

THE WOMEN WHO KNEW JESUS

ELIZABETH, mother of John:

I am Elizabeth, the wife of Zacharias, the mother of John, called the Baptist, the cousin of the girl Mary.

The miracle of my conception, the strange and wonderful things that occurred in the life of my husband, the life and death of my son, are most wondrous and filled with the power of the Lord. Were there time, I would tell you of it all from the beginning of those lonely and despairing years when Zacharias and I became convinced that I was the most useless of all vessels, a barren woman, to the tragic death of my fine son at the whim of a court harlot.

I would tell you of the glory and wonder of that day in the house of the Lord, the Temple of the Most High, when a heavenly radiance shone round, and for the first time in many generations, a heavenly messenger appeared. I would try to describe to you the look in the eyes of my aged husband as he suffered the silence of discipline and his exaltation when he was finally able to cry that I, an old woman was to conceive and bare the man child that would make straight the way for the coming of the Lord. I would tell you of that child, of his strength and goodness, of his power and humility, of his complete submission to the will of the Almighty God.

But there is no time, and so, I will share with you only one small moment, most precious to me, that lifted my spirit and made my heart overflow with gratitude and goodness of God.

Within my body, I carried a child. You women who have experienced the wonder and awe of those first trembling movements of beginning life will know what I knew when, as my cousin Mary came to my door, I felt my babe leap within me, as the Holy Ghost bore solemn witness that the chosen mother of the Lord stood before me. I knew that thrill incident to the quickening spirit of my own blessed conception, and I returned her greeting with gratitude and reverence: "Blessed are thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." She responded, that flawless vessel of the Lord, with one of most beautiful and glorious hymns of praise know to mankind:

"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God, my Savior. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden; for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath showed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the might from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away. He hath helped his servant Israel in remembrance of this mercy; as he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and his seed forever."

Indeed, he had done all those glorious things. But even more, He had given to mankind, His own son, and for one precious instant in eternity, He had granted to an ordinary old woman, the privilege of a personal witness that this was, indeed, the Christ - Savior of the world. I bear to each of you this day, that same witness.

MUSICAL SELECTION: "O Holy Night"

THE MOTHER OF JOSEPH, the carpenter:

Joseph is my son. He is a quiet man, strong and steady, with eyes, wonderful eyes, kind, and gentle, and warm. When he enters our home in the evenings, with the clean scent of new wood about him and the tiny fragile shavings still slinging to the coarseness of his robe, the room, filled with his presence becomes a place of peace and contentment. And while he is not given to laughter, this serious, soft-spoken son of mine, he has nevertheless, a slow, sweet smile that transforms his face and warms the hearts of those around him. He is a good man, my Joseph, with a deep and abiding faith in God and the strength to keep His laws.

And so it was, when he thought the law had been broken, his eyes spoke of the pain his lips could not, and shadows filled his home where had been only love and light.

You see, Joseph had finished his carpenter apprenticeship and was about to take a wife. He had chosen for his own, the girl Mary, fine and gentle, as pure and as faire as the morning light. And the love they bore, these two, one for the other, made our whole world a better place to be.

And so both families agreeing, the betrothal ceremony took place. It was as binding as marriage, indeed, by law if the bridegroom should happen to die, the betrothed girl is considered a widow. If she is unfaithful, she is labeled an adulteress. And once betrothed, the only way the contract can be broken is through divorce. I tell you this that you may know the custom here in Galilee, and that you might better begin to understand what was in our hearts in the days that followed.

We were nearly ready, Joseph and I, and Mary and her family. The marriage was to have taken place a year after the betrothal and our time had been spent in carefully, lovingly furnishing the small home that was to be their own, and in preparing for the solemn reception in that home. I was so proud -- proud of my strong son, and proud of the lovely woman he had chosen to share his life.

And then, suddenly, amazingly, heartbreakingly -- Mary was with child. It was not to be believed. Not Mary. And yet it was so. I had only to look into the face of my Joseph to know that the moral agony I saw had nothing to do with rumor or doubt. To divorce or send away the woman he loved; according to Jewish law these were the only two alternatives. She could be sent away to have her child and not return to Nazareth -- hurt, humiliated. Love of the law, love of one's wife-to-be. Joseph was torn with pain and I suffered with him.

And then, like a miracle, the shadows were gone. We say little of what happened that night, for it is a private thing and not to be subjected to the doubts and jeers of a mocking world. What was said in that moment when a messenger of the Lord spoke with my son, is for him alone to know. But the purpose was plain - this woman most dear, was infinitely worthy to become even dearer. Mary of Nazareth, most blessed among women, was to become the mother of the Messiah. With strength and dignity, filled with faith, and the desire to give his Mary as much

protection and devotion as possible, Joseph married her immediately, and my heart swelled with pride.

You see, of all the souls in heaven, the Lord God had His choice of the man to be the earthly father of his only begotten son. With great care and deliberation would he have chosen a man to do the thousand, no millions, of gentle, thoughtful things a father does for a beloved son. It was Joseph, who would cradle the babe in his strong, clean, work roughened hands. Joseph who would walk with him in and through the hills and streets and into the synagogues for evening prayers and smile at him across the table.

I, like the Lord, knowing I could not be the earthly companion of my beloved, my ONLY BEGOTTEN SON, were to choose such a companion to take my place, I would choose the best, the very best. I would choose from among the kind of men I had known and respected before the foundations of this world were laid, men like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, who was sold into Egypt, Noah, Moses, Enoch, and Elijah. And yet my son, Joseph, the carpenter, was chosen to be the earthly father of Jesus, the Christ -- Savior of the World. Joseph, my son.

MUSICAL SELECTION: "When Joseph Went to Bethlehem"

THE MOTHER OF THE GIRL, MARY:

I am the mother of Mary. And yes, you are right, there is not a great deal said of me, but that is as it should be. My place in the wrap and weave of the patterns of those days is inconspicuous, unheralded, yet it is not without its moments of attending glory. For you see, it is my grandson that is called Redeemer, Savior, Jesus the Christ.

It was my daughter -- young, sweet, pure, and ever obedient to whom Gabriel appeared, my daughter to whom he said, "Hail, thou that are highly favored; the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women."

In common with other daughters of Israel, specifically those of the tribe of Judah and of known descendant from David, my Mary had contemplated with holy joy and ecstasy, the coming of the Messiah through our royal line; she knew that some Jewish maiden was yet to become the mother of the Christ.

But was it possible that the angel's words to her had reference to this supreme expectation and hope of the nation? She had little time to turn these things in her mind, for the angel continued. "Fear not Mary, for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David; and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom, there shall be no end."

Even yet she comprehended but in part the importance of this momentous visitation. Not in the spirit of doubt such as had prompted Zacharias to ask for a sign but through an earnest desire for information, she asked, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" This answer to her natural and simple inquiry was the announcement of a miracle through the operation of higher law, such as the human mind ordinarily fails to comprehend or regard possible. Mary was informed she would conceive and in time bring forth a Son, of whom no mortal man would be the father. And the angel answered and said unto her. "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee,

and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee; therefore also that holy thing that shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God."

Then the angel told her of the blessed condition of her cousin Elizabeth, who had been barren; and by way of sufficient and final explanation added, "For with God nothing shall be impossible." With gentle submissiveness and humble acceptance the pure young virgin replied, "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."

His message delivered, Gabriel departed, leaving the chosen Virgin of Nazareth to ponder over her wondrous experience. My daughter's promised son was to be "The Only Begotten" of the Father in the flesh. The child Jesus was to inherit the physical, mental and spiritual traits, tendencies, and powers that characterized his parents: one, immortal and glorified -- God; the other human -- woman ... my daughter Mary.

This child, whom I had conceived and reared, for whom I had wiped tears and mended broken dolls, who had prayed at my knee and worked at my side, was to be the mother of God. I knew her better than any other person on the face of the earth, and I say to you, she was fit for her calling -- pure, stainless, infinitely good. She had the strength and courage to humbly accept not only the birth, but the crucifixion and death of her perfect son, Jesus of Nazareth. I watched him grow, both in body and spirit, and long before I was called to leave this earth, indeed, even from the very beginning, when an angel of the Lord visited our simple Galilean cottage with the greatest news ever given, I knew that the child Jesus, was, indeed, the Christ. He was my grandson. He is my Lord. I know it. I glory in it. I testify of it. And so be it forever.

MUSICAL SELECTION: "The Daughter of God"

THE WIFE OF THE SHEPHERD:

My husband is a shepherd. And at times, in the spring of the year, when the nights are cool, and the stars hang so low in the heavens I want to reach up and pull one to me with the crooked end of my husband's staff, we go into the fields, and there, together, we watch the flocks.

There are those who say we are poor, that of the many who come and go, wander and stay in this beloved and ancient land, we are the lowliest, and the most humble. Humble? Perhaps. Indeed, it is what we desire. But poor? Oh my friend, if only I could give you the eyes to see, the heart to feel the vastness and incredible beauty of the ageless Judean hills, the deep peace and contentment we've found in this land of unspoiled solitude, the quiet, almost unspeakable joy we feel in the companionship we share, one with another, and with Almighty God. Hardly poor - in fact, infinitely richer than the madman Herod who sits decaying with disease and corruption in his marble palace beyond the hills.

They say of Herod that within his great palace are vast treasures of gold and precious gems. And yet, I, the wife of a lowly shepherd would not part with one instant, be it so small, of the miracle that unfolded before us in the fields, not so very long ago. No, not for a hundred times, and a hundred times again the wealth of the man who dares call himself our king.

They tell of that night, that night of all nights, in a great book -- the one you call Bible. It tells in words, lovely and true of that night when worlds and eternity alike stood still, and witnessed the birth of Jesus, the Christ.

And I was there, it was I, I who stood with my heart, my soul, soaring, shivering, singing, while the glory, of the Lord shone around about. The Glory of the Lord -- there are no words to describe it. It was like -- like the very first dawning on all creation, and every dawn thereafter glowing and melting into one -- shimmering, shining, throbbing, awesome and frightening. We WERE so afraid. But then came the voice -- clear, piercing sweet, beautiful beyond description. "Unto you is born this day, in the city of David a Savior, which Christ the Lord."

And suddenly, there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the Highest, and on Earth peace, good will toward men."

Like an infinite and eternal exaltation of larks they sang; sang until my heart must surely shatter and the tears ran unchecked down my cheeks and dropped unnoticed upon my clasped and trembling hands.

To you, who have read my story, and considered it a tale for fools and children, I can say only this -- from this eternity to the next, never ending to never ending -- I SAW WHAT I SAW. And I tell you the truth, as pure and clean and bright as the noonday sun. Worlds without end, it cannot, will not change.

For the humble, it is easy to believe, as we believed what we heard that night. And because we believed, we went and did see the child, lying in a manger. We saw, that night, a sight multitudes of people -- past, present and future -- kings, and commoners, princes and potentates would give their lives to see, the infant son of the Lord God Almighty.

Poor? Ours was a divine gift, a sacred treasure, to be kept deep within the heart, wondered at, pondered upon, cherished. And then to be told, in great reverence and in the quiet of night, to children, and they to theirs, generation to generation. Forever.

MUSICAL SELECTION sung by audience: " While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks"

WIFE OF THE KEEPER OF AN INN:

For generations, my husband's family have been keepers of an inn here in Bethlehem. And now, together, we do the same. Ours is a small inn, humble and unpretentious, nevertheless as clean as we can make it. We take pride in our simple but carefully prepared meals, our scrubbed floors, and well-aired bedding. Sometimes there are flowers growing from our window pots and we take pleasure in our small business.

It is not a large town, this Bethlehem of Judea, and most of those calling it home are simple farmers and shepherds. And yet, still and all, it is a beloved and revered village, endeared to Jewish hearts as the birthplace of David and that of the prospective Messiah.

Each morning, for many years, I have swept clean the pack earth in front of our door, and have looked into the faces of those passing through our small village. I have seen many things there -- anger, despair, pride, acceptance, peace, selfishness, exhaustion. The faces I forgot, but the things I saw there stay with me, reminding me of how fortunate I am to be at peace -- content with my life and those things the Lord has seen fit to bestow upon me.

And then came the time of the tax rolls, the proclamation of Caesar Augustus that here shall be a taxing and registration of the house of David. It was the second of three such registrations to be held at intervals of about twenty years. Sleepy Bethlehem was not itself. Its quiet streets were choked with dust and filled with the voice of tired, hurrying people. The outer inn was filled to the rafters, and to escape for a moment, the noise, the heat and the hurry, I fled to my dooryard.

As was my custom, I stood for a moment, gazing down the street, studying the faces. There was a donkey, and leading it, a strong young man, obviously fatigued and yet different somehow. There was pride in the face -- and dignity. He was a poor man, and yet I have seen, passing my door, great men of the world, with much less a look of nobility. This was a man of the house of David, a house of kings, and here was one of the same royal lineage. Yet he was more. And then I saw the face of the young woman riding, exhausted and great with child on the back of the donkey. If the man leading the animal had about him the air of royalty, this surely was a queen. Her face was drawn with fatigue and her simple robes powdered with the fine light dust that lies thick along the roads of Judea. And yet no trace of discontent, no shadow of complaint, no faint inclination to murmur could I see.

Slowly they came closer and stopped before me. Quietly the young man asked for lodging and my heart fell. Perhaps it was because I knew so well how it is to be tired and heavy with child, but perhaps I sensed something from the young couple that drew from me a desire to comfort and serve. I don't know, but I did know that within that hot, crowded, noisy and odorous inn there was no room, no single corner fit for the birth of a child -any child - but especially this child.

My mind raced. My own room? Impossible. It was crowded already with my own children and members of my family who had come to pay the same tax. The sheds behind? No again, they were small and dark, overrun with mice, dirty with disuse. But there was a stable -- the shelter we kept for our animals in the hills behind the inn. There would be clean sweet straw, open areas to admit freshness and light, but most of all, peace and privacy.

And so it was to a humble stable I led them -- these two extraordinary young people. And having done for them what I could, I left them to rest and returned to the inn.

Evening came, following it, the night -- that night. The night foretold for centuries, hoped for, prayed for, whispered of around campfires and in synagogues, during wars, under oppression, on death beds. For on that night, made glorious by a burning and brilliant star and the voices of the hosts of heaven itself, was born in my stable, the Son of God, the Redeemer of all mankind, the Savior of the world -- Jesus the Christ.

I saw him, lying still and small, in a common manger. I stood by while humble shepherds filled with the power and perception of the Holy Spirit bore witness that it was, indeed, the Messiah. I stood in the shadows, gazed at the radiance of his person, the indescribable look of joy and peace and love that transfigured the face of his mother and that of Joseph, the man chosen to care for him. I was, and I bear solemn testimony -- irrefutable, unshakable, even till death, that I saw born to Mary the virgin, the son of the highest, the only begotten of the Eternal Father -- Jesus, the Christ.

The rise and fall of dynasties, the birth and dissolution of nations, all the cycles of history as to war and peace, as to prosperity or famine, the awful happenings of earthquakes and storms, the triumphs of invention and discovery, the epochs of all the occurrences that make history are chronicled throughout the world by reference to the year before or after that night -- the birth of Jesus Christ.

A man never lived of whom more has been said and sung, none to whom is devoted a greater proportion of the world's literature. He is extolled by Christian, Muslim and Jew, by skeptic and infidel, by the world's greatest poets, philosophers, statesmen, scientists and historians. Even the profane sinner in the foul sacrilege of his oath acclaims the divine supremacy of Him whose name he desecrates.

I saw born that night, in the city of David, the one who was, and is, and always will be for eternity and ever, the son of the Living God, the Redeemer and Savior of the human race, the Eternal Judge of the souls of men, the chosen and appointed of the Eternal -- in short, the Christ. It is my solemn witness.

MUSICAL SELECTION: "What Child is This?"

THE MOTHER OF THE CHILD JESUS:

Yes, I am Mary, and yes, Jesus is my son. Indeed, blessed am I among women.

My story is an old one, told and retold from before time began and once again here today by those women whom I love so well. It is a story of spirit, rather than history, and its simple and inspiring truth must and will be manifest by the Holy Spirit rather than by the words of men.

I am a woman, much as the women among you, gifted with the divine opportunity of forming a partnership with God in providing a mortal temple for the spirits of his children. It is a sacred thing, motherhood, whether it concerns the Christ or anyone of the infinitely precious spirits sent to many of you. Sacred, holy and beautiful beyond description. For in the pure and undefiled love a mother for a child, mankind comes closer to approaching the love of God, than at any other time.

Notes from Kathy Fowkes:

When this was done for the Relief Society Christmas program, each woman wore a plain piece of cloth (about 4 or 5 feet long) over her head and across her shoulders. The women were seated together on the front row. One by one they took a seat facing the audience and read their parts. The simple head coverings made them equal and covered the modern day dress they were wearing for Christmas.

Since this is about women, it would also be appropriate for a Relief Society Mother's Day program, as well as for a Christmas program. The music selections were played on the piano, but might have been vocal performances or both.

So far no one has been able to determine who wrote this. Thanks to the unknown author who created this and may the person someday know how it has been enjoyed by many sisters.