

VOICES OF CHRISTMAS

by John W. Carter



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INTRODUCTION

One of the joys of Christmas is finding new ways to tell the old story! Through these monologs, various participants in the Christmas event explain what happened from their point of view. Even old Herod gets his chance. It's all the same story, but in each case, it's different!

These monologs were "field tested" at Westfield Friends Church in Westfield, IN. I dressed up in costumes and presented one each Sunday in Advent, and one on Christmas Day (Christmas was on Sunday that year), but they could all be used together in one evening as a Christmas program. Since each is independent of the other, the order in the book is flexible. You can do one, or two, or all of them, in any order you choose. Each one takes about 20 minutes to perform, depending on how rapidly or slowly you speak. A casual, conversational pace is ideal.

I sincerely hope you will enjoy as much blessing and Christmas spirit in reading or performing these monologs, as I did in writing and performing them.

Gloria in excelsis Deo,
John W. Carter

The Innkeeper

(Luke 2:1-7)

You never know. You just never know. One minute you feel like a million bucks, like the whole world is going your way, and the next, like you want to crawl into a hole somewhere and never come out. God has his reasons, I'm sure. Maybe it's his way of teaching us humility, getting us to think about something else besides ourselves all the time. It sure worked on me! One minute I was a successful and influential businessman in Bethlehem, then suddenly, in the time it took to say "No room," I became a goat of eternal and universal proportions, a world-wide symbol of callous neglect and dishonor.

My name is Ezra, and as you've probably gathered by now, I am the "infamous innkeeper of Bethlehem," the one who looked the mother of Jesus square in the eye and told her she'd have to sleep out back. I am the reason the King of Heaven, the Son of God almighty, was born in a dirty, smelly stable, rather than in the finest room in the inn, my own, which I did for a brief moment consider giving up to them, and then just as quickly decided not to. So many times I've played that scene over and over again in my head. If only I had said something different; if only I could have a second chance; if only ... If only I had become a textile merchant rather than an innkeeper! But I guess I really had no choice.

The inn was built by my great-grandfather. He passed it on to my grandfather, who passed it on to my father, who, since I was his oldest son, passed the business on to me. At first, I was only in it for the money, but then I began to see why the inn had become so important over the years. It was more than just a way for me to take advantage of the needs of travelers for my own

1 personal benefit; I was providing a service, a much-
2 needed service to strangers and visitors from all over the
3 world. They came tired and dusty, and left rested and
4 refreshed. Ordinary people going to market, wealthy
5 merchants working on great business deals, common folk
6 going to visit family, important and powerful officials on
7 government business, all came to *me*; all came knocking
8 on *my* door! Ezra, the innkeeper of Bethlehem! I liked
9 that. It made me feel important.

10 The day it happened was just a normal day. Well,
11 actually, it wasn't *normal* normal, but it was about as
12 normal as the past several weeks could get. The Romans
13 had come to town to take the census and collect the tax.
14 Good ol' Caesar wanted to know exactly how many of us
15 he had under his thumb, I guess, and he probably figured,
16 "Why not collect a tax in the process?" Then, in a real
17 stroke of Roman genius, he made everyone travel to the
18 city of their ancestors to do it! People from the East had
19 to go West; people from the North had to go South; it was
20 awful! Everyone hated it! Personally, I didn't particularly
21 mind since my family is from right here in Bethlehem.
22 And the business! I don't have to tell you how good the
23 innkeeping business was during that time! Wall-to-wall
24 people every night! It was fantastic!

25 The only bad part was having to turn away the late-
26 comers. It was hard at first, but I got used to it. "A
27 necessity of a successful business," I told myself. I began
28 to see the travelers as merely customers, and the
29 customers soon became little more than noisy objects. I
30 found it's much easier to say "no" to a noisy object than
31 to a person in need.

32 Anyway, late that evening, there was a knock at the
33 door, another couple looking for lodging. Nothing special
34 about them. I had seen them a thousand times over the
35 past few weeks. The weary faces, the rumpled clothes, the

dusty sandals on calloused feet. They looked like every other couple in Bethlehem, except that she was pregnant. Not just sort of pregnant, I mean *really*, like it could happen any moment, pregnant! I guess it kinda got to me, 'cause I thought about trying to make some room for them even though the inn was already crammed full, maybe even give them *my* room. But then I figured, why bother? You have to draw the line somewhere. I'm sorry they got here too late, but it's their problem, not mine. Besides, it'd be too much of a hassle to move everyone around now, and then, where would I sleep? Let 'em go somewhere else. So I told them, "Sorry, no room."

I wasn't ready for what happened next. No sooner had the words left my lips than a sharp, piercing pain ran to the very center of my soul, as if a dagger had been suddenly plunged into my heart. The look on their faces and the silence that followed twisted it and drove it even deeper until, to my utter amazement, I heard myself offering them the use of the stable! They grabbed my hand, muttered something about God blessing me, and hurried off in that direction.

Me? I just stood there trying to figure out what had just happened. It was all so sudden. One minute I was proprietor of a respectable, if somewhat overcrowded, lodging establishment, and the next, I have customers sleeping in the stable! But the more I thought about it, the more pleased with myself I became. It was, I realized, a more than adequate solution. I didn't have to bother anyone at the inn, especially myself, and since they had received lodging, I could expect to be paid. It was quite a convenient arrangement after all. I thought, or rather hoped, that that would be the end of it, that they would get up in the morning, pay their bill, and leave like all the others whom I would never see again. But it didn't work out that way.

1 A little after midnight, I was awakened by the sound
2 of what I thought were prowlers, so I grabbed my staff
3 and hurried back to the stables. Creeping up quietly, I
4 could see several figures in the moonlight, standing
5 around, looking in the stable window. They seemed
6 harmless enough, so I walked up and asked who they
7 were and what they were doing hanging around my
8 stables at this time of night.

9 Turns out they were shepherds from up in the hills.
10 Apparently they had seen an angel or something who
11 told them to come here and look for a baby in a manger.
12 The guilt I had so easily squelched earlier began to
13 reappear. "So she had her baby," I said, trying to sound
14 casual, "what's so special about that?" The oldest one
15 looked at me with kind of an amazed expression on his
16 face, and then said quietly, "You don't know, do you." I
17 confessed I had no idea what he was talking about. "That
18 child," he said, "that child is the Messiah, the Son of God."
19 It was my turn to look amazed. "You're not serious," I
20 said, "it can't be!" I accused him and his companions of
21 public intoxication, but he assured me it was true and
22 suggested I see for myself.

23 The light in the stable was dim; there was just the
24 one small oil lamp. I asked the couple if they were OK,
25 if there was anything they needed, but they assured me
26 they were fine, and asked if I would like to see the baby.
27 They motioned towards the manger, and as I looked, I
28 saw him lying there, wrapped in an old piece of cloth. It
29 was a baby all right, a very normal, healthy baby, looking
30 very much the way all babies look, all red and wrinkled.
31 I found it hard to believe that this birth was any different
32 from any other birth, or that this very ordinary looking
33 baby could actually be the Son of God as the shepherds
34 claimed.

35 But just as I turned to go, he looked at me. It wasn't

1 just that our eyes met, as babies do sometimes, with a
2 kind of mindless fascination for the adult face. No . . . he
3 *looked* at me! It was a look that said, "thank you" just as
4 clearly as if he'd spoken it. No condemnation of my
5 selfishness, no criticism of his pitiful accommodations,
6 just "thank you." The dagger left my soul, the wound
7 healed over and vanished in an instant. A joy welled up
8 inside me in places I never knew existed, and I fell to my
9 knees in awe and gratitude. Truly this *was* the Son of God.

10 So . . . that's how it happened. The most important
11 guest to ever grace any inn in the world at any time, and
12 I put him in a stable. I don't feel much like a big shot
13 anymore. Oh, I'm still an innkeeper, and guests still
14 knock on my door, but now they're more than just
15 customers. They're people, real, live, feeling people with
16 hurts and hopes just like you and me. And ever since that
17 day, the day I stuck the Lord out back in the stable
18 because it was the easiest, most convenient thing to do,
19 I've always tried to do the right thing, the most caring
20 or helpful thing.

21 I treated him shamefully once; it's not going to
22 happen again. Who knows? Someday when that baby's
23 all grown up, he may come through here again, looking
24 just like the thousands of other people around him, just
25 as common and ordinary as he was then. I may not
26 recognize him, and I doubt that he'll remember me. So I
27 treat *everyone* as if they were someone special, as if *they*
28 might be the Son of God. Sure it takes a lot of work, but
29 then again, every hand I shake, every smile I return,
30 every guest I welcome with open arms may be that second
31 chance I've been waiting for. You never know. You just
32 never know.

A Shepherd

(Luke 2:8-20)

(The SHEPHERD enters, calling:) **Yachiyd!** (yaw-kheed)

Here Yachiyd! Oh, excuse me! I'm looking for Yachiyd. She's a little white ewe about this tall with long black ears and the sweetest little face. You haven't see her, have you? No? Well, I'm not surprised. She can be a real pain at times! I don't know what gets into her, wandering off like that. But I guess there's one in every flock, a stubborn little bundle of wool that thinks she knows more than the shepherd. I suppose I should be grateful that out of thirty sheep, I have only one like her. My cousin Michael has three or four, and do they ever keep him busy!

It's not easy being a shepherd. Oh, don't get me wrong; I'm not complaining! Sheep are valuable animals, and besides, my family has always raised sheep! It's just that most people think all a shepherd has to do is sit around under a tree all day.

Actually, sheep need a lot of care; they sure don't have enough sense to take care of themselves! Sheep will eat anything that pops up under their noses, even if it kills them, so you have to check the field and pull up all the poisonous plants before they get to them. You have to be sure they get enough fresh water or they'll drink out of any old mud puddle they come across and end up sick. You have to check them regularly for bugs or disease. Then there are the wild animals to watch out for: cougars or wolves, even bears sometimes!

But the worst part is when they wander off. Sheep follow their noses; they nibble some grass, take a few steps, and nibble some more until finally, they end up at the bottom of a gully, or tangled up in brambles somewhere, or helplessly cast over on their backs like a turtle. If I don't find them quickly, a passing wolf soon will.

1 As I said, being a shepherd is hard work, but it has
2 its rewards, too! Like watching the new lambs play on
3 the hillside in spring, or looking up at thousands of stars
4 in the summer night sky, or enjoying the majestic beauty
5 of a sunset. Oh, it's glorious to feel like you're a part of
6 all that, like it was all put there just for you.

7 I didn't always feel that way. In fact, I used to hate
8 being a shepherd! It was all so . . . so common. I mean,
9 people from all over the world passed through Bethlehem
10 on their way to Jerusalem. Rich people, powerful people,
11 important people who did important things; merchants
12 in town who provided valuable services to people who
13 were involved in things that really mattered, not stuck
14 on a hill somewhere with a bunch of feather-brained
15 fleeces.

16 Sometimes I would ask God, *why?* Why couldn't I
17 have been born to a cloth merchant or a jeweler, rather
18 than to a family of shepherds? Why was I condemned to
19 a life so insignificant in the over-all scheme of things?
20 Didn't God care? Did he even know that I existed?

21 Now, you may not believe this, but one night, I got
22 an answer. Oh, sure, God just spoke right up and talked
23 to you, right? Well, not exactly . . . it was even *more*
24 incredible! Most of us shepherds had been keeping our
25 sheep away from town for a while. It wasn't enough that
26 Caesar had conquered us; he wanted to know how many
27 of us he had conquered, so he called for a census and a
28 general tax. Bethlehem was full of Roman troops doing
29 their "duty," and stealing and eating everything in sight
30 in the process. We paid the tax quickly and moved our
31 sheep to safer quarters up in the hills.

32 One night, we were all sitting around the fire
33 watching the sheep and grumbling about the Romans or
34 something. I don't really remember because I was busy
35 doing some grumbling of my own. Anyway, all of a sudden,

1 Michael smacks me and hollers, "Hey, look at that," and
2 when I looked up, there was this bright light in the sky!
3 It kept moving closer and closer, getting bigger and
4 brighter until everything was all lit up like broad
5 daylight! I was petrified! Next thing I knew, we were
6 scrambling in every direction, looking for rocks, trees,
7 *anything* to hide behind!

8 I ended up behind a stubby little bush, shaking like
9 a leaf, and as I peered up over the top, I noticed the light
10 had taken shape, almost like a . . . an angel or something.
11 And then it spoke. "Do not be afraid," it said, "for behold,
12 I come bringing good news of great joy for the entire
13 world! Today, in Bethlehem, your saviour has been born,
14 the Messiah, the Lord. And this is how you'll know it's
15 true. You will find the child wrapped in swaddling, and
16 lying in a manger."

17 Then suddenly, it was like the angel burst into a
18 million pieces, and thousands of angels filled the sky,
19 swirling in the heavens, praising God and singing the
20 most beautiful music I've ever heard, "Glory to God in
21 the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill among men."

22 Whether it lasted for hours or seconds, I really don't
23 know. It was like time stood still. But all at once, they
24 were gone. It was dark again; the sky was clear; the fire
25 was crackling, and the sheep were still lying down, calm
26 as ever, as if nothing had happened. One by one we
27 crawled out of our hiding places and gathered around
28 the fire. No one said a word. We just stood there, looking
29 down at the fire, and, occasionally, at each other.

30 Then Michael spoke up. "So let's go," he said, and
31 that was all it took. Everyone started talking at once!
32 The angels! The message! The music! But in the midst of
33 it all, I noticed Michael heading off down the path. So I
34 hollered, "Hey, Michael, where you goin'?" "Town," he
35 hollered back, "I'm goin' to see him." Why not, I thought,

1 and hurried off after him. In no time the others followed.

2 There's an old inn on the edge of town; we thought
3 we'd stop there first to see if they knew anything about
4 all this. As we got closer, we noticed a light in the stable.
5 So, thinking it might be the innkeeper, we looked in. It
6 was just a couple wrapped up in blankets, resting on a
7 pile of straw. But as I turned to go, I suddenly froze.
8 There beside them in the shadows, was a manger, and in
9 the manger, a baby, all wrapped up in swaddling. I could
10 hardly believe my eyes! It was him! It was true! Just like
11 the angel had said: this was the Messiah!

12 It was all so incredible, we didn't hear the innkeeper
13 coming until it was too late. Huffing and puffing and
14 waving his staff around, he demanded to know what we
15 were up to, sneaking around his stable so late at night.
16 We told him our story, but I don't think he believed us.
17 He did, however, allow us to go inside with him to see
18 the baby.

19 It was — well — what can I say? It was a baby! He
20 looked around at us all and smiled one of those baby
21 smiles, and then seemed to look particularly at the
22 innkeeper. We talked with Mary and Joseph for a while —
23 that was their names — and they said the baby's name
24 was "Jesus." When we told them about the angels and
25 everything, I half expected them to laugh at us, but they
26 didn't. They seemed really interested and kept asking
27 questions. I know they believed us!

28 As we left the stable, I began to think. How many
29 years? How many hundreds of years have we been
30 waiting for this and now it's happened?! I mean, ever
31 since the days of the prophets, every boy and girl has
32 been taught that one day the Messiah would come to
33 earth and establish his kingdom, but who would ever
34 have guessed that one day would be *this* day?! Why not
35 in my father's day, or my grandfather's? So many lifetimes

1 have come and gone without seeing him, and now,
2 suddenly, he's here! And not only is he here, he's . . . *here*,
3 in Bethlehem, and I have seen him! Why should I be so
4 blessed?

5 Angels! God sent angels to tell us about it, to tell me
6 about it! It occurred to me that perhaps I was not so
7 insignificant after all, that God did know who I was, that
8 he did care, and that in the over-all scheme of things, I
9 had become, in fact, very significant! I was one of the
10 privileged few, even one of the first, to actually see the
11 King! The others were singing and praising God, and I
12 couldn't help but join in.

13 Ever since, I have been quite happy being a
14 shepherd. Oh, it's not any more glamorous but it is
15 important. My sheep provide people with food and
16 clothing. Actually, I think I would be content no matter
17 what I was doing, even if I was a slave! God knows who
18 I am! He knows me just like he knows all of us, and what's
19 even better, he cares about what happens to us and wants
20 only good things for us! That's why he sent the Messiah,
21 to provide good things for us. We just have to wait a few
22 years for him to grow up, and then, when Jesus sets up
23 his kingdom, he'll provide us with everything we need!
24 He'll call his people in from all over the world and rule
25 with justice, healing the sick and destroying the wicked.
26 He'll take care of us, like a shepherd. Yea . . . kinda like
27 a — a shepherd from heaven, you know? To take care of
28 all of us lost and sick and abused sheep. Oh, and he'll be
29 a good shepherd, too. I know it! I just hope I can be a
30 good . . . Yachiyd! Yachiyd, you rascal, I see you! You
31 come back here! Uhm, excuse me, I have to go catch a
32 sheep! (*He hurries off.*)

Herod

(Matthew 2:13-18)

(HEROD enters, glares at the congregation, then begins.)

Very well. You may sit in the presence of Herod the Great. I should have you all executed for such dishonor. Ordinarily I would, but then who would there be to hear my side of the story? Oh, I know you think you know all about me, what an entirely evil and warped individual I must be. But now, see for yourselves! Am I not just as normal and rational as any one of you?

I did much for the good of my people. I built theaters and provided games for their amusement. At least twice I greatly reduced their taxes. During the great famine, I provided for their needs out of my own personal resources. I took a place by the sea known as Strato's Tower, and made it into a most magnificent port, with palaces and causeways, and a great amphitheater. I renamed it "Caesarea" in honor of the emperor. I also built a temple to Caesar, and one to Apollos, too, I think. And in Jerusalem, I even rebuilt and beautified the temple for the Jews. So you see, I am not the absolute ogre that history has portrayed.

I do not deny that some of my actions may have seemed a bit harsh on occasion, but you must understand, difficult times call for drastic measures. I had seen how the political winds can change, how turmoil can arise and destroy kings and countries, emperors and empires. And if one child is born to turn the world upside-down, then the deaths of a thousand infants is not too great a price to pay to stop him and return to the world a promise of peace.

Peace. If only you knew how deeply I hunger for peace. All my life I've spent looking over my shoulder, watching for the dagger in the dark, the poison in the

1 wine, the whispering behind my back, never knowing
2 who would come at me next, always wondering which
3 benign smile would pose the next threat to my throne.

4 I was born to be what I am, to be king of the Jews.
5 My father was Antipater. Caesar himself appointed him
6 administrator over Judea. It was an uneasy
7 administration. Antigonos, the last of the Jewish kings,
8 still considered himself ruler of Israel, and continued to
9 challenge Rome's presence there. Phasaelus, my older
10 brother, was made governor of the area around
11 Jerusalem, while I was given Galilee. Four years later,
12 my father was assassinated. I made up my mind then and
13 there that I would not suffer a similar fate; I would
14 protect my position at any cost. Six years after Father's
15 death, Rome helped me put down an uprising in which
16 both Phasaelus and another brother, Joseph, lost their
17 lives. I was made king of all Judea.

18 The younger brother and sister I had left soon
19 became no small annoyance. Salome was always loyal to
20 me, but was a constant irritation to the rest of the family.
21 My brother, Pheroras, I caught plotting my death, but he
22 died before I could have him executed.

23 That, I have found, is the most efficient way to deal
24 with threats. Swift and decisive action. Destroy the
25 opponent; show no mercy. The first thing I did as king
26 of Judea was to execute Antigonos and forty-five of his
27 followers. That pretty much solved my Jewish problem.

28 Later, my three oldest sons were executed; the two
29 born to Mariamne, the second of my ten wives, on charges
30 of conspiracy, and then my oldest, for framing them while
31 he himself was actually the one doing all the conspiring!
32 I had Mariamne's brother killed as a potential rival. Then
33 I had reason to suspect her eighty-year-old grandfather
34 of planning my early death. Needless to say, his preceded
35 mine.

1 These were but simple acts of self-defense I assure
2 you, and yet, they did tend to drive Mariamne and me
3 apart. Eventually, even she became a threat that had to
4 be eliminated. I wish I could say these were the only ones,
5 but unfortunately they were not. The price of peace can
6 be high at times.

7 One day, as if these political and family problems
8 weren't enough, three holy men from Persia appeared at
9 the palace asking where they could find the king of the
10 Jews. Impudent fools! Were they blind, or did I not look
11 like a king? When I informed them that I was the one
12 they were seeking, they conferred among themselves and
13 then replied, "We seek one who was only recently born
14 to be king of the Jews!" I was furious! How dare they
15 march into my presence and ask me, the king of Judea,
16 about my own supposed rival?! They were either
17 incredibly brave or incredibly stupid! They should have
18 lost their heads on the spot, but the wise know when to
19 strike and when to wait. I listened to their story. They
20 claimed to have been watching the heavens when an
21 unusual star appeared, indicating the birth of one who
22 was to become great in this region. They had, therefore,
23 traveled these many miles to honor him.

24 What do I care about stars? I did, however, care
25 about my throne. So preferring to be safe rather than
26 sorry, I sent them out and summoned our own local holy
27 men, the chief priests and the scribes of the Jews, to ask
28 what they knew of all this. To my surprise, they knew
29 quite a bit. They quoted some ancient prophecy about a
30 ruler being born in Bethlehem who would one day govern
31 Israel. Bethlehem! A sad little dump not five miles away
32 has a supposed king born in it and I hear nothing about
33 it! Nevertheless, I remained calm. Pretending to be
34 merely curious and thanking them for their trouble, I
35 dismissed the chief priests and secretly recalled my three

1 **Persian visitors.**

2 **We talked for a while; I asked them about their skills**
3 **and their stargazing. I listened to their speculations**
4 **about this new king with interest. Judging from when**
5 **they had first seen the star, and how long they had been**
6 **traveling, they figured the child was little more than a**
7 **year old. Hearing this, I told them what I had learned**
8 **from the chief priests, that according to scripture, one**
9 **such “king” was to originate in nearby Bethlehem.**

10 **You should have seen their faces! They got all**
11 **excited and nearly fell all over each other excusing**
12 **themselves to leave right away. Taking advantage of the**
13 **situation, and in a manner so as not to arouse suspicion,**
14 **I encouraged them to go and search diligently for the**
15 **child, asking that they send word when they found him**
16 **so that I might join them in honoring him. I smiled at my**
17 **own cleverness as they left.**

18 **But days passed, then weeks, as I waited to hear.**
19 **Finally, when a month had gone by and still no word, I**
20 **sent spies to Bethlehem, only to discover that the**
21 **Persians had left long ago. I had been betrayed. I swore**
22 **that would not be the end of it. All of Bethlehem would**
23 **pay dearly for this deception! I would deal with them as**
24 **I had dealt with every other traitorous dog who plotted**
25 **against my throne! No one challenges Herod the Great**
26 **and lives; not the Jewish aristocracy in Jerusalem, not**
27 **the members of my own royal family, and certainly not**
28 **a pip-squeak two-year-old in a two-bit town like**
29 **Bethlehem!**

30 **I summoned the captain of the guard and ordered**
31 **him to prepare his troops. They were to march into**
32 **Bethlehem and kill every male child two years old or**
33 **younger, and if he overlooked even one such child, I**
34 **would have his head! They did their job well, I can assure**
35 **you.**

1 It was all quite unfortunate, but as I'm sure you
2 understand now, all quite necessary. There cannot be
3 two kings; people cannot remain faithful to more than
4 one authority. Oh, they may try for a while, limping along,
5 serving both very badly at best, but finally, they will end
6 up honoring one and betraying the other. I learned well
7 from my father's mistakes; I will not be betrayed.

8 So the Jews were upset. I know these people; they'll
9 get over it. All they really care about is a full belly and
10 permission to carry on their superstitious rituals.
11 Besides, the "king" described in their scriptures would
12 threaten all that, challenge their cozy little lifestyles. I
13 simply saved them the embarrassment of discovering
14 that the king they had waited so long for was not at all
15 what they really wanted! So you see, it was really for
16 their own good as well as mine!

17 Still, suppose the child did somehow manage to
18 escape! Suppose he hid beneath a floor, or left with the
19 Persians! Suppose he returns one day to gather a
20 following! Granted, I'm an old man, and sick, and by the
21 time he's old enough to do anything I'll be long gone,
22 but . . . God help my successor! Religious wars can be so
23 bloody. I guess there's no reason to worry, though. My
24 captain assures me it has all been taken care of. Peace
25 has been preserved.

26 It's a very precious thing, peace. Some of you I'm sure,
27 like me, recognize that, and, like me, are willing to protect
28 it at any cost. You are the smart ones. Yes, and you are
29 the ones who will succeed in life, who will rise over the
30 heads of your opponents and crush them like ants on the
31 pavement. That's what it takes to survive in these
32 uncertain times: take everything you can get and protect
33 it from those who are jealous, strike first and watch your
34 back, and don't trust anyone. It really is the only sure
35 way. Look at me. If I had done otherwise, I would be a

corpse by now, rotting in the grave. Instead, this latest threat to my throne has been removed, and I stand here today, still very much alive, an example to you all of what the exercise of power can accomplish. Behold, my friends! Behold Herod the Great!

The Magi

(Matthew 2:1-12)

I must apologize for the absence of my two colleagues, but Caspar and Balthazar were called away on business at the last minute, so I alone am here to tell you our story. My name is Melchior, and I come from far off Persia, from the great city of Persepolis, where I am one of the local “magi,” part priest, part astronomer, part magician, part physician, part . . . everything! Our rulers call upon us for divine counsel, and the people inquire of us as to the ways and the will of the Most High. “Come, Melchior, and ask the Almighty to make us successful in battle. Tell us, Melchior, is it a good day to plant? Melchior, my son is ill; what should I do?” Day after day; it never stops.

I became a magos when I was twelve. It’s not something you choose; it’s something you’re born to. You are raised, trained, and educated from birth to be magi, just like your father and your grandfather and your great-grandfather before you. All the local magi were present at the ceremony; they chanted and danced, anointed us with oil, and offered sacrifices. We were told that being a magos was essential to the order of life. We were the connecting link between the earthly and the divine, between man and the Most High. I was awed and excited. The fact that I had never really met the Most High didn’t bother me, because now that I was officially one of the magi, he would reveal himself to me.

But months went by, and nothing happened, and when I asked Caspar about it, he said it was the same with him. We decided to take our questions to Balthazar, a wise and highly respected teacher among the magi. His answer surprised us. He had been a magos for thirty years, and yet, he confessed, he too had never really

1 encountered the Most High. We decided to begin
2 experiments and studies to discover just where the Most
3 High could be found.

4 Over the next several years we studied the elements,
5 but the Most High was not in fire, or earth, or air, or
6 water, although many claimed he was. We studied nature,
7 but we could not find him in trees or rocks, although
8 many around us did worship these. Our last study was
9 that of the heavens, the movements of the sun and the
10 moon and the stars, but after years of study, we were
11 ready to conclude that while there was indeed a kind of
12 celestial order, still, the Most High was not there, and it
13 was pointless to worship any of the greater or lesser
14 lights.

15 Then one evening, as we were finishing our study
16 of the stars, we noticed something unusual. Actually,
17 Caspar saw it first and called our attention to it. There
18 in the eastern sky, was what appeared to be a bright new
19 star, with a light so brilliant that it eclipsed all the others!
20 We watched through the night, fascinated, as it moved
21 overhead and came to rest on the western horizon! Night
22 after night we returned to the rooftop to observe the star
23 and consider our theories, since no one else in all
24 Persepolis had any idea what it meant.

25 I believe it was Balthazar who finally came up with
26 the answer. He said he remembered once hearing a
27 visiting astronomer explain how stars were the angels
28 or spiritual counterparts of all great men on earth,
29 the divine servants in worldly affairs. We stared,
30 trying to imagine the magnitude of a man whose star
31 outshone all others! Greater than Solomon, greater than
32 Nebuchadnezzar, greater even than Cyrus or Alexander
33 the Great! Why, a man such as this might rule the entire
34 world! We decided to go and see this magnificent one for
35 ourselves!

1 You have no idea how difficult it is to prepare for a
2 trip when you don't know where you are going! Our
3 friends told us we were crazy, and at times I was inclined
4 to agree. Nevertheless, we loaded our camels, donkeys,
5 and servants as best we could, bid our families goodbye,
6 and headed West.

7 Our first stop was up through the mountains to Susa,
8 an outpost city on the eastern edge of the Roman empire.
9 Yes, they had seen the star. No, they had no idea what it
10 meant. One of their local priests, however, did suggest
11 that perhaps the next Caesar had been born in Rome!

12 Leaving the mountains, we crossed the Tigris and
13 the fertile river valley into Babylon. There our luck was
14 a little better. Quite by accident we discovered an old
15 Jewish rabbi who knew of a prophecy in their sacred
16 writings. Something about a star coming forth out of
17 someone named Jacob, and a scepter rising out of Israel.
18 He too had seen the star, and believed it signaled the
19 coming of a king who would rule Israel and establish
20 some kind of world-wide kingdom!

21 Much encouraged, we pressed on, crossing the
22 Euphrates into the great Arabian desert. So it was true!
23 The star marked the arrival of a great and magnificent
24 king who would rise to rule the world! And from *Israel*
25 no less! The desert was difficult, but we finally crossed
26 the Jordan and made our way into Jerusalem.

27 We were excited about our audience with the local
28 ruler. Surely a king like Herod would know of the arrival
29 of one so great. No doubt he had already been to see him
30 and presented his majesty with many magnificent gifts!
31 But when we asked him where we might find this "King
32 of the Jews," he became angry. His words were polite but
33 his eyes looked daggers as he informed us that *he* was
34 the king of the Jews. It had not occurred to us that he
35 might be threatened by the arrival of the Great One. We

1 explained about the star, apologized for the intrusion,
2 and left quickly.

3 Naturally we were surprised to be summoned back
4 later that evening. Herod wanted to know about our trip,
5 where we had come from, and our work in Persepolis.
6 He seemed particularly interested in the star, and how
7 long we had been traveling. Finally he informed us that,
8 according to local religious authorities, the one we
9 sought was to be born in Bethlehem, a little town not five
10 miles away. You can imagine our excitement as we
11 hurried to excuse ourselves! Herod encouraged us by all
12 means to go and search diligently for the child, and all
13 he asked was that we send word when we had found him
14 so that he too could come and honor him.

15 As we left the palace and hurried toward Bethlehem,
16 the star seemed to dance before us in the night sky,
17 guiding us toward our journey's end. But when it finally
18 came to rest, it was not over a royal dwelling as we had
19 expected. We waited for the star to move on, but there it
20 remained, its light streaming to earth in unparalleled
21 brilliance over a modest little house of brick and mud.

22 Our approach must have awakened the master of
23 the house, who met our noisy procession at the door.
24 With great anticipation we introduced ourselves,
25 apologized for the lateness of the hour, and explained
26 our situation, how we had followed the star overhead for
27 months, searching for the mighty king who had just been
28 born, and how finally, it had led us to this house. The
29 man said he knew nothing about a mighty king, but that
30 the star had been there ever since a cousin and his family
31 moved in. They had been in town for a census, had a
32 baby, and had no place to stay. He invited us in to see
33 for ourselves.

34 Entering the house, we were introduced to Mary
35 and Joseph, and their son, Jesus, who was just over a year

1 old. We looked at each other in silence for a moment, not
2 knowing what to expect. Then my eyes fixed on the child:
3 dark, curly hair, eyes as big as all outdoors, and I
4 wondered, "Can this really be the king? He looks so
5 normal, just like any other child. What could make him
6 so special?"

7 Then something wonderful happened. He smiled at
8 me, and . . . I don't know . . . something about that smile
9 lit my heart with a thousand lights, each more brilliant
10 than the star that shone overhead! And suddenly, I knew;
11 this was the one we had been seeking. One by one, we
12 fell to our knees in worship and adoration, offering gifts
13 we had brought from home. Caspar, a great quantity of
14 gold coins and jewelry. Balthazar, a large alabaster jar
15 of myrrh. Arabian, I think. And I, a large ornate box of
16 pure, white frankincense, supposed to attract the divine.

17 We spent the remainder of the night camped in a
18 field outside of town. We were tired, but who could sleep?
19 It was all so incredible: the star, the child! We could
20 hardly wait for morning to return to Jerusalem with the
21 news. Herod would be delighted! As it turned out,
22 however, we didn't go back to Jerusalem. Once I finally
23 fell asleep, I had a strange dream. An angel with a flaming
24 sword stood before the gates of Jerusalem, warning me
25 not to return to Herod. Discovering the next morning
26 that we'd all had similar dreams, we decided to go home
27 by a different route, although we never did understand
28 why.

29 We've been back for quite some time now. Persepolis
30 is much the same, but of course, I am not. Oh, I'm still
31 one of the magi, busy as ever. A magos' work never ends,
32 you know. But, ever since that night in Bethlehem, my
33 life has been wonderfully different! You see, I had finally
34 found what I had been looking for! Oh, yes, I had found
35 the great king whose star we had followed across



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