

The Stable Birth

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The woman rubbed her neck, thinking if they could just stop traveling for a day or so, she'd feel better. But she knew that was impossible. Her forehead, nose, and cheeks were chapped and red from constant exposure to the sun. Her shoulders drooped, her, full and sore, rested on her huge belly. The baby had dropped, so the woman had to ask her husband to stop at least ten times a day so she could relieve herself. Her swollen feet throbbed down to her toes, which resembled fat figs. Riding on the back of a donkey was never comfortable, but for a woman at the end of her pregnancy, it was. Before her marriage, the woman had woven bride-to-be dreams of visiting her new husband's homeland so he could introduce his relatives to his new wife. She pictured standing beside him, her head tilted against his upper arm as he presented her to his cousins and aunts and uncles. He'd say, "This is my lovely new bride, Mary. Am I not the luckiest man in the world?" In her mind she saw herself dip her head as if she were embarrassed, but inside she'd know she was thrilled. Joseph was a good man and she was grateful to God for such a husband.

She'd never imagined that she'd be visiting Bethlehem when so many other people would be there, swarming into the rustic town, like bees around a frenzied hive. It was lonely traveling with Joseph, who was a soft-spoken man of few words. Before they'd left Nazareth, Mary's close-knit family surrounded her, almost swallowing her whole in their efforts to support her as all awaited her baby's birth. Her mother and aunts and cousins had been busy preparing clothes for the newborn, stitching little shirts and blankets. Even her grandmother rose from her bed as Mary's girth widened. Grandma's dramatic recovery had everyone saying it was a miracle from God, and Mary was certain of this, also. But she'd never doubted her grandmother's ability to get well when there was a baby's birth to attend to and crowds of people to cook for.

At dusk, when they arrived in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph were amazed and a bit disconcerted to find the city stuffed with harassed-looking men and women, squawking children, and bleating, braying, grunting animals of every kind and smell. Mary immediately wished for the solitude of the dusty roads outside the city limits. The town stunk like overcooked meat frying, unwashed bodies, and something else. Perhaps it was anxiety. The people, forced to be somewhere they didn't want to be, were restless and excitable, and compensated by drinking too much, shouting too loudly, and forgetting their manners. Joseph led the donkey as Mary struggled to ride the docile beast. On their journey in the desert, Mary had been forced to sleep on the hard ground. But she'd comforted herself that at least in Bethlehem there would be a soft bed waiting for her at some nice, clean inn. Unfortunately, this didn't seem to be the case, as she surmised from the sag of Joseph's shoulders. There was, sadly, no room for a pregnant woman and her husband to stay anywhere in Bethlehem.

As the sun fell behind the hills, Mary's labor pains began. One innkeeper gave the two weary travelers the option of sleeping in his stable. Since Mary's belly felt like someone had lit it on fire, she agreed to the unsuitable lodging, fearing that if they didn't find somewhere to settle soon, she'd be having her baby in the middle of the

crowded, noisy street. But was this what God wanted for His son? That He be born amongst a bunch of animals? She could only imagine the stench that would be in a barn. Manure, moldy hay. She gagged as they approached the stable, swallowing bile down her dry throat. Mary mourned that her mother, her aunts, and her grandmother wouldn't be with her to attend the birth. The only help she'd have was from Joseph. This was woman's work, and all she had was her new husband.

What did he know about labor pains and handling infants? How could she do this? She was young and this was her first pregnancy. No new mother should be forced to deliver her baby, especially her firstborn, without her own mother present. After the exhausting journey and now the pains coming stronger, Mary finally gave in to tears. She sniffled and wiped her nose, then Joseph lifted Mary from the back of the donkey. Thank goodness her husband's trade as a carpenter had strengthened his muscles. She was no thin, light bride anymore. Had she ever been? It seemed lifetimes ago.

As she walked into the stable, her water broke and suddenly, the clean straw surrounded by the quiet animals looked inviting indeed. Mary stumbled to the blanket Joseph was spreading out for her. Strangely, thankfully, the stable didn't make her wretch, but reminded her of childhood winters she'd spent holed up in their own barn at home, watching their cat birth kittens, or nursing a sick puppy back to health. All she could smell was the warmth and love and safety of this humble place. Mary reminded herself to compliment the innkeeper on his commodious stable facilities, then realized that sounded odd. The fiery throbbing in her abdomen was making her think sideways.

Tepid water rushed down her legs and dribbled onto the ground as Mary lay down on the blanket. Joseph prudently covered her with another blanket, then drifted away for a moment, only to return with a dipper full of cool water. Mary sipped it and much of her nausea dissipated. She looked around her properly and saw an old cow, an even older mare, and a few hens. Mary's sideways mind took comfort in the fact that `her' barn was filled with females, even if they were only farm animals.

Dabbing her moist forehead with a clean cloth soaked in the cool water, Joseph stayed by Mary's side as her labor progressed. They'd considered having Joseph leave to search for a midwife, but Mary was afraid of being left alone, so the two had remained together through the night. The horse and the cow munched hay, their crunching beating a comforting rhythm for Mary and her husband. The mare nickered encouragement every so often, and the cow blinked her liquid brown eyes slowly, as if she was trying to tell the laboring woman that all was well. Mary wondered if perhaps the cow was thinking of calves she'd born, years ago, in verdant fields. The brave little donkey that had willingly carried the pregnant woman for so many days could be heard snoring in the back of the stable. The russet brown hens tucked themselves into their nests at the edge of the barn, their clucking sounding almost like Mary's grandmother as she pattered around the kitchen.

Mary tried to doze but the pains were coming faster and lasting for longer periods of time. Again, Mary started to cry and this time Joseph began to sing to her. Songs from her childhood, the ones about God and His goodness, about the cricket and the lark, and about the foolish man who built his house upon the sand, came to her as if from far away. She saw Joseph's lips move, but she was nearing delirium and didn't cognate that the

music was coming from him. But wherever the melody was coming from, Mary thanked God for it, and only later realized it had been her husband's deep, steady voice. He'd never sung to her before, and she hadn't known he had the voice of an angel.

In the cool, still hours before dawn, Mary resigned herself to the birth and began to bear down. Joseph continued to sing and chant while he held her hand or wiped her forehead with the damp cloth. Once she started pushing, Mary found energy she hadn't known she possessed. It was almost a heady feeling to be able to do something and not just be the victim of pain. One, two, three pushes, then rest. One, two, three again. Almost as if it were a miracle, Mary could feel the starting to emerge from her body. Joseph left her side and moved into position to deliver the child. The small baby, pink-faced and covered with , snuggled into Joseph's arms. The man wiped off the , swaddled the boy in soft linen, and handed Him to His mother. Mary, of course, was crying again, but these tears came from somewhere entirely different this time. No longer did she cry from exhaustion or despair. These were tears of relief and pure joy. What a beautiful Son she had!

She looked from her baby to her husband and back again, unable to believe the perfection of the moment. Her husband came to her side and put his arm around her shoulder. She brought the baby to her breast and His suckling relieved the tightness she had been suffering for days. Outside the door of the stable, the night's darkness fell away as if it were mid-day, but Mary knew it was just past midnight, long before the sun would rise. She driftily wondered why there was so much light when it was supposed to be a dark, moonless night, but her sideways mind could only grasp the solid feel of her husband's arm on her neck, and the baby's strong lips nursing.

Mary and Joseph murmured, "Jesus. Our baby Jesus," never once moving their gaze from the newborn's glorious face. After Jesus fed, he slept and Mary laid Him on the hay and lowered herself next to Him. Joseph lay on the other side of the baby, wrapping his arm over the baby to touch Mary's shoulder. Joseph closed his eyes and was, at once, heavy with sleep as he protected his little family. Before Mary slipped into slumber, she wondered what would happen in the coming days, weeks, and years. Would the world accept her Son, who was also His Son? Opening her eyes once more, Mary smoothed Jesus' tiny brow and glimpsed the wings of an angel flitting high in the stable's rafters. And then Mary, like Joseph and Jesus, fell asleep.