated himself to go into the Most Holy Place to meet with God – what could be simpler?

He slipped in through the curtain carrying the incense, and I was standing there to the right of the altar. When he saw me, he froze like a rabbit caught in headlights and almost dropped his censer.

“Do not be afraid, Zachariah,” I reassured him, “I bring you news of great joy.” He just stared at me, so I went on. “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to name him John. He will be a joy and a delight to you.”

He was still just standing there with his mouth open. I didn’t think he was ready to take in any details, so I waited quietly, smiling at him in encouragement. There was a long pause.

Eventually, he stammered, “H… h… how can I be sh… sh… sure of this?”

It was my turn to be speechless – how could he, a man of God, have so little faith? “If you need proof,” I replied, “then you can have it. I have been sent by Almighty God, to whom be glory and praise for ever, to bring you good news, and you did not believe it. So now you will be unable to speak until my words are fulfilled. Now – hear the rest of the message, which will most certainly come true. Many will rejoice at John’s birth, for he will be great in God’s sight. He is never to drink wine or other fermented drinks, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. He will bring many of the people of Israel back to the Lord their God. He will walk before the Lord in the power and spirit of Elijah, turning the hearts of fathers to their children, and converting the disobedient to embrace the wisdom of the righteous – he will make the people ready for their Lord.”

And with that, I spread my wings and left him to face the music, alone.

**Uncle Zac’s Special Day**

*The narrator is Eleazar, a priest who is now in his fifties.*

I’ve been a priest for twenty-five years, serving the Lord day by day and longing for the time when God will come and rescue his people as he promised long ago through the prophets. How long, o Lord, how long?

It’s easy as a priest to get so absorbed by the rituals that you forget to worship the God who gave them to Moses at the time of the Exodus. But I’ve never found that a problem thanks to what happened one day – a very special day when I was training to be a priest. Let me tell you about it.

There was one particular priest who took us trainees under his wing, who never tired of talking about God’s promises and explaining the symbolism behind the rituals. He didn’t have any children and was getting on a bit, so he poured out his hopes and his prayers on us instead. So we were all thrilled for Uncle Zac when he was chosen, by lot, to go into the sanctuary to burn incense before the Lord. Everyone dreams of being chosen once before he retires, and this was probably Uncle Zac’s last chance.

We gathered round him and went through all the procedures – the stripping of his everyday clothes, the ritual cleansing with water, the dressing in sacred garments, the sacrifice for unintentional sins, and finally the cord around his ankle so that we could pull him out if he had a heart attack in there. Then the high priest consecrated him and gave him the censer. We watched him intently as he walked slowly up the aisle and slipped through the gap between the curtains.

Lord God of Hosts, creator of the Universe, remember your covenant to Abraham, to Moses, to David and Solomon. Fill your house with your presence; visit and redeem your people.

We waited for him to re-appear – it normally takes about two minutes. Surely we’d been waiting longer than that! My eyes were fixed on the curtains – why on earth was he taking so long? I glanced at the others – they too were getting restless. It seemed like an age, though it can’t have been more than five minutes. The high priest was just going forward to investigate when the curtains parted and there was Uncle Zac.

I knew immediately that something had happened. He had gone through the curtains looking confident and serene; he came out bewildered and hesitant, shaking like a leaf and looking around as if he’d seen a ghost. Samuel and I stepped forward and helped him down the steps and back to his seat. Everyone was staring at him. He pointed to the heavens, then bowed down and looked up. It was obvious that he’d seen some sort of vision and was trying to tell us about it, but he couldn’t speak.

When the ceremony was over, we all went over to talk to him. Someone brought a tablet so that he could write. We learned that the Archangel Gabriel had appeared with a message from God – Uncle Zac hadn’t believed him and had been struck dumb as a punishment. And what was the message? “Be sure of this,” Uncle Zac wrote, “the Lord has visited and redeemed his people.”

A few weeks later, it was the end of Uncle Zac’s tour of duty, and he went back to his village. He still couldn’t speak, but there was an inner peace about him that hadn’t been there before. We formed a circle around him and he blessed us – without a word of course. It was like when Moses blessed the twelve tribes before he died. We hugged him and off he went. I never heard from him again.

What was it all about? I don’t know. But surely God spoke to him as he did to the prophets of old. I’ve never forgotten it. And each day, as I go through the rituals prescribed by Moses, as I call on the name of the Lord our God, I wonder – will be appear today to me as he did that day in the temple to Uncle Zac? How long, o Lord, how long?

**Gabriel’s visits – part two**

*Gabriel continues.*

I was more nervous about my second visit. If an experienced man of God was such hard work, how would I get on with a teenage girl? I waited for her in her garden when her parents were out.

“Greetings!” I said, “you who are highly favoured. The Lord is with you.”

She looked at me, puzzled, so I reassured her: “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.”

“Hang on a minute,” she replied, “I’m not even married yet. How is this going to happen?”

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” I replied, “and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” She smiled at me in amazement. “Think of your cousin Elizabeth – she is six months pregnant in her old age, for nothing is impossible with God.”

“I understand,” she replied, “I am the Lord’s servant. May what you have said come true.”

“Congratulations!” I smiled at her as I left.

**The child carrier’s tale**

*The speaker is Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, set in her home when she is pregnant shortly before and after Mary comes to visit her.*

It’s not like me to get so uptight, but I’ve been all of a tizzy since Zac came back from work last night with a message delivered through the religious post: “Mary coming to visit you. She will explain. Do what you can to help. Anne.” What could it mean? Why does she need help?

I didn’t get much sleep last night thinking about it, and John must have picked up on my anxiety – he’s been playing football inside me all night. I tell you, it’s no joke being pregnant at sixty with no family nearby to support. Zac’s worse than useless in the kitchen, and he’s not much company these days. He never was a great talker, but now he just sits there, beaming and dreaming, nodding at what I say and occasionally scribbling something on a blackboard to show me. Men! I long to hear another voice!

I remember the day vividly. He came back from work early, looking completely out of it, with a trainee priest in tow. I couldn’t get a word out of him – it was like he’d seen a ghost. The young priest told me what he could – how Zac had gone behind the curtain to offer the sacrifice and been there for ages before coming out white as a sheet and unable to speak; eventually they realised he had seen a vision. I think the young man was relieved to get away, to leave us to ourselves.

It was a week before Zac was ready to communicate. I’d got a blackboard by then and gradually, over days and weeks, the story emerged. The angel, the fear, the promise, the disbelief, the commission, the sentence of silence. Then the bewilderment and the shame. Could it be true? Or had he lost his marbles?

Two months later, my morning sickness started and I knew it was true. A dream come true! But weeks of illness and tiredness. And now I’m tired – tired of being old, tired of silence, tired of lumbering about, tired of being kicked inside. God help me to remember this is what I wished for and to be thankful, and give me strength to cope.

*(Sung)* O come, o come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,

Who lives in lonely exile here until the Son God appear.

Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, o Israel.

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Mary arrived a couple of days ago, and she’s been an answer to prayer. She’s gone out shopping so that I can get some rest, and she’s offered to stay and look after me until John is born, which would be wonderful. She’s a breath of fresh air, and I’m loving being able to chat openly about the deep things of God with someone who can speak. I sent Zac off this morning with a message for her mother: “Mary arrived safely, staying for some months. All is well. God is good. Elizabeth.”

She got here after lunch, tired from her journey and looking tense and drawn. I could tell immediately that something had happened – something with Joseph perhaps? And Anne’s message had warned me anyway. So I gave her a big hug. I hadn’t seen her for a year, and I’d always had a soft spot for her. She was a bit shocked when she saw me out here (*indicates belly*) at my age. She’d heard our news and written to congratulate us, but I don’t think it had sunk in. So then she wanted to know all about it.

She knew about the angel and the promise of a son, but Zac and I hadn’t told anyone about the rest of the message – it was too dangerous. But I knew I could trust her. Her eyes widened with each revelation – the impact John would have, being filled with God’s spirit from his birth, his task to bring the people of Israel back to God, and to prepare them for the coming of the Lord. “Elizabeth,” she said, “how blessed you are to be entrusted with this special child. I came here unsure if you would believe the story I’m about to tell you, and now I find that God has gone ahead of me.”

Then it was my turn to listen in amazement as she spoke of her own encounter with the angel, the promise of a son, and the titles he would bear – Saviour, Son of the Most High, Son of David, King of Israel. “Messiah!” I whispered. “How wonderful!” All of a sudden, John jumped inside me. I winced in pain, and Mary saw it. “What is it?” she asked. “My baby John heard your news and jumped for joy. O Mary, how blessed you are, the mother of the Lord! How blessed the child you are carrying! I’m overwhelmed that you have come to visit me when you have so much else in your life. How wonderful that, unlike Zac, you believed the angel’s message!

We hugged, the spirit of God in John and me embracing the spirit of God in her and her Jesus. Two women, old and young, miraculously carrying babies who would bring the promises of God to fulfilment. Mary’s face was radiant, and she burst into praise: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.” On and on she went, like the psalms of our ancestor David and the prophecies of Isaiah.

Her joy was infectious, and washed away all my tiredness. I thought back to my prayer of a few days ago, uttered more in hope than expectation, that God would give me the strength to cope, and I realised that she was the answer God had given me. Over the next few months, she will help me around the house, and I will teach her all I know, and try to prepare her for tough times ahead. And we can rejoice together in the goodness of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

*(Sung)* Bless the Lord, o my soul, o my soul; worship his holy name.

Bless the Lord, o my soul, o my soul, and worship his holy name.

**Who’d be a mother?**

*This is a phone call from Anne, the mother of Mary, to her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, shortly after the angel has appeared to Mary. We only hear one end of the conversation, so in the gaps we have to imagine what Elizabeth is saying at the other end of the line.*

Hello? Elizabeth?... It’s your cousin Anne here from Nazareth…. How are you? …. Good. It must be so tiring for you, in all this heat. …… I mean, at our age, we don’t expect……. Well, I hadn’t thought of it that way, no. Yes, a wonderful blessing, of course. ….. I didn’t mean you should complain to God about it. ….. You sound so relaxed and content. ……. And to think, he singled you out for His special attention – you must be very proud. …… No, not exactly proud – but you know what I mean. ……. Well, maybe that’s why He chose you rather than me.

…… Yes, very well thanks. Not too many aches and pains. Yes, she’s well too, but …… that’s why I wanted to talk to you. ….. Your favourite goddaughter – Elizabeth, I need some advice. ……. No, it’s not good ….. It’s a long story …… Good, I need to talk it through with someone…..

She came back from school on Thursday, and went straight up to her room without a word. I left her for a while, and then went up with a cup of tea. I knocked, but she wouldn’t open the door. I went in gently, and there she was, sitting on her bed, her eyes red with weeping. I put the cup down, sat down beside her and gave her a big hug. “What’s up?” I said, “Had a tiff with Joseph?” She sat tight for a while, then threw her arms around me, “Oh Mum!” and burst into tears. Huge great racking sobs, it must have gone on for five minutes. At last she calmed down a bit. “Have this tea before it goes cold,” I said, “and then you can tell me all about it.”

“It’s all off, Mum. It’s all off. He couldn’t trust me. I could see he wanted to, but he couldn’t, not after what I told him. I can’t blame him, but I thought …. I thought ….. I thought God would sort it all out. And I love him so much, and I need him so much, and …..” And the sobbing started again. I just had to hold her in my arms, holding her pain and her grief, waiting and wondering, what had she told him?

“It was lunchtime, and I went out for a walk in the woods. There was a man there, tall and strong. I was sure he was a good man. ‘Good morning,’ he said; I nodded in reply. ‘The greetings of God,’ he went on, ‘He is well pleased with you. Mary, the Lord is with you.’ What a strange thing to say! And how did he know my name? I stared at him, and as he smiled, I realised this was no ordinary man. I fell down at his feet in terror, but he reached out and lifted me up. ‘Don’t be afraid, Mary. God sent me here with good news. You will give birth to a son, who will be called Son of the Most High; he will reign on the throne of his Father David, and his kingdom will never end. You are to call him Jesus.’ ‘How come?’ I replied, ‘I’m not even married yet!’ ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and you will conceive.’ It all sounded pretty far-fetched. Who would believe such a story? ‘Remember your cousin Elizabeth. Nothing is impossible with God.’ He looked at me in challenge. I thought of Elizabeth’s husband Zachariah – he hadn’t been able to speak for six months because he refused to believe God’s messenger. ‘OK,’ I said at last, ‘may God be with me.’ I looked again, and he’d vanished.”

She stopped and looked at me, and I realised it was the first time she had done so all through the story. Her eyes bore into my soul, looking for reassurance – would I believe her? Joseph hadn’t. Would anyone believe her?

Could I believe her? My mind was racing with what she had said. Could it be true? It wasn’t the sort of thing she could make up – not my Mary, so straight-forward and child-like – or was she? I mean, meeting up with a man in the woods in the lunch-break! Had anyone seen them together? What if …? No! The disgrace of it! She could be stoned! You could hide it for a while, but then….

She was still looking at me. I couldn’t meet her eye. I needed time to think. What could I do, Elizabeth? I put my arms around her and held her. She was calm now, as if the telling had helped her. I was like ice – not feeling anything, stunned and bewildered, not knowing what to think or say or do or feel. “Don’t tell your Dad anything for now, Mary – we need to work out what to do. Stay up here this evening, and I’ll bring your supper up for you.”

And now, three days on, and I’m still no nearer to knowing. Can I trust her? Is it true? Could it all be a bad dream? Why her? Why me? What do I tell Heli? Elizabeth, help me! What should I do? ……….. Yes ……. No ……. No …….. I suppose so …… Yes, that might be good – it would give us all some space …….. I’ll put her on the bus tomorrow ….. Thanks ….. Yes ….. You’re so much wiser than me – you might get to the bottom of it ….. Yes ….. I’ll try …… Thank you so much …….. God bless.

**Gabriel’s visits – part three**

*Gabriel continues.*

My third visit was the most straightforward. I suppose it should be easier if it’s in a dream. It had taken him hours to get to sleep as he was tossing and turning, so I had to wait until he was out.

“Joseph,” I said. He rubbed his eyes and stared, so I started again. “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

I knew I had said enough, and left him to his dreams.

**The Innkeeper’s daughter**

*This should be delivered in a common accent, which may be different from what is written, so both accent and words should be adapted to reflect whatever the actor feels right.*

I thought I’d never forget that night, I wouldn’. It was the scream I still heard, night after night, thirty years it must be. I knew that God was punishing me. It was all my fault. How could I forgive myself, my poor little Dan? Until ….. I’ll get onto that, let’s start at the beginning.

Me Dad was the ’keeper of the King’s ’ead in Bethl’em, and me Mum ’n I ’elped behind the bar when it was busy. And boy, was it busy that weekend. The bleedin’ Romans ’ad called a census to get more taxes, ’n everyone ’ad to go to their ’ome town. Imagine the scene – ’alf the people were away so we couldn’ get no ’elp, except me Ben came over to lend an ’and, ’n the place was packed with strangers ’oo ’adn’ been ’ere for generations. There weren’ no bed to be ’ad for love nor money.

I’d been on me feet all day since before breakfast when this young couple comes in, mid-afternoon like, lookin’ for a room. No chance, poor beggars. They were dog-tired, ’n she was out ’ere (*indicates pregnant belly*), looked like she was ready to drop. But we ’adn’ got nowhere, so they ’ad to go.

Right manic it were that night, so we ran out of beer. Me Ben did ’is best to get some more, but it weren’ no good, ’n at midnight the punters moved on in search of their next un. ’N then I ’ad me special treat, didn’ I?

Well, it were like this. Me Ben ’n I, we’d been acourtin’ awhile ’n was gonna get married like. Clever ’e was, my Ben – ’e’d rented ’is bed out for a month’s wages, so when we closed the bar, out ’e goes as if to go ’ome, then sneaks round the back ’n I lets ’im in ’n up to my room for a bit of what you didn’ oughter, you know what I mean. Me Dad would’ve killed ’im if ’e’d found out, but I knew ’e was the one for me, ’n I weren’ gonna leave ’im out of the streets with nowhere to go, were I?

We was just akissin’, when there’s this knock on the door. “’Oo’s that?” says I. “Bex”, says me Dad, “can you do us a favour?” Well, you can imagine I weren’ in the mood to do no one no favours, except me Ben. “What’s that?” I says, suspicious like. “Open the door, Bex. We need to talk.” “What, in me altogethers? What’s it all about, then?” “You remember that couple we ’ad to turn away this afternoon? They’re back, desperate, ’n the young lady’s goin’ inna labour. Can they ’ave your room?” “No they bleedin’ can’t,” says I, all indignant. “If you’re so bleedin’ charitable, give ’em your own. Or are you afraid of askin’ Mum?” That shut ’im up! “You could put ’em in the stable, wouldn’ mess up no sheets.” ’E knew he was beat, so ’e stomps off.

It goes quiet, ’n I’m listenin to make sure ’e’s gone, ’n I’m thinkin’ about that poor young girl. Then I ’ears a giggle behind me, ’n Ben blows out the candle, ’n she’s gone from my mind, ’n we get down to business like. We was at it all night, ’n that was when we started our Dan. ’N at last, I was lying in ’is arms, all drowsy like after an ’ard night’s work, ’n I ’ears this scream. I can ’ear it still, ’n I knew she’d ’ad ’er baby, ’n I pitied ’er in that stable in the straw, ’n I wished I’d been able to ’elp ’er.

By the time I got downstairs in the morning, they’d gone. Me Dad said some shepherds ’ad turned up in the middle of the night – not sure what they were doin’ in town rather than lookin’ after the sheep – ’n one of ’em ’ad taken ’em ’ome to stay with ’is wife. ’N I saw them in town at times, but I stayed away, as I couldn’ look ’er in the eye like, ’n I tried to think no more on it.

**Gabriel’s visits – part four**

*Gabriel continues.*

My fourth visit was the most fun. It was a pretty special occasion, so the full gospel choir came along to celebrate. It was night-time out in the fields, so I turned the lights on – I hadn’t realised it would scare them out of their skins. “Do not be afraid,” I said, “I bring you good news of great joy for all people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you – He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you – you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger!”

At this, the choir burst into song, “Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace and goodwill towards all people, on whom his favour rests!”

**The Sheepdog’s Tale**

*The narrator is Shep, a sheepdog who was guarding the flocks near Bethlehem on the night the angels appeared to announce the birth of a saviour.*

Woofff! Put another log on the fire, will you? An old dog feels the cold now that I’m retired from shepherding the sheep. That’s better. Now, are you sitting comfortably? Good. And I hope you’re all ears to hear about a night that was like no other.

It all began quietly. It was a clear, chilly night. The sheep were safely in the pen. The Boss was lying asleep across the gateway to the pen as usual, with his club by his side, and Lassie and I were lying on either side of him, half asleep and half alert for any approaching wolves, ready to wake the Boss if necessary. There were a couple of other pens nearby on the hillside. There was just the odd howl in the distance, nothing to be alarmed about.

All of a sudden, I was wide awake, the hairs on my back standing on end. Grrrrr! It was a sound like no other – a whooshing sound like giant wings rushing through the air, starting quietly as if coming from a great distance and getting louder and louder. Lassie and I looked at each other – what was It? I jumped on the Boss to wake him up – better safe than sorry. But there was nothing to be seen.

Then a bright white light appeared over the hillside, heading straight towards us. I’d never seen a UFO before. As It came closer, It took the shape of a giant figure, a bit like a human but with huge wings and glowing in brilliance. You couldn’t take your eyes off It, but you couldn’t take It in – It was too big and too strange. The Boss was standing on his feet staring at It, and Lassie and I were crouching behind him, when It landed right in front of us and smiled at us.

Bow-wow!!! All of a sudden, the Boss was flat on his face trying to make himself small. Lassie and I followed suit, not daring to look up any more. Suddenly a warm breeze floated over us, and I was no longer afraid of It – it was like the smile had covered us with a sense that everything was OK. And I heard a voice – a voice like a tumbling stream combined with a rumble of distant thunder – saying, “Don’t be afraid. I bring you good news.”

The Boss got up, and It spoke to him a second time. I couldn’t make head nor tail of what It said, but the Boss was listening carefully and nodding his head, so I knew It was all right. Then the whole hillside was alive with more of It, hundreds and hundreds of them all glowing, and the streams and the thunders combined into the most beautiful sound I have every heard, and my ears picked up an unmistakeable message, “Glory to God in the highest!” It went on and on, and we were just standing there transfixed, drinking in all the goodness and the glory we could feel around us.

I don’t know how long It went on, but eventually the sound turned into the whooshing and the lights disappeared into the distance as mysteriously as they had come. And we just stood there in stunned silence long after It had gone.

Eventually, the other shepherds around came over to talk to the Boss, and they chattered away. They were talking utter nonsense – about a baby in a manger. The Boss doesn’t even like babies, and why would you put a baby in a manger?

After a while, the other shepherds went back to their pens, and the Boss called Lassie and me over to him. He told us to guard the gateway to the pen until he got back – he was going into town to see this baby. And off he headed into the dark.

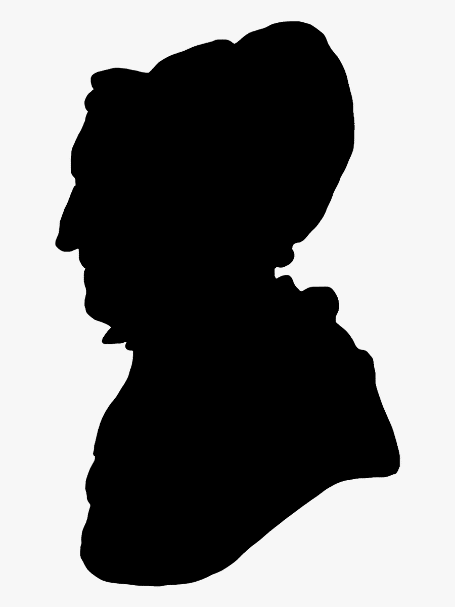
Lassie and I looked at each other. Was he barking mad? What chance did we have against a wolf? And then I heard the silence. I mean, I realised that I hadn’t heard a single bleat from the sheep, not a howl from wolf, nothing since It had arrived.

We stood guard there in the gateway, too excited and aware of our responsibilities to even think about sleep. When did shepherds ever leave their dogs in charge of the sheep?

The Boss got back just as the first light was appearing in the sky, and as he greeted us, I heard a howl in the distance and a frightened bleat from the pen, which the Boss soothed with his most reassuring voice.

And ever since that night, he’s been a gentler man, and I hear him humming away, singing away at all times of day and night, the song that we heard that night, “Glory to God in the highest!”

I’ve thought long and hard about that night, and I’m still no nearer to understanding what went on. But I reckon this God who sent It to us must be a good shepherd, because the sheep stayed calm and the wolves stayed away.

**Ready**

*This is spoken by Anna who was in the temple with Simeon.*

It won’t be long now. I’m ready to go. God is in charge. His Saviour is already here, and will soon be revealed.

How do I know? I’m one of the lucky few to whom he has already been revealed. Twelve years ago, in the temple.

I practically lived there. Why would I want to be anywhere else? What can you do with a long widowhood except praise God?

I was ready. Old Simeon had been told that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s anointed, and he was getting very frail, so it couldn’t be long now. And God was already on the move. He’d sent an angel with a message to Zachariah announcing good news. The poor man hadn’t believed him, and had been struck dumb until the promised son had been born to his wife Elizabeth in her old age.

Simeon and I had taken Zachariah home after he met the angel – he wasn’t in any state to go by himself, and he couldn’t speak to explain. And we’d gone back time and time again over the coming months, and learned of the announcement of a prophet who would prepare the way for Messiah. What times of prayer and praise we had together in that home – even though Zachariah still could not speak!

After about 6 months, when Elizabeth was finding it difficult to move around as her pregnancy advanced, we were delighted to find that her god-daughter Mary had come to look after her – a young woman of faith, who was devoted to Elizabeth, joined in the prayer and praise, and who was obviously going to be a wonderful godmother to young John. There was something mysterious about her – an inner smile, and yet some sort of inner trouble. You never could understand the young!

It was only about six months after Mary had returned home, that she walked into the temple with a husband and baby to be consecrated. My heart leapt! But first I had to stop Simeon putting his foot in it.

“I’d no idea you were married,” he was saying. “It’s only a few months since we saw you at Zachariah and Elizabeth’s.”

“Now, Joseph,” I interrupted, “why don’t you take Mary and Jesus to the office to arrange the ceremony, and we’ll catch up with you later?”

As soon as they’d gone, I turned to Simeon. “Simeon, you’re a prize turnip!”

“What do you mean? How can she have got married and had a baby since we last saw her? I wouldn’t have thought it of her!”

“Open your eyes. What is the child called?”

“Jesus.”

“And what does that mean?”

“He saves.”

“And what have we been waiting for? A Saviour who is Christ the Lord?”

And at last the penny dropped. So when Joseph and Mary took Jesus up to the sanctuary to present him to the Lord, Simeon hobbled up to them and took the baby in his arms and looked up to heaven.

“Sovereign Lord,” he said, “I can die a happy man now, because I have seen your Saviour with my own eyes, the one you have prepared to fulfil your purposes. He will be a light for the whole world, and the glory of God’s people Israel.”

Simeon died shortly after that, with a smile on his face. Then there was that terrible business when Herod sent his soldiers to murder all the baby boys in Bethlehem.

And I‘ve heard nothing more since then. I have just had to trust that God is in charge – he must have kept the child safe.

**Rumour monger**

*The narrator is Dave, who sells newspapers on the streets of Jerusalem at the time of the visit of the wise men. The scene is near the royal palace during the evening rush hour. We only hear what he says, so have to imagine what his customers are saying.*

Standard, Standard, read all about it! Good evening madam. There you are, madam; there’s some shopping vouchers in there too for you.

Standard, Standard. Good evening minister, what do you make of the rumours, sir? ….. Well sir, they’re saying, between you and me, sir, that King Herod’s dangerously ill. ……. No sir, there’s nothing in the paper about that sir, the King can rely on us sir, to stick to the official version sir…..Very well sir, good evening sir.

Standard Standard. Good evening sir, have you heard the rumours sir? ..... Well sir, the minister came by sir, and he didn’t deny it sir, so it must be true, eh sir?

Standard, Standard. Good evening doctor, been to the palace, have we sir? ….. Don’t worry sir, my lips are sealed sir.

Standard, Standard. Good evening madam, have you heard? The doctor came past from the palace looking worried madam, so it can’t be long now madam.

Standard, Standard. Hi there John, good to see you…….What was that? …. Very strange, I’ll keep my ears open.

Standard, Standard. Good evening sir. Have you seen anything of these mystics sir? No sir, sometimes better not to know sir.

Standard, Standard. Good evening madam, let me just slip that into your push-chair madam. They asked you what madam? No madam, I’ve not heard that one either madam.

Standard, Standard. Good evening matron, no royal babies delivered recently madam? …. No madam, I’ve not seen any official announcements madam.

Standard, Standard. Good evening sir, yes sir, that star does seem unusually bright sir. No sir, there’s nothing in the charts about it sir.

Standard, Standard. Good evening, young man. No, I’ve never followed a star, you’d probably end up going round in circles. Good thing there’s no clouds tonight.

Standard, Standard. Good evening, officer. Ask a policeman, they say, but if you ask me, officer, they’d have done better to keep their mouths shut. No officer, we don’t want no rumours going around, do we?

Standard, Standard. Good evening madam. No madam, nothing in here about a Messiah madam. Sounds a bit dangerous to me madam, not the sort of thing King Herod would approve of madam, always assuming he’s well enough to approve of anything madam.

Standard, Standard. Good evening reverend, what’s this I hear about a Messiah sir?...... Well sir, there’s people going around asking questions sir……… I quite agree sir, we don’t want no trouble.

Standard, Standard. Good evening sir…….. Well sir, if it’s a royal baby you’re looking for sir, you could try the palace sir. Mind you sir, King Herod’s getting a bit past that sort of thing sir, and I’ve not heard of any of the princesses having a baby sir. Yes sir, you just keep going up the street this way sir, you’ll see it in a couple of minutes sir. Good luck sir, I think you might need it sir.

Standard, Standard, read all about it!

**The Innkeeper’s daughter – part 2**

*Bex continues her story eighteen months later.*

It were a year or two later that I remembered that scream. Dan was ’avin ’ ’is afternoon nap, tired out after all ’is crawlin’, ’n I was catchin’ up with the ’ousework, when I ’ears a blood-curdlin’ scream – a woman’s scream – ’n I immediately thought back to that other one. Then another, ’n another, ’n the sound of boots runnin’ – soldiers’ boots. I goes to shut the door, but a soldier bursts through it, sword in ’and. “Oh no,” I thinks, “’ere we go.” But ’e don’t want nuffin’ from me, shoves me aside, ’n rushes through the back, like ’e’s goin’ after ’idden treasure. Then ’e’s straight back out again, ’n ’is sword’s drippin’ with blood, ’n I looks at ’im in ’orror. “No!” I whispers, like there’s no voice in me. “No!!!” But e’s gone, ’n I rushes in to Dan, ’n there’s blood pourin’ from ’is ’ead ’n chest, ’n there’s nuffin’ I can do to ’elp ’im, ’n I’m cradling ’im in me arms, ’n ’is blood all over me dress, ’n I ’owls until I could ’owl no more, ’n Ben comes ’ome ’n finds me numb with grief ’n shock, still ’oldin ’ ’im.

Thirty years I’ve heard them screams, thirty years of ’eartbreak, longin’ for sleep to deaden the pain, dreadin’ the dreams, with no escape. ’N every time it starts with ’er scream, ’n I know that God is punishing me for what I did that night, for my sins – my sins with Ben, ’n my ’ardness of eart in sending ’er to the stable floor. ’N we made Dan that night, ’n God took ’im away, like he did with King David, ’n its all my fault. Oh God, ’ow long will you punish me? Must I suffer for ever?

**Realpolitik**

*This is by King Herod the Great, lying semi-delirious on his deathbed shortly after the visit of the wise men. In each section, the opening word, “Fools!”, is loud, angry and distressed, whilst the rest is quieter and says why. Think of Herod as a cross between Saddam Hussain – a monster who kept a lid on a simmering pot which boiled over once he was gone, making life far worse for the masses – and Marshall Petain, who thought that by appeasing the occupying powers he could save the country from far worse and moderate their impact; he is full of self-justification, perhaps subconsciously aware of the weakness of his case, and blames everyone else for what he was “forced” to do.*

**Fools!** Worthless sons! They’ll undo all I’ve achieved within a few years. How have I deserved this? For thirty-three years I’ve kept the peace. Thirty-three years I’ve kept the Romans at bay.

**Fools!** Religious fanatics! No common sense. Always looking for a magic answer, a saviour who will make all problems disappear. No sense of compromise with reality, always provoking the Romans, selling their snake-oil to the masses.

**Fools!** Mystic dreamers! How dare they? Asking around for a royal baby. Don’t they realise what trouble they are stirring up?

**Fools!** Bumbling idiots! I tell them to track those dreamers, and they miss them slipping into Bethlehem at night. How can I eliminate the threat if they can’t spot the house?

**Fools!** Ungrateful Romans! I do their dirty work, and they blame me for killing a few peasant babies. Don’t they understand? What choice did I have? Better for a few to die than the whole country rise against them.

**Fools!** The lot of them! I’ve done my best. They’ll understand when I’m gone and it all goes up in flames.

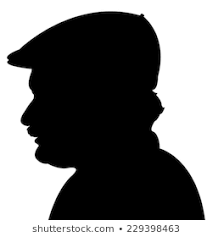
**Fools!**

**Gabriel’s visits – part five**



*Gabriel continues.*

There were four further visits, all in dreams – I’d worked out by now that this was the best method of communication. One to the wise men to keep them away from Herod, and three to Joseph to give him practical directions – first to flee to Egypt in the middle of the night, and then to bring him back to Nazareth. I knew by then that the child was in good hands, and that I wouldn’t need to visit again for quite some time.

**All her fault**

*The narrator of this monologue is Heli, the father of Joseph. He is bitter and bewildered that things have not turned out as he had hoped, full of self-pity and lacking in self-awareness. He is speaking a few months after the visit of the wise men, having just received a letter from Joseph in Egypt. This drama avoids comfortable assumptions about those whose lives were impacted by the Christmas story.*

It’s all her fault. If only he’d never set eyes on the little slut. Things were going swimmingly until she came on the scene. And then …..whoomph, it all went belly up.

I’m not getting any younger. I’m too old to keep the business going on my own without a young man to do the heavy lifting. Months of wondering where he’s got to, whether he’s safe and well, and now this.

“Dear Dad, hope you’re well. We had to escape to Egypt in a hurry, will be back when it is safe. Don’t worry about us, all is well. Love, Joseph, Mary and Jesus.”

Thanks a million, son, see if I care if your old Dad has to give up the business and leave nothing to you. You might even find he’s no longer around when you remember that you’re meant to be looking after him in his old age.

Mind you, most of our respectable clients have already jumped ship after you disgraced yourself by marrying that girl after what she’d done. Or was it you that got her in the family way and refused to admit it? You can’t say I didn’t warn you. If you can’t trust her when you’re not even married yet, don’t kid yourself that you can trust her later. Mark my words, you’ll live to regret it.

I mean, honestly. Seeing angels in the lunch-break. Overpowered by the shadow of the Almighty. God’s the father! Hadn’t she got the brains to make up a better story? And what does my brilliant son do – falls for it hook line and sinker! Talk about what you want to believe. I thought he’d seen sense when she first told him, and then the next morning he’s changed his mind and decided to stick with her.

And to think I was so happy when he fell for her, so young and innocent, with a winning smile and a simple faith. How could we all have been fooled, the hussy? They say still waters run deep. Off she goes to stay with her cousin for a few months so as to avoid the stares of the neighbours, but when she comes back she’s out here and there’s no hiding her disgrace.

He seemed only too keen to get out of the village with her. I can’t say I blame her for wanting to be away, go to the city where nobody knew, but why did he go with her? They say there’s no fool like a young man in love. The census gave him an excuse to go away. He should have done what the rest of us did and said we were from here. But o no, he’s so hung up on his royal pedigree that he has to head off to Bethlehem. Fat lot of good that did him, even there it got too hot to handle, and now he’s in some slum in Egypt.

Son, you’ve made your bed, and now you’ll have to lie on it. Your old father will die of neglect, and you’ll be sorry when you hear of it. The neighbours look at me with pity, but they won’t lift a finger to help me, or they might share my shame. I can’t even go to the synagogue any longer, they all treat me like a leper.

Son, I never thought to hear you called a sinner. You’re a fool, a deluded fool, and I hope you’re happy with the choice you’ve made. But you’ve brought disgrace on your whole family, and I’ll never forgive you for that. And it’s all her fault, the little slut.

**Epilogue**

**Ready – part 2**

*Anna continues her story.*

I‘ve heard nothing more since then. I have just had to trust that God is in charge – he must have kept the child safe. Until today.

Simeon’s son Nathaniel came round to see me today. He’s a priest at the temple, like his father, who told him the whole story. He was beaming from ear to ear, bursting with news. I made him wait until I’d got him a drink and a cake.

“The whole temple has been abuzzing for the last three days,” he said.

“Doesn’t it still go quiet at the end of the Festival?” I asked.

“Normally, but not this time. The teachers of the law have been busy.”

“You’re teasing me. You obviously want me to ask why they’ve been busy.”

“Well, go on then.”

“All right then. What have they been busy with?”

“Questions.”

“What sort of questions?”

“Questions about the law. What it really means.”

“That’s what they’re meant to be teaching.”

“Yes, but this was different.”

“How so?”

“The questioner. He seemed to understand the law better than the teachers.”

“That wouldn’t be difficult with some of them.”

“No, but not all. His questions put them on the spot.”

“What do you mean?”

“He speaks with authority.”

“Who is this questioner?”

“A boy. Not far short of his Bar Mitzvah.”

“Is this who I think it is?”

“His parents came to pick him up today. They were frantic. They’d been searching for him for three days.”

“I should think they were. How did he respond?”

“He was baffled. ‘Didn’t you realise I would be in my Father’s house?’ he said.”

“No!”

“I took them aside, and said to them, ‘You don’t need to worry. Be sure of this, the Lord has visited and redeemed his people.’”

“Zachariah’s exact words!”

“They stared at me and asked, ‘How do you know?’

“’’My father Simeon told me. Mary and Joseph, be sure of this, every word spoken about this boy will come true. And I will be calling on Anna today with good news. Now may the Lord bless you and keep you.’ So I bring you their greetings.”

“And now I can die a happy woman, for the Lord has come to his temple.”

**The Innkeeper’s daughter – part 3**

*Bex continues her story thirty years later.*

’N then, last year, all of a sudden, it changed. I was just aleavin’ Jerusalem at the end of Passover when I ’eard the soldiers’ boots. “Oh no, not again,” I thought, but they was just takin’ three poor saps for ex’cution – two right thugs, kickin’ ’n screamin’, ’n another, all quiet like. The crowd was all ajeerin’ but I shuts ’em up: “Leave ’em be, you cowards,” I cries. “Aren’ they suff’rin enough?” ’N ’e looked at me, ’n ’e ’eld my eye, ’n I knew I ’ad to go with ’im, ’n be with ’im till ’e died.

They strung ’im up, ’n ’e didn’ say nuffin’. ’e were about the age of my Dan, ’n I thought ’ow brave ’e was, ’n ’ow proud I’d be to ’ave a son like ’im. ’N is Mum were there, quiet too, no screamin’, like she ’as to be strong for ’im. ’N ’e cries out, “Father, forgive ’em, for they don’t know what they’re doin”, ’n there’s tears arunnin’ down my face, ’n I thinks ’ow I didn’ know what I were doin’ that night all those years ago, ’n its like ’e’s tellin’ God that it weren’ my fault, ’n its time to stop punishing me.

One of ’em thugs were makin’ a right racket, cursin’ God ’n the quiet un, but the other tells ’im to shut ’is gob, that we’s bein’ punished justly, but this man ain’t done nuffin’ wrong. ’N ’e turns to ’im ’n says, “Jesus,” – that was ’is name – “remember me when you come inna your kingdom”. ’N this Jesus, ’e smiles – in ’is agony ’e smiles – ’n ’e says, “I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

’N a bit later, ’n they’re all gonnas, ’n is Mum’s aweepin’, ’n I puts me arm round ’er, ’n we weep together, ’n I says, “’E’s gone to the place where that smile came from, ’n there ain’t no more pain nor suff’rin’ there.” ’N we goes down together to ’er friend’s ’ouse, ’n I sits wiv ’er, ’n she starts tellin’ me about ’im, ’n I tells ’er ’ow I’s changed up there, ’n ’ow God’s ’eard ’is prayers ’n ’e ain’t punishin’ me no more. ’N I tells ’er what I did, ’n ’ow I sent that poor girl to the stable floor while I got up to no good upstairs. ’N she looks at me, wide-eyed like, ’n she smiles, in all ’er grief, ’n she gives me a great big bear’ug like, ’n she says, “I was that girl.”

Well, you could of blowed me over wiv a feather. ’N she tells me ’ow God told ’er about this baby, ’n she weren’ even married yet, ’n ’ow they got a message from an angel to run away before the soldiers came. ’N I tells ’er about my Dan, ’n ’ow the soldier stabbed ’im. ’N she tells me ’ow she took ’er Jesus to the temple, ’n a priest told of ’ow God would use ’im, ’n ’ow a sword would stab ’er own soul too, ’n now she knows what ’e meant, ’n now we can be sisters, coz we unnerstand what each other’s been agoin’ through.

’N since that day, I ain’ ’eard that scream no more. ’Er Jesus, ’e came back after ’e died, ’n then ’e went up to ’eaven, ’n ’e’s gettin’ a place ready for ’is Mum ’n me ’n everyone ’oo follows ’im. ’N I know that God’s forgiven me, because ’e prayed for me when ’e was on that cross, ’n I stayed wiv ’im.