

THREE WOMEN OF BETHLEHEM

by Martha Sliter Sheeran



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BETHLEHEM**

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THE GATEKEEPER'S WIFE

NARRATOR: In prophecy, the little town of Bethlehem was foretold as a wondrous city where the Saviour would be born. And then — after centuries of waiting — there came a holy night on which the prophecy was gloriously fulfilled.

Many have written of this night, and generations upon generations have continued to revere the City of David. Those who write tell the story of angels who sang, and shepherds who watched, and kings who came to adore.

But there is still another story — written on a parchment scroll by the Scribe of Bethlehem himself. It is the story told to him by women who watched but failed to see.

There were three of them who came to the Scribe — the gatekeeper's wife, the wife of the innkeeper, and she whose husband was a shepherd. They came singly, at different seasons of that blessed year, but each had a tale of the Holy Night and a message to be recorded for as long as time shall endure . . .

Winter still lingered in the distant hills when the first woman approached the Scribe with her strange recital of the Holy Night.

GATEKEEPER'S WIFE: Scribe of Bethlehem, I am the gatekeeper's wife. Perhaps it was I who first saw the holy light on that certain winter's night which none who lived then in Bethlehem shall ever forget. Write what I saw for others to read!

I shall speak first of what took place before. For several days the crowds had pushed past my gatehouse window as each man of Syria sought to fulfill the decree of Caesar Augustus that he and his family should enroll for the census in his own city. Those of the House of

David ended their journey in Bethlehem. And I watched them crowd into our little city, filling the houses to overflowing. Others pushed through the narrow streets, coming to rest in towns beyond the city of Bethlehem. Still others came from the opposite direction and took the road that leads into Jerusalem.

I saw all manner of persons on those strange days. Those with riches, and those whose poverty hung on them like a straining yoke. Those who were arrogant and those who were humble. Some traveled in rich caravans, others made the trip on foot. All were tired and hot and thirsty. But I, comfortable in my little house, gave heed to none of them. My husband tended his business at the gate, and I watched the pageant of people from behind my half-closed shutters.

By the third day I was weary of the milling, pushing crowds. Their faces looked haggard and disgruntled, and the voices that pierced through the doors of my house sounded sharp and gruff. The roads had been rough and the travelers were finding it difficult to secure lodgings.

A score of times we had been asked to share our dwelling with some stranger or give our food and water to a traveler. And the answer we had agreed upon was always the same. But it became increasingly difficult to refuse the insistent crowds. I can still hear their angry voices —

FIRST WOMAN: Open up — open up, I say. We must have a place to stay.

SECOND WOMAN: Give us water, we pray you. Have you no pity for a traveler?

FIRST WOMAN: Our food is gone. We must have food.

SECOND WOMAN: Water!

FIRST WOMAN: Food!

SECOND WOMAN: A place to stay!

GATEKEEPER'S WIFE: At twilight on the third day I

1 decided to close up my house and barricade my windows
2 against the strangers still asking for shelter.

3 It was then that I saw them — the old man on foot
4 and the young woman riding heavily on the small donkey.
5 They were making their way slowly up the slope that
6 leads here from Nazareth. And though the shadows were
7 lengthening on the narrow road, the man and the maid
8 and the beast were outlined in a softly-glowing light.

9 I stood at my window and watched the light grow
10 brighter as the travelers approached the gate. A few drew
11 aside to let them pass — as though they, too, had seen
12 the light — but others crowded and jostled them as if
13 they were no different from the rest.

14 But I saw that they were different. They were tired
15 from the journey. And it was apparent that the woman's
16 time was almost upon her. But their faces held a look of
17 peace that I had never seen before.

18 I stood and watched as though in a dream, while my
19 husband repeated the phrases he had said over and over
20 again to the hordes of travelers.

21 "Sorry, no water. Sorry, no room. Move on to the inn."

22 I heard the man thank him, and watched the woman
23 smile at him as they moved down the street in their circle
24 of light. I knew then that I should call out that I had
25 water to share, and food to offer, and a room where they
26 could rest. But I stood there dumb, as I had stood when
27 all the other weary travelers had passed my door. The
28 circle of light which might have enveloped my dwelling,
29 passed me by. And my husband and I still had our house
30 and all its possessions to ourselves, just as we had wished
31 it...

32 Write, Scribe of Bethlehem, that a house where
33 guests are unwelcome is an empty place, while bread
34 unshared seems dry, and water hoarded to oneself
35 becomes as gall. Write that she who lives completely for

herself carries the burden of a lonely heart.

This is the message from one who let the mother of her Lord seek other shelter for his birth . . .

THE INNKEEPER'S WIFE

NARRATOR: When winter was over and spring flooded into Bethlehem, the wife of the innkeeper came to the Scribe. The story she asked him to write spoke of the glory that came one holy night to Bethlehem — and of the shame that now marked the town — especially the people at the inn.

INNKEEPER'S WIFE: Ours is a humble inn in a humble town, but it will go down in the pages of history as the inn which refused to house the King of Kings. Fools that we were, we crowded the hostel with those who offered great sums of gold for their lodging and turned away him who came to offer the riches of heaven.

The livelihood of an innkeeper in a small city like Bethlehem is small and precarious. Normally, few wish to stop overnight in Bethlehem with the great city of Jerusalem only six short miles away. Only those travelers who are trapped by darkness spend the night with us, while others stop but briefly for rest and refreshment for themselves and their beasts. Many are the caravans that by-pass the town of Bethlehem on their way to and from Jerusalem. And many are the times when the inn is empty and the box which holds the money for our family is empty as well.

And so, when it came to pass that the Emperor issued an edict that the whole world should be enrolled in the census, my husband and I rejoiced that good fortune should shower upon us for a time at least.

"Think," he said, "of the many of the House of David who must come to Bethlehem to be enrolled. They will

1 overflow the houses of their relatives and friends. And
2 they will fill the inn. And the prices that we charge for
3 lodging can be higher than that which is usual, because
4 they will be forced to stay in the city where there is but
5 a single inn."

6 "And think," I added, seeing the prospect of gold
7 flowing into our hands, "think of the rich caravans of
8 travelers who must journey through Bethlehem to
9 Jerusalem on the north and to the cities that are farther
10 south. Think of what they can offer us for food and
11 lodging. We will provide for those who have the most to
12 pay and seize this opportunity to enrich our family."

13 The throngs crowded into Bethlehem as we
14 predicted they would. And the gold we sought poured
15 into our money box. We had the one commodity that
16 people needed. And it went to those who could pay the
17 most for it. For that is the way of good business.

18 Wealthy merchants in great caravans put up at our
19 inn. And we even lodged three kings within. Truly, we
20 now have enough to enrich our family with necessities
21 and comforts for a long time to come. But, from the kings
22 who sought our shelter, we learned that we had turned
23 aside him who would enrich our family with eternal life
24 and the bounty of Paradise. The kings — Gaspar,
25 Melchior, and Balthasar — followed the light and came
26 across the desert places to worship an infant born in our
27 stable.

28 We, too, saw that light. But we failed to recognize
29 its meaning. Up the crooked street it came, glowing softly
30 on a weary man and a spent young woman who rode a
31 donkey. And when we refused them a room at the inn,
32 though our own could have been made available, the light
33 followed after them — down the path to the stable where
34 we sent them to rest. All that night the light glowed in
35 the stable. And a brilliant star shone brightly above it.

1 And the gold in our box at the inn was dim by
2 comparison . . .

3 Now the stable is empty once more. But emptier still
4 are the hearts of those of us who dwell in the inn.

5 Write, Scribe of Bethlehem, for the women who live
6 after us, that I, whose lust for riches turned him away,
7 have learned that riches matter not unless they bear the
8 blessing of my Lord. Make that the message from the Inn
9 of Bethlehem.

10 THE SHEPHERD'S WIFE

11
12
13 NARRATOR: In the summertime, when the hills were green,
14 and the paths into the city were firm and dry, the third
15 woman came to the Scribe.

16 SHEPHERD'S WIFE: I am the wife of a poor shepherd whose
17 flocks graze on the hillside close by the city of Bethlehem.
18 I seldom leave our hut to come into the marketplace. But
19 I have words to tell you, O Scribe, that must be written
20 for our children's children to read.

21 I saw the light of the Heavenly Messenger. I heard
22 from my husband the words the angel spoke to herald
23 the birth of the Saviour. And yet I scoffed and did not
24 believe. Mine is the fault that there were only men to
25 adore him on the divine night when he was born in a
26 lowly stable. Mine is the reproach to all of womankind,
27 for I might have worshipped at the Redeemer's manger
28 and offered a woman's kindness to his mother. Instead,
29 I disbelieved . . .

30 Our hut is on the hillside overlooking the plain
31 where the shepherds tend their flocks. Night after night
32 as the moon shines down on them, I watch my husband
33 and the other shepherds keep their vigil with the sheep.
34 This night was no different from the rest — except that
35 the moon was brighter, and the sky more cloudless, and

1 a brilliant white star seemed to hang directly over the
2 city of Bethlehem.

3 I watched the star and wondered at its brightness.
4 And then, suddenly, there was another light in the
5 heavens, right over the spot where the shepherds sat on
6 the plains below.

7 I opened the door of the hut and looked down the
8 hillside. I watched the light grow whiter and whiter, until
9 it almost blinded me, even at that great distance. And
10 then I heard music — music such as I have never heard
11 before.

12 Soft strains of what I suppose are lutes and harps,
13 and golden notes of trumpets, and the sound of muted
14 cymbals, and a host of voices swelling into harmonies
15 unknown to me. The light grew greater and the music
16 fuller. And then they faded. And the hillside looked the
17 same again. And there was no sound. And the only bright
18 light was the star that shone over Bethlehem.

19 I closed my door and went back into my hut,
20 believing that I had dreamed a dream. Then, shortly and
21 unexpectedly, I heard my husband outside, and when he
22 entered it was as though he, too, reflected the light that
23 shone on the plains.

24 "Come," he said, "we must hasten to Bethlehem, for
25 tonight the Saviour is born."

26 I stood there, disbelieving.

27 "It is true," he repeated. "For tonight as we kept
28 watch over our flocks, behold an angel of the Lord stood
29 by us, and the brightness of God shone round us. And we
30 were greatly afraid. But the angel said to us: 'Fear not,
31 for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which
32 shall be to all the people. For there has been born to you
33 today in the town of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the
34 Lord. And this,' the angel said, 'shall be a sign unto you:
35 you shall find the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes



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