

THE INNER JOURNEY TO
Bethlehem



JERRY WELTE

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Introduction

The birth of Christ came about after a physical journey to Bethlehem. Yet, for God to be born in the world, a journey of faith must take place as well. Mary and Joseph traveled the arduous road to the holy city of David, but they also traveled an interior path of hope and trust. Joseph was guided by dreams while Mary heard God's messenger and "treasured these things in her heart."

All people of faith are invited to make this inner journey to the birthplace of Christ. Each of us has a Bethlehem inside us, a sacred and sometimes remote place where we make room for the Lord to enter. The reflections in this book suggest the spiritual journeys of seven key players in the drama of Christ's nativity. Their inner movement forges pathways that we are invited to follow in our own way to experience the birth of our Messiah anew.

MARY



(Luke 1:26-38)

All God's Love Now Forms a Child

Strangely, I am not afraid. Nor am I really surprised. For some time now I have felt something wondrous happening to me. I have long sensed the Lord's presence within me, that I was pregnant with God's Spirit. Now that spirit will take flesh, as it has always done in the course of salvation history. All that love cannot help but form a heart to feel our pain, eyes

to see injustice, hands to lift up the lowly, ears to hear the cry of the poor, and a mouth to speak God's word.

The challenge will be in the telling. My story will surely sound more like blasphemy than good news. If I went to the elders, they would condemn me on the spot. A child without a father? The most high born of a lowly maid? They have stoned women for less. Imagine how fast the stones would fly at one who suggested that her pregnancy is of God. How strange that those who most loudly claim the Spirit can be the slowest to acknowledge its presence. I must tell Joseph first, for he is an upright man. He will listen. Together we will find God's way.

"Blessed among women!" It is marvelous and dangerous talk. I have seen the ones who crave such honors. I have no desire for that kind of glory. Are not all God's people blessed and filled with the Spirit? Are not we all called and chosen? What a world it would be if we all gave birth to God as we are able. I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done according to God's word.

Prayer: Mother of God, may the Lord be born among us once more this Christmas through our service to God and one another.

JOSEPH



(Matthew 1:18-25)

This Is Not the Work of Human Hands

I am a simple man and this is not a simple thing. I have always believed that I could solve any problem with my hands. So I told Mary that I would take her far away and build us a new home, a refuge safe and sure. I could see in her eyes that she knew the truth I could not face—this is not the work of human hands. All my life I have relied on my hands,

but now I must become a new kind of carpenter who builds with tools of faith. I much prefer a sturdy hammer.

So I determined to let go and leave this in God's hands. I was going to divorce Mary quietly and go my way, but the dream has changed everything. Now I see that my hands still play a role. God has a hand in this, but so do I. There are things that only God can do and things that only I can do. I must hold and guide and protect this child. God has provided the wood of salvation from the stump of Jesse, but I must build it into a house for God's family.

I will fashion a door fitting for the Lord's entry into this world. I will build a bed for him to dream of God's reign. I will hew a table for a holy family to gather in memory and hope. I will sculpt a blessing cup for us to seal our communion in God's grace. Father, today I place our lives in your hands, but I also take up the tools to begin your work. Prosper the work of my hands, O Lord. Prosper the work of my hands.

Prayer: Creator God, give us faith in the work of your hands and love for the work of our hands in building your kingdom community.

ELIZABETH



(Luke 1:5-25)

God Helps Us to Be Desert Bloomers

They call me “barren” and they are right to do so. I am a desert...dry, lifeless, and without water. Zechariah and I have grown old and useless. In our hope for a child, we are like desperate farmers sowing fruitless seed in sand. When he came back from the temple strangely mute, he wanted to try again, but we might as well scatter seed on rocks. Yet, how my body hungers for life; a womb like a fallow land aching for a harvest. Perhaps there is hope in holy yearning.

Daily I pray the words of Isaiah, perhaps talking to myself as much as God: “Streams will burst forth in the desert. The parched land will bloom with abundant flowers.” Then I walk into the desert and see the life all around me—tiny, vibrant flowers and rugged, stubborn plants. When I first feel the stirring in me, it all makes sense. This is how God works in us, teaching us to be desert bloomers. We sink our roots deep to find the source of life where there should be none.

My child shall be a wilderness dweller, for he was conceived in a desert. Having already baptized me with the water in my womb, he will prepare the way of the Lord with water and the spirit. Through his witness, the world will soon receive living water. Then there shall be no more deserts, no more wastelands. No one knows this better than I, for I was an arid land and now I am fertile soil. I was dead sand, but today I am a river of life. Isaiah’s promise is fulfilled in me and I proclaim its hope to the world: “Let all who thirst, come to the water.”

Prayer: God of life, may we sink our roots deep into the soil of your love so that we may be draw forth living water for your people.

THE INNKEEPER



(Luke 2:1-7)

Why Does My Heart Feel So Vacant?

I have been thinking about the man and woman all day. I have turned people away before, but somehow this feels different. Still, they were only peasants. I may not have royalty coming to stay here today, but I know that a king doesn't ride in on a donkey. In any case, surely there are more important people on their way here, people with the means to pay. I must

save my rooms for them. After all, I have a right to make a decent living.

My father ran this inn before me and his father before that. Once, after turning people away, he noticed the puzzled look in my eyes and explained, "The world is big, but our inn is small. There isn't room for everyone." I told the woman as much and she smiled. It was a kind, but knowing smile, as if she knew it was a lie. She reminded me of my mother, who could always fit one more chair around a table while explaining, "A big heart makes room."

I saw the children playing on the ridge today, each of them trying to climb to the top and push the others down. I think they call the game, "king of the hill." It is a wise game, good practice for the ways of the world. The man and woman will find a place for their child to be born. The poor always manage, as must I. This is a big day for me. Soon every room will be filled and so will my coffers. Why, then, does my inn seem empty? Why does my heart feel so vacant?

Prayer: Loving God, help us welcome the traveler, feed the stranger, and make room for the outcast so that you may be born in our midst.

THE SHEPHERD



(Luke 2:8-20)

Would That I Had Such a Shepherd

It is cold out here...and lonely. The sheep huddle together for warmth and safety. They have learned that the world is a dangerous place. They have seen their own wander off as though things were otherwise and fall prey to wolves. They have also watched me go in search of the one, leaving the many to fend for themselves. They have no fear, though, for they know I would give my life for them.

Would that I had such a shepherd. These long

night watches stir up doubt and fear. When the winds howl and the darkness deepens, I wonder if I am alone in the world...a sheep without a shepherd. For too long I have watched the lambs of the world preyed upon by the rich and powerful, devoured by wolves in sheep's clothing. Every night I whisper a prayer into the darkness, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." O, Lord, but how I do want.

As always, it is at the midnight hour that the emptiness prowls within me like a predator of the soul. Then, all at once the sky brightens and I hear a strange, wondrous song, like voices carried on the wind. I rise to my feet and look to the horizon. The sheep set off and for once I follow them. It is as if all creation is drawn to the source of this marvelous hymn. I find the child in a manger and fall to my knees. The night wind whispers back the answer to my prayer: "Though I walk in the dark valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me." I have found the Good Shepherd and the voices of angels echo in my heart, "Glory to God in the highest!"

Prayer: Good Shepherd, watch over us and guide us so that goodness and mercy may follow us all the days of our lives.

THE MAGI



(Matthew 2:1-12)

There Are Maps that Cannot Be Drawn on Paper

We are travelers this night, as we have always been in life. Our restlessness drives us. We seek, but never arrive. We search, but do not find. Our journeys have brought us before kings, princes, and lords, but they have all been found wanting. There is so much weakness in their power, smallness in their stature,

and folly in their wisdom. Perhaps we are looking for a king not to be found in earthly palaces.

Others employ maps and charts, but we travel by the stars. So often we all are lost, so who can trust a map of human design? Certainly the blind cannot lead the blind. We have learned there are maps that cannot be drawn on paper. There are patterns in life and an order in the universe that we have come to know and respect. The stars know exactly where they are going. They will guide us to a more perfect light.

The star comes to rest over a humble place. This is no domain for an ordinary king. There is no portal to enter, no guards to get past, and no airs to put on. The child is helpless, as are we all in the end. Yet, we are not fooled by these appearances as we have earlier been deceived by the trappings of worldly power. So, we offer fitting gifts for royalty—gold for fortune, incense for praise, and myrrh for mortality, for even kings cannot cheat death. Yet, somehow we believe you will turn these gifts to your own paradoxical ends. You will find a more precious currency in poverty, a truer glory in service, and a greater life in death. So, we worship you, you who are the true King of kings.

Prayer: King of kings, teach us the ways of true power—the authority of service, the riches of virtue, and the life of dying to ourselves.

SIMEON



(Luke 2:25-35)

Opening My Eyes to God's Mysteries

It is not easy to go through life with one's eyes open. I have seen far too much—too much violence, too much hate, too much injustice. I know many who survive by willful blindness. They turn away; they mind their business; they keep their heads down. How I envy them at times.

My eyes are different now. The sky used to be the first sight they took in each day, but lately they

seem drawn to the dust. In time a kind of gravity takes hold, pulling my gaze downward from heaven to earth. I have two sets of eyes and I wonder which of them sees more clearly.

I keep my eyes open for one reason, to see one thing. God's promise was made long ago, however, and I have paid a price for trusting it. So, sometimes I give myself permission to close my eyes and dream. With my eyes closed, all promises are kept and God's ways reign supreme. Then I open them and the world returns like the glare of a harsh desert sun.

Strangely, the vision arrives during one of these blessed daydreams. I am in the temple when a gentle voice calls my name like the voice of God. I am not sure if I am still dreaming when I open my eyes and see the child placed in my arms. For the first time in a long while, I lift up my eyes to the mountains and pray, "Our help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." I realize now that God doesn't make empty promises. Now you can dismiss your servant, for I have seen your salvation. I can finally die with my eyes wide open.

Prayer: Saving Lord, open our eyes to the wonder of your saving presence among us, a light of revelation for all and the glory of your people.