

## Chapter 8

Early in the morning, I suddenly awoke and started to cry out in pain as I began to have mild contractions. They began with cramps that radiated from my front to my back, then down my legs. It seemed like my baby was being stretched in all directions.

Joseph heard me and immediately got out of his straw bed next to me and asked, "Mary, what's wrong? Are you all right?"

"I don't know," I told him as he gently reached out and held my hand. "I feel like I am being stabbed in the stomach and my muscles keep getting tighter and tighter and my hips feel like they are being pulled apart."

Then, after a minute, came another stabbing pain and I told him, my face by now blood red, "I am not sure how much longer I can take this before our baby is born. Surely, it can't be much longer."

As I spoke, the sheep in the stable began to bleat and were joined by the braying of our donkey, as if they all were in sympathy with me and my agony. Each time I cried out, they united with their own sounds.

By now, the contractions were coming like waves every five minutes or so, and were getting progressively worse each time, until I wondered if I could take any more. Then, during a pause, I would take some deep breaths, and hope and pray this would soon be over.

Years later, I was talking with another mother, who said she had heard these pains as being "like an ocean wave slowly gathering momentum from the depths of the ocean, building to its maximum height and force, and then crashing to the shore. Between waves there is stillness and calm."

But at that time, there wasn't much calm for me. Deeply concerned, Joseph rushed out to call Elias the innkeeper to see if he could provide me with some water to quench my thirst. His wife, Dinah, quickly brought it in a small clay jar to me and looked on in compassion as I eagerly drank it.

"Mary, my dear, I have had three children and I know what you are going through," she said as she lightly mopped my brow with a cloth. "I'll be with you when your baby finally arrives, so don't worry. I will help you through this and, once it is all over, you will soon forget that you ever had these birth pains."

I smiled weakly, but I wasn't convinced that I would forget them that easily. I thanked her, and then Joseph told me that, if I thought it was all right, he was going to have to find where he needed to register and pay his taxes in the town.

"Are you sure?" I gasped out as another birth pang ripped through my body. "What if the baby comes while you are gone?"

Dinah said, "Mary, my guess is you have a couple of hours yet before your baby is born. I think there will be time for Joseph to go and do this and be back in time."

"All right, Joseph, but please be back as soon as you can," I told him.

The innkeeper, who had been hovering close to the door, joined us in the stable and said, "Joseph, the main place to register is on the other side of Bethlehem, but you are right to go early as the place will be packed. I have already done this myself with those hated tax collectors. When you get there, just bite your lip and don't show any anger toward them."

With that, Joseph leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, then headed out into the maze of dusty streets and alleyways of Bethlehem, past the traders, merchants, artisans who were cutting stone inside their shops, and others like him who were carpenters to whom he waved.

As he pressed on, he could hear the sound of voices, as people seemed to feel they had to shout to be heard, as well as the clatter of hooves and odors of cooking food.

Soon he came across the crowded main market, a colorful bazaar where sellers vended fruits and vegetables, dried fish, sacrificial animals, clothes, perfumes and jewelry.

Joseph later told me that when he finally found the place he was looking for, his heart dropped as he saw hundreds of people all, all members of David's tribe, trying to get into the building. It had a sign which someone told him read, "Register and pay your taxes here."

He told me that as he waited, one of the people in the line said, "I hate these tax collectors. They are nothing but thieves and traitors who cozy up to the Romans and King Herod and keep much of the money for themselves."

Joseph explained his predicament to those in front of him in the line and they kindly ushered him to the front. There he found himself facing a man he described as a "bored official."

Joseph couldn't read or write, and when he nervously told this to the man, he took pity on him and helped him fill in the form and asked for the required taxes. Joseph produced these from a leather purse and handed them over.

Within about ninety minutes, he was back with me and was relieved that our son had still not arrived.

For the next thirty minutes, the contractions coming faster and faster. I hoped that soon the eternity of excruciating pain would be over and the great miracle of childbirth would take place.

"Mary, just push between the contractions and then stop pushing so your infant will happen slowly," said Dinah as she sympathetically gazed down at my pain-ridden face. "It will soon be over my dear."

She was right, for there came the most incredible moment of my short life as the baby's head appeared from the opening of my body. Very soon, his entire head was out, followed by the shoulders. When his complete body was out, Dinah took the child and suctioned the baby's mouth and nose to ease the first breath of my Jesus. She then took a knife to cut the umbilical cord.

She found some material and, after wiping the blood from his body, she found another large piece of cloth and wrapped Jesus in it. Then she handed my child to me.

I couldn't stop smiling as this little angel of a baby gazed up at me and seemed to chuckle at the fact that he had finally arrived on this earth.

It was by now 280 days - nine calendar months - since the miraculous conception, and now he had arrived in the most humble of surroundings.

"Elias, could you clean out the manger and put some clean straw in it?" Dinah asked her husband. "The baby needs somewhere to rest after his long battle to join us all."

After Elias had completed the task, I managed uncertainly to struggle up from the bed. As Joseph steadied me, I took Jesus from the arms of Dinah and laid him in the manger. He had the widest smile I have ever seen. I just stood above him, holding hands with my husband, and kept marveling at this miracle of new birth.

By now, even the animals had gone quiet. It was so peaceful. It was if they also recognized what had just occurred. The Son of God, the Savior of the World, had come to earth and I, as a virgin, had been chosen to bear him.

As we all sat quietly in the stable, little did we realize what was happening on one of the hills outside Bethlehem, where a group of shepherds were tending their flocks of sheep that I later discovered belonged to the High Priest and his family. Each one of them had been declared by the priest to be unblemished and they were later to be sacrificed in the Temple in Jerusalem or eaten as Passover lambs.

The wind was whistling through the hillside as they pulled their heavy cloaks around them, and the shepherds watched carefully for bandits or wolves, who could be prowling after their precious charges.

But these men were startled as they saw a blinding light, and before them appeared an angel, wearing shining apparel. As they covered their eyes, he said, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This *will be* a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

They could hardly believe what they had just heard – that the Messiah, the Deliverer, had come to Bethlehem to set his people free.

The shepherds were in for a further shock, when the sky was again lit up and a great company of other angels appeared. With their colleague, they began praising God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

As quickly as he and the others had appeared, they disappeared, leaving the shepherds trying to work out what they should do next.

"Well, the angel gave us a clue that the Messiah will be wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger," said one of them.

"But there are hundreds of mangers," added one of the others. "Where on earth do we start?"

"I've got an idea," said the third shepherd. "I have a friend down there called Elias. When I was in Bethlehem yesterday, he was telling me that he had a couple staying in his stable called Joseph and Mary, and he said that she was about to give birth. Let's go there and see if this is the right place."

It was agreed that only four of them would go on the search, while the others, about half a dozen of them, would stay behind to watch over the sheep. So the four of them ran breathlessly down the hill and into Bethlehem.

When they arrived at the stable, they didn't bother to knock on the door, but came rushing in. They stopped in awe as they saw the baby lying in the manger and wrapped in cloths.

"Is this the Messiah?" one of them asked me as he peered at Jesus with an oil lamp flickering to illuminate the scene.

I smiled and said, "Yes, this is the Messiah that has come to save the world. But how did you know about his birth?"

He paused as if to catch his breath and replied, "Well, while we were tending our flock earlier this evening, an angel appeared to us and gave us the great news about the birth of the promised Messiah and our Deliverer. We decided this might be the place to come as Elias had previously told me about the two of you."

By now, each one of the men had sunk to their knees and began to weep with joy as they peered down at Jesus, who was by now sound asleep.

Not wanting to intrude any more, the oldest of the men took my hand and said, "God has trusted you to bring into this world and raise his own Son. You are honored among all women."

With that, the men returned to their sheep, leaving Joseph and I to look after our baby who was later to be seen as God's lamb, a sacrifice for the entire world. But at that time, I was not really aware of this.

I looked over at Jesus, still fast asleep, and thanked God for this great privilege of bearing His Son. I knew that we were just at the beginning of a life together with this baby, and I wondered what was going to happen next.

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