

FROM BETHLEHEM TO CALVARY

by Carol Feickert



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From Bethlehem to Calvary

A Tenebrae presentation for Maundy Thursday

by Carol Feickert

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ZECHARIAH

The old priest as he was at the time of Jesus' birth

ELIZABETH

Zechariah's wife, cousin to Mary of Nazareth

MARY MAGDALENE

Follower of Jesus, a saintly woman

PONTIUS PILATE

Roman Prefect of Judea

JESUS

The Lamb of God

CANDLE LIGHTER

VOICEOVERS

MUSICAL PERFORMERS

for the interludes, as suggested

BOY SOPRANO

for the final hymn

PRODUCTION NOTES

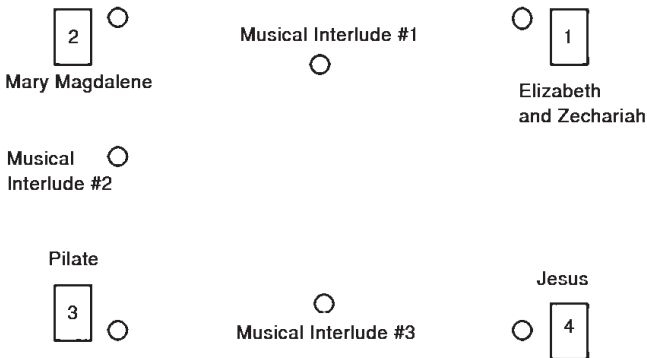
This drama is a variation on theatre-in-the-round. The audience stays stationary while the action moves around the outside of the room, from platform to platform. Round tables of eight are preferable, but not necessary. Serving a Lenten meal before the drama, or perhaps dessert, is suggested. Communion may be served at the completion or anywhere deemed appropriate between vignettes.

Setting

In each corner there is a small platform, on which the actors stand.

To the right of each platform there is a small stand holding a brass candlestick with a single white taper. A brass candle snuffer sits to one side of each candle. The candles must be virgin for the presentation, although used candles should be in place for rehearsals.

In the diagram below, circles stand for the candles, seven candles in all. They are located at each platform as well as in between each pair of platforms (except for between the beginning platform and the Jesus platform #4). Jesus' candle should have a crown of thorns at the base.



Costumes

ELIZABETH and ZECHARIAH should be dressed as Jewish working class with simple robes, headpieces, and sandals. They both have gray hair, and Zechariah has a beard, in keeping with the Jewish tradition at the time. (They are actually dead, as you will hear later, but their story reflects on Jesus' roots and is worthy of consideration. They mark the beginning of the road to Calvary.)

MARY MAGDALENE wears traditional Jewish robes, and her long hair is partially covered by an earth-colored cloth used as a veil. Her face is not made up heavily so that she looks very young and innocent. Note: There is no biblical proof that MARY MAGDALENE was a prostitute, and many scholars choose to believe that insult was added later as early Christians tried to discredit MARY's role in the beginning of the faith.

PILATE wears the traditional Roman clothing of a wealthy patrician. He is clean shaven in the Roman tradition with shorter hair than the Jewish custom.

JESUS wears the dingy light gray robes of a prisoner, and the robes are somewhat torn and smudged with blood and grime.

CANDLE LIGHTER is dressed in black.

Music

The suggested numbers are in the public domain and are available in hymnals or online. There is also room for inserting your choice of music as long as it is in keeping with the reverent tone of the service.

(When it is time for the presentation, the houselights dim. CANDLE LIGHTER goes silently to each of the seven candles and lights them one by one. When the spotlight comes on, ELIZABETH and ZECHARIAH are standing on Platform #1. Their faces reflect the difficulty of the lives they have led.)

Vignette 1
Luke 1:11-25

ZECHARIAH: I am not sure how this all came about. All I remember is serving in the temple as I always did. I am Zechariah of the tribe of Aaron, and I hold the eighth degree of service in the temple in Jerusalem. As I was taking my turn offering incense that day, there appeared a bright, bright light. It resolved itself before me, blinding me with its brilliance. And it spoke.

BASS VOICEOVER: Fear not, Zechariah, for your wife shall bear you a son and you shall call him John *(Luke 1:13)*.

ZECHARIAH: I was scared and I was trembling, and I knew that my wife, now beyond the age of childbearing, was barren. I did not mean to doubt the words of this being when I said, "But I am an old man, and my wife is getting along in years. How will I know that this is so?"

(From the light came the reply:)

BASS VOICEOVER: I am the angel Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. Because you did not believe my words, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the days these things come to pass.

ZECHARIAH: And it was so. I could not utter a word until the birth of my son.

Now my wife Elizabeth had a sister, Anna, who was the mother of Mary of Nazareth. And soon it became apparent that Mary was involved in this as well. Mary came to stay with us and she was also with child, but she was forced to travel to Bethlehem with her

intended. It was there that she gave birth to a boy, Jesus. Elizabeth gave birth to a hearty boy, John, and these two boys often saw each other as they were growing up. But their relationship was unusual. They were more like grown men planning their futures than little boys playing. Always so serious.

We did not know where these boys would be led. But we knew they both had roles to play in something God wanted to do. It was an amazing thing.

ELIZABETH: Yes, it was amazing. After all those years of trying to have a baby and failing, we were going to have a child! We had been tormented by the people for our failure to produce offspring, for in the Jewish faith, a couple with no children was being punished by God. But I was able to give birth to John, just as my cousin Mary gave birth to her Jesus.

But then King Herod went on a rampage, killing all the baby boys he could find. So Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt with Jesus. I fled with John up to the hills and hid in a cave to keep him safe. Herod's soldiers killed my Zechariah in the temple, so angry was the king that he could not find our child.

John stayed safe living in the wilderness until the day he started preaching. I did not live long enough to hear my son preach, however. John called on the people to repent, to be baptized, for the Lord was going to send someone to save all of us.

And then one day, Jesus appeared before John and asked to be baptized. John was horrified. John knew or perhaps sensed something about Jesus that nobody else knew. But he did as Jesus asked. It seemed important somehow.

As it turned out, not one of us — me, Zechariah, or John — lived to see the triumph in the life of Jesus. But we praised the name of the Lord every day of our lives. John was killed by Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas.

But Jesus lived on. After John baptized him, Jesus

began to go about the countryside, preaching and drawing large crowds. It was just a matter of time before his popularity attracted the eye of the high priests of Jerusalem — which brings us where we are today. It is Thursday. Jesus has been taken by the Romans. There is only one way this can end for that gentle, loving man — and it is not good. (*ELIZABETH takes up the candle snuffer and puts out the first candle. The spotlight dims, then reappears on a choral group or a musician standing between the first two platforms.*)

Musical Interlude #1

A quiet Lenten hymn sung by a quartet or small chorus or an instrumental solo (flute or wood flute) of perhaps the “Agnus Dei” from any classical Requiem. At the end of the musical number, one of the performers puts out the second candle on the table in front of the group. No one else moves until the spotlight dims and reappears on Platform #2, MARY MAGDALENE. Then the musicians and ELIZABETH and ZECHARIAH quietly exit.

Vignette 2

(*From the shadows during the previous song, MARY MAGDALENE steps up on the platform. When the preceding musical candle is extinguished, the spotlight illuminates her platform.*)

MARY MAGDALENE: (*Cry of anguish*) What can I do? How can I help him? The Romans took him away as a prisoner ... at least that is what Peter told us as we were cleaning up from the Passover supper. They came into the garden where he was praying — where he was praying! — and took him away.

For many months I have followed him and his disciples as he went about the countryside preaching. We were like a family, traveling together and breaking bread together whenever we could. I guess I should say we

were *almost* like a family. The Twelve had a hard time accepting me into their circle. In Jewish society, women have no stature. I was treated more like a kitchen worker by everyone ... except Jesus.

Ah, Jesus ... I have watched his face go through every emotion possible. I have seen him angry with the injustice he saw around him. I have seen him weep over the infirm and crippled. I have watched him heal with a touch of his fingertips or a smile. And his smile ... his whole face lights up, and you cannot help but smile back at him.

(*Wistfully*) I sound like I am in love with him ... and I guess I would be, if he were a typical Jewish carpenter. But nothing about Jesus is typical. Nothing. Oh, I wish you could talk with him for just one minute. and you would see. He is filled with something beautiful that we do not understand. He is sensitive and loving and humorous. An hour spent with Jesus is better than a week's rest. He soothes me, he makes me feel whole and happy, and I am full of love for him.

(*A hymn may be sung here, or a solo. If the actress portraying MARY MAGDALENE is a soloist, she can choose anything that is definitive of the love of Jesus. At the conclusion of MARY MAGDALENE's song, she stands, head held high, staring silently in the direction of the Jesus platform. Then she picks up the brass candle snuffer and silently extinguishes her candle, the third one.*)

Musical Interlude #2

The spotlight moves to the musicians, perhaps a flute ensemble. They play briefly — perhaps something from the Verdi *Requiem*. At the end of the musical number, one of the performers extinguishes the fourth candle on the table in front of the group. The musicians and MARY MAGDALENE exit as PILATE moves into place.

Vignette 3

John 19:1-16

(The spotlight is on Platform #3, where PILATE stands. He is angry, perplexed, and very frustrated. He paces as he talks, showing great agitation.)

PILATE: What's the matter with that man? He hasn't done anything wrong by Roman law, but his people won't hear of anything but crucifixion for him.

I tried everything I could to find an excuse to release him. He told me that he came into this world to testify to the truth. He said, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Now what was that supposed to mean? So I had him flogged within an inch of his life. I was hoping that would appease the Jews and they would turn away. He hardly needed crucifixion by the time the soldiers finished with him. But the Jews continued to scream for his death.

My soldiers had placed a crown of thorns on his head and the thorns pierced his forehead. "Hail, King of the Jews," the soldiers yelled at him. I tried to tell the angry mob that I found no case against this Jesus of Nazareth, but they wouldn't hear of it. It was as if they were puppets being controlled by something I couldn't see. They were unmovable.

You have to understand how shaky my position is here. My job is not secure, nor is the job of any Roman governor. If we lose our grasp on the people and there is a revolt, we will be blamed by the Emperor, and we are the ones who get the punishment. I am already being punished by the fact that they sent me to Judea, the armpit of the world. I don't dare let this get out of hand.

But I tried one more time. I asked him, "Where are you from?" Silence. No answer. *The man is a fool*, I thought. But I tried again, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, the power to crucify you?"

His answer was a sort of smile — well, more like a mere suggestion of a smile. He said, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore, the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.” He was calm, he was serene, he was without fear.

So I gave him up to be crucified as his people demanded.

Oh, Jesus, Jesus, you could have easily saved yourself all that pain. Why were you not afraid? Your eyes were boring holes into me, but they said nothing. They were calm eyes, not the eyes of a condemned man.

I am so confused. I am full of pain. I know this will pass, for I am not the one who will die on that cross tomorrow. This won’t make any difference to me in a day or so. It will be finished.

Still ... I can’t get those eyes out of my mind. (*Looking at the Jesus platform, as if talking to Jesus*) Why were you not afraid? (*Yelling*) Why were you not afraid? (*As PILATE stands frozen, still looking at the Jesus platform, the CANDLE LIGHTER quietly extinguishes the Pilate candle, the fifth one.*)

Musical Interlude #3

“O Come and Mourn with Me Awhile,” words by Frederick W. Faber, music by John B. Dykes. This musical interlude should be very quiet and mournful. This hymn is suggested, perhaps played on a violin or an oboe. At the hymn’s conclusion, the PERFORMER extinguishes the sixth candle. The spotlight dims, then reappears on Platform #4 where we see JESUS standing quietly. There is a crown of thorns around the base of the candle before him.



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