

THE GREATEST JOY

by Sylvia Washer



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CAST OF CHARACTERS

NARRATOR

Sets the scene at the beginning of the play

MARY

Jesus' mother, now an older woman

LUKE

The Gospel writer, come to gather background on the events surrounding Jesus' birth

MORDACIAH and RUTH

Bethlehem innkeeper and wife

SIMON

A shepherd from Bethlehem, now an old man

NATHANIEL

Simon's grandson, about 8 to 12 years old

PRODUCTION NOTES

This drama is designed to be used in a Christmas Eve worship service which includes communion and candlelight. Therefore, its setting will most likely be in the sanctuary of a church.

The stage is the chancel area. A large white "Christ Candle" should be placed on the communion table or in some other prominent area. It will be lit at the beginning of the service and will remain burning. Players will light their candles from it during the candlelighting portion of the service.

Attention will need to be given to lighting the characters, since most of the lights will be out. Lighting should be as soft as possible and not glare in the faces of the characters. As many churches do not have elaborate lighting systems, this may be as simple as only turning on the light in the chancel area while leaving the rest of the sanctuary unlit.

The scene is the home of Mary in Jerusalem. The players will be seated around a low table covered with a cloth. The table will be set with six candles (unlit until the end of the play), the remains of a meal (cheese, bread, grapes) and several chalices. Players may sit on stools, chairs, or benches which have been draped with fabric.

Mary may want a ball of yarn or strips of cloth to work with as she talks. Luke will need a stylus, or some sort of pen, and a scroll. The scroll easily hides a copy of the script, which can be available for prompting anyone who needs help.

It is important to plan well for the serving of communion so that the service flows smoothly. If communion will not be served in the pews, have as many stations for communion as possible. Members of the cast may assist in serving, if that is appropriate.

It is also important to move smoothly into communion and then the candlelighting. Small candles with shields may be handed to worshipers as they arrive or baskets of candles can be available at each station for communion.

Print the name of the characters in the worship folder, listing the names of the players. If needed, explain the nature and order of the service and how communion will be served.

SET REQUIREMENTS

Low table, seating for six (chairs, stools, or benches), cloth for draping table and chairs.

PROP LIST

“Christ Candle” for communion table, several chalices, bread, cheese, grapes in baskets or bowls, scroll, stylus or pen, ball of yarn or fabric, six candles (tapers) with holders, small candles with shields (as many as needed for the congregation.)

COSTUMES

Biblical robes and sandals for all characters.

1 *(The Christ Candle is lit at the beginning of the service. MARY,*
 2 *LUKE, MORDACIAH, RUTH, SIMON, and NATHANIEL are*
 3 *in place around the low table. NARRATOR stands at a podium*
 4 *with microphone off to one side. Characters freeze as*
 5 *NARRATOR speaks.)*

6 **NARRATOR:** The stories of the life and work of Jesus were
 7 not written down for many years. But by late in the first
 8 century, eyewitnesses to the events were becoming old.
 9 It was clear that a written record was needed so the
 10 stories would be remembered accurately.

11 In our Bible, we have four different records of Jesus'
 12 life and ministry. They are called the Gospels — Matthew,
 13 Mark, Luke and John. Though they tell the same story,
 14 each one is somewhat different. For instance, what we
 15 know as the “Christmas Story” is told partly in Matthew
 16 and partly in Luke.

17 Luke’s is the only gospel that includes the events in
 18 the little town of Bethlehem on the night of Jesus’ birth.
 19 There has been much speculation about how Luke heard
 20 this story. He was a Greek and a physician who met Paul
 21 in Troas and became a believer. From that time on, he
 22 accompanied Paul on his journeys to spread the Good
 23 News of God’s love in Jesus Christ. During the years of
 24 those journeys, Luke began to write his story of the life
 25 of Jesus and another book (Acts) about the beginning of
 26 the church. But the question remains: Where did Luke
 27 hear the stories of a crowded inn, a manger, angels and
 28 shepherds?

29 Before Paul was sent to Rome to be tried, he was in
 30 prison for several years in Palestine in the port city of
 31 Caesarea. Luke was not imprisoned with him, but stayed
 32 nearby to assist Paul. Some scholars speculate that it
 33 was during those long months that Luke began to work
 34 on his story of Jesus’ life. From Caesarea, he could have
 35 easily visited most of the important locations of the gospel

1 stories and met many who knew Jesus and saw him teach
 2 and heal. Surely one of those he would have wanted to
 3 meet was Jesus' mother, Mary. And one of the stories he
 4 would have wanted to hear was of Jesus' birth.

5 Tonight, we imagine ourselves gathered around a
 6 table in the home where Mary lived in Jerusalem as Luke
 7 hears the story of Jesus' birth for the very first time.

8 **LUKE:** Thank you so much, Mary, for that wonderful meal.
 9 The food has sustained my body, but just to be here with
 10 all of you is food for my soul. I have asked so many others
 11 about our Lord's birth, but none of the disciples seem to
 12 know any details. I want to be able to tell this story to
 13 begin my record of the Master's life.

14 **MARY:** *(Leaning forward, touching LUKE's hand)* But it is we
 15 who thank you, Luke, for what you are doing. Soon many
 16 of us will be gone, and who will tell the story then?

17 **RUTH:** Yes, while we wait for our Lord to return, we must be
 18 sure that the truth of his message and ministry will be
 19 told.

20 **MARY:** And we are honored to meet you, Luke, and to have
 21 news of Paul from prison. We in the church of Jerusalem
 22 pray for your work and for your safety as you spread the
 23 Good News. We will help you in any way we can. *(All*
 24 *agree.)* Of course, we each have our own special memories
 25 of that night in Bethlehem. It was long ago now, but the
 26 memories are clear! Where would you like to begin?

27 **LUKE:** I want to begin with you, Mary. I have heard that you
 28 and Joseph lived in Nazareth and that Joseph had to
 29 come to Bethlehem for the census. But why did you make
 30 the trip with him when it was so close to the time for
 31 your child to be born? *(LUKE occasionally takes notes on his*
 32 *scroll as he listens to the characters' stories.)*

33 **MARY:** Well, that was because of my dear Joseph. He was
 34 building the furniture for a fine house when the decree
 35 came that all must return to the place of their birth to be

counted for the new tax roll. He couldn't leave the work. We were sure he could be finished in time for us to make the trip and be settled with my uncle's family in Bethlehem in plenty of time for the baby to come. But the man who owned the great house kept making changes and adding to the orders. He would not pay Joseph until all the work was done, so we had no choice.

LUKE: But surely you could have stayed with your family in Nazareth when the time was so short.

MARY: Yes, I could have done that, except Joseph would not hear of it. You see, Luke, you cannot know what it had been like for us in Nazareth. You know, of course, that the child I carried was not Joseph's. Only a few knew that for sure . . . Who would have believed my story? *(She gives a small laugh and a sigh.)*

But all of Nazareth knew that Joseph was an honorable man . . . and they wondered. They talked behind our backs, they asked veiled questions. Joseph tried always to shield me, and I him. But we knew. I suppose we were one of the few in our land who rejoiced at having to make a trip for the census. It seemed to be a gift from God that we would not be in Nazareth when the Holy Child was born!

So, even with the delay, I was happy to go. And Joseph would never have left me, for then the gossips would have been sure the child was not his!

It took us about a week to make the trip. Joseph insisted on stopping often so that I could rest. In many ways, it was a wonderful adventure for us . . . the freedom of being away from the watchful eyes of Nazareth, money from Joseph's work to live on in Bethlehem, and the child so near. Of course, we were worried and fearful about the birth . . . about what sort of child this would be that Jehovah had entrusted into our care.

LUKE: And when you finally reached Bethlehem, did you

1 stay with your uncle's family as you had planned?

2 MARY: The joy we had when we at last reached the door of
3 my uncle's house soon turned to fear, for there was
4 sickness, much sickness in the house. Uncle Abraham
5 opened to our knock and begged us to go away for our
6 own safety. We knew he was right, but that left us
7 knocking on doors at all the inns of the town . . . inns that
8 were full to overflowing with those who came for the
9 census.

10 That was the night I first met Mordaciah and
11 Ruth . . . *(She nods to the man across the table)* and learned
12 of their kindness. What instruments of Jehovah they
13 were for us!

14 MORDACIAH: *(Responding to MARY)* Ah . . . who could have
15 known what would come of that knocking on the door of
16 the inn. How often I have heard it in my dreams . . . that
17 knocking. What if I had turned you away, as I was bidden
18 to do? What if I had not been the one to hear the knocking?

19 LUKE: *(Pen poised over scroll, looking at MORDACIAH)* So
20 what happened? How did you find a room for them when
21 the inn was already full?

22 MORDACIAH: That's what my father-in-law said. *(Laughs to*
23 *wife.)* "What does it matter if she is having a baby right now?
24 Can we throw out people who are sleeping in rooms they
25 have already paid for? What kind of innkeeper do you
26 think I am? Mordaciah, your head is as soft as your heart.
27 You have already given your own bed to an old man.
28 There is *no room . . . send them away and trouble me no*
29 *more!*"

30 But when I got back to the door to tell them, I looked
31 at their faces and I couldn't do it. How could I say those
32 words? And in that moment, I thought of the stable.
33 Normally, I would've never even considered such a thing.
34 But they were young, as I was. Their baby was coming,
35 as ours would soon. I could let them decide.

1 **MARY:** (*Laughing to MORDACIAH*) I can remember the look
2 on your face . . . the fear that we would be insulted by
3 your offer. How could you know that every other inn had
4 turned us away, and I had begun to think that the Son
5 of God was going to be born on the dirt road in the
6 darkness?

7 **LUKE:** Are you telling me that Jesus was born in a *stable*?

8 **MARY:** (*Pats LUKE's arm.*) Yes, Luke, that's what I'm telling
9 you. But it turned out to be a wonderful place, (*Smiling*)
10 and Mordaciah and Ruth were so kind to us.

11 **MORDACIAH:** Joseph and I spread the clean straw and
12 prepared a place for Mary in one of the stalls. It was
13 warm near the animals. And it was my Ruth who thought
14 of using the manger — isn't that right, Ruth?

15 **RUTH:** Well, I knew there must be a warm, safe place
16 somewhere to put that little one, and then the manger
17 caught my eye. The cattle would not be fed during the
18 night, so it was safe, and with fresh straw and blankets,
19 it made a very nice bed.

20 When the baby came, I knew how to help. And then
21 Mary and I wrapped him in the bands of swaddling cloth
22 she'd packed in her bag and laid him in the manger. Never
23 will I forget what I felt as I looked at that child!

24 **LUKE:** (*Nods with understanding.*) Ah yes — the miracle of new
25 life.

26 **RUTH:** Well, you see, I already had two babes of my own and
27 I knew the feeling of joy when they are born well and
28 whole — but this was something very different. Knowing
29 now who the child was, it is hard to remember that I
30 didn't know I was looking at the Son of God. But even
31 though I didn't have the words in my mind, somehow I
32 think my heart knew.

33 **MORDACIAH:** Yes, it is true what Ruth says. Dr. Luke, you
34 must find the words to tell the story of what happened
35 that night, for it was one of greatest joy . . . the greatest

1 joy I have ever known!

2 LUKE: I will try, my friend, I will try! The joy is in my heart
3 now as I hear this wonderful story for the first time. *(He*
4 *bends to write a few more words on his scroll.)*

5 MARY: Our friends left us then so we could be alone and rest.
6 I slept and when I woke, Joseph was standing by the
7 manger watching Jesus sleep. I stood beside him and
8 looked at the child. Joseph put his arm around me and
9 laughed softly. "I was just thinking," he said. "Here we
10 are in Bethlehem because of one ruler — Caesar in
11 Rome — and out the stable door, we can see the lights of
12 King Herod's palace in Jerusalem shining in the distance.
13 Herod and Caesar sleep in their palaces, and here is the
14 Son of God asleep in a feeding trough where tomorrow
15 the cattle will eat. The Messiah has been born . . . the
16 deliverer for whom our people have waited for so long.
17 And who knows about it? One carpenter, the baby's
18 mother, an innkeeper's helper and his wife. The rest of
19 the world sleeps as though nothing has happened."

20 But as we stood there, we began to hear voices
21 outside. Joseph grabbed his staff and hurried to the door,
22 fearing robbers. But there were no robbers — only a
23 group of shepherds. Your grandfather was one of them,
24 Nathaniel. *(MARY pats NATHANIEL on the head.)*

25 LUKE: *(Turning to SIMON)* So you were there, Simon? You
26 were there in the stable, too?

27 SIMON: Yes, I was there. I know that joy and excitement of
28 which Ruth spoke, for I felt it too.

29 LUKE: But how did you know? Who told you, and how did
30 you find the place?

31 SIMON: My friends and I were on the hills outside
32 Bethlehem guarding our flocks. The sheep were herded
33 together for the night, and we were sitting around our
34 fire, keeping warm and telling our stories. A night like
35 all our nights, or so we thought.

1 The animals sensed it first. The sheep became
2 restless, started baaing and shuffling, and the dogs began
3 to pace and bark. We reached for our staffs and got up
4 to investigate. We saw nothing, no sign of wolves or other
5 wild beasts. "What could it be?" we wondered.

6 NATHANIEL: It was the angel of the Lord, wasn't it, Grand-
7 father?

8 SIMON: (*Smiling and patting the boy*) You see, Luke, there are
9 many who know the story already! It is as Nathaniel has
10 said. Suddenly the air seemed to be charged with power.
11 And then, from out of the darkness, there was an amazing
12 light, and in its midst stood an angel. We all fell to the
13 ground, terrified. But the angel told us not to be afraid,
14 but to hear the Good News of the great joy that had come
15 to pass. The Savior had been born, and in our own small
16 town of Bethlehem. The angel told us where to find the
17 baby . . .

18 NATHANIEL: (*Excitedly, standing and throwing out his arms*)
19 And then, the sky just broke apart and there were
20 thousands and thousands of angels praising God and
21 singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth
22 for everyone!"

23 LUKE: (*Sits quietly in amazement.*) So it was an *angel* who told
24 you, Simon? You and your friends? What did you think?
25 How did you know what to do?

26 SIMON: Well, at first we couldn't think. And then we thought
27 we were crazy, or maybe dreaming. But how could we
28 all have had the same dream? Mostly, though, in spite of
29 what the angel told us, we were afraid!

30 After we calmed down, we started thinking. Just
31 suppose we weren't crazy . . . suppose it was true. We had
32 to know! So we left our sheep and went into Bethlehem.
33 We walked up and down the streets looking in stables,
34 afraid we would be taken for robbers. Then we saw one
35 stable where a lamp was lit. We started to run. Joseph met

1 us at the door, and sure enough, we could see he was
2 afraid of us. We all started to tell him who we were and
3 asked if there might be a newborn babe inside. With a
4 look of amazement, he stepped aside and let us in. And
5 there in the manger, just as the angel had told us, was
6 Jesus. That's when we felt the flood of joy!

7 Can you tell the story so that other people can feel
8 as we did, Dr. Luke? Will anyone ever believe it unless
9 one of us is there to swear it is true?

10 LUKE: You know, Simon, I've been wondering about that,
11 but somehow, perhaps by the power of the Holy Spirit,
12 maybe they will. At first, I thought that it must be one of
13 you who knew and lived with the Master who must write
14 down these stories. But then Paul reminded me that both
15 he and I had believed without seeing Jesus for ourselves.
16 It was Paul who convinced me that others might come
17 to know our Lord through these stories.

18 MARY: They will know his story, but will they follow him?
19 Will they know him, or will they be confused, as we so
20 often were?

21 MORDACIAH: It will take more than just the story. They
22 must know his presence in the breaking of the bread
23 *(Picks up a loaf)* even as we came to know him most fully.

24 LUKE: Of course. You are right, Mordaciah. *(Excitedly)* That
25 is how he has become a living presence in my life. The
26 stories I will write all point the way, but it is by believing
27 through faith and receiving the body of Christ when we
28 break bread with other believers that he lives in us.

29 NATHANIEL: That's right, Dr. Luke. When I was a very little
30 boy, I would walk to the inn where the stable was and
31 try to feel what my grandfather felt that night. I had
32 heard the story all my life, and I wanted to feel that great
33 joy, but it never came. Then one Sabbath day, the church
34 service was held at our house. We gathered around the
35 table and broke the bread and shared the cup. As I took



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