

THE VISITORS

Matthew 2:1-2, 7-16

**Faith Community
Christmas Eve, 2007**

It wasn't long after our child was born that I heard the pounding of hooves and the tinkling of metal. I sensed trouble. Our baby had been born in that little out-of-the-way town, in the inn-keepers stable, among restless animals and the odors of straw and hay.

Mary held our child most of the time, but she held him especially close when we heard the clamor of sounds coming toward the stable. Along with the stomping hooves we now heard excited voices - tense voices - and they were coming closer.

In his loud, animated voice the inn-keeper said, "No sir, I'm telling you there ain't no king here. You got it all wrong. Does this look like a place where a king would be? You don't want Bethlehem - Jerusalem maybe - but that's five or six miles up the road."

Then I heard men with deep voices talking among themselves. Finally one of them asked the inn-keeper, "Who else do you have staying here?"

"Nobody else, I've told you about everybody."

The baby Jesus squirmed, waking from the clamor outside. Mary hugged him tightly, trying to calm him in her tense arms.

"Are you sure there's no one else?" boomed another man's voice.

"Um...Oh yea, well there are the young ones in the stable, but you don't want to bother them. She just had a baby. They're just poor, common kids. Not sure they know which end is up. But other than them, that's all there is. Really, I'd try Jerusalem if you're looking for royalty, Sir."

"A baby you say?" The voice seemed closer now.

"Yea, but don't disturb those kids, they aren't who you're looking for."

I was beginning to get anxious. I looked around for a way out of the stable if we needed to make an emergency exit. In the back was a small opening that seemed to go outside. I guessed it was a convenient way to shovel the old straw out back when it had to be changed.

I was thinking we could fit through there without too much trouble when suddenly a bellowing voice surprised me, "Is this the King?"

My heart froze. I spun around and there stood three tall men so finely dressed that they looked like kings themselves.

"I...I...I don't know," I said. "Does he look like a king to you?"

Then the deep voice again, only quieter this time. "I'm sorry if we frightened you, but we have come from the East to see the Messiah. We have been told about him and have followed the brightest star, which brought us to this place. This must be the child."

The three of them kneeled down before our baby as the inn-keeper stood in the doorway, his mouth gaping open. Only reluctantly did Mary open the swaddling clothes to let them see the baby.

Then they turned and took from their bags three gifts for the child.

The first was frankincense - the fragrance I had smelled in the incense of the temple. I had smelled it before, but never seen it up close.

Then they presented the second gift - myrrh - the highly valued perfume that only the richest royalty could afford. I held the container in my hand and marveled at what was happening.

Finally the third gift - gold - the most precious of metals, the rich metal that kings surround themselves with.

I sat speechless in the musty straw, forgetting for a moment that this was a stable and I was a carpenter.

Mary's voice barely broke the silence as she said, "Thank you."

The elegant men stayed with us long enough to tell us about their studies of the stars and this odd new star, or formation of stars, that brought them to Bethlehem and our meager stable.

They had stopped in Jerusalem, they said, and asked about the King of the Jews. Not being Jews themselves, they had no idea where this Messiah was to be born. They also didn't know they would stir up such a royal hornet's nest.

"Herod called us in to find out what we were about," one of the wise men said. "We had no idea we would cause so much commotion. We just told him we had heard that the King of the Jews was born, and we were following the bright star to find him."

The wise man lowered his voice almost to a whisper as he said, "Herod is a strange and frightened man." He was obviously angry when we first told him. Then he called in his advisors and they talked together excitedly.

"I thought he was being deceptive when he finally spoke to us, 'When you find this king, come and let me know. I, too, would like to worship him.' We have talked among ourselves about his insincerity and decided not to go back to Jerusalem, but to go home by another way. We are afraid he will do you harm. Beware!"

As the wise men prepared to leave, I remember saying to them - and to myself - "Is this, my son, the Messiah? The Son of God?" With intense stares they looked at me. Then the one who had handed me the gifts nodded his head. They went out into the night.

Several nights after that I was sleeping restlessly, bothered by a wild confusion of sights and sounds. I was having a chaotic dream - a dream of disturbing mystery, odd noises and vague images. The best I could make of it was that these were the sounds of swords clanking, soldiers marching, and an ominous evil figure who wanted to do us harm.

In the midst of this chaotic dream a gentle, quiet figure appeared at the entry to the stable. He was tall and thin, and wore a long, pale gray robe of a very common kind. His voice was quiet, but his words frightening, “Go! Flee! He is coming to get you. Take your child and wife, and leave this land. It is not safe.” His word seemed to echo. I looked back to the doorway, and this strange messenger was gone.

Then I opened my eyes. It was quiet and dark. I had to catch my breath as the fear drained away and was filled with calm relief. It was only a dream!

I turned to Mary and Jesus, both peacefully oblivious to my wrenching dream. Mary had set Jesus in the manger, but was curled up sleeping nearby.

I lay back on the straw with my eyes wide open staring up at the roof and enjoying the wonder of this moment: a newborn child, Mary, my love, a simple stable where three bright men had knelt, unbelievable gifts of incense, myrrh, and gold. These signs of the highest royalty were placed in our peasant setting. I chuckled to myself.

The pleasant drifting of my mind was shaken by the sounds, again, of horses. Several now. The jangling of metal and distant voices. Men shouting. Women screaming. Fear struck me. I found myself holding my breath.

I moved quickly, first to Mary, to awaken her. “We have to leave quickly!” I whispered. I pulled together the few belongings we had as quickly as I could. Mary awoke realizing from the tone of my voice that this was serious.

I looked out the entryway of the door and there they were - soldiers just down the street, at least twenty of them that I could see at a quick glance. All the clamor and chaos of my dream was happening, and I knew where it would lead.

I looked out at our donkey, tied by the side of the stable. His ears twitched as if he were aware of the growing storm. We couldn’t leave through the doorway; soldiers would be watching every action on the street.

The small opening in the back! I hurried to the rear of the stable and cleared away the door.

Mary finished tucking our things into bags. She took the three gifts and packed them away. I came and took the bags while she carefully picked up the baby, trying not to wake him. Jesus squirmed and let out a little cry, but then snuggled his face next to his mother’s shoulder. Both of us stopped in frozen stillness.

I listened for any sound of soldiers. The voices seemed louder, but I couldn’t tell if they really were, or if it was only my terror intensifying every sound.

We moved quickly to the back opening, and I crawled down and peered out into the field behind the stable. There wasn’t a soul in sight. I went on through. Then I took the baby from Mary and helped her through the small doorway.

Jesus was restless - squirming and whimpering - but Mary quieted him while I slipped around the side of the stable and untied the donkey. He was jumpy at first, but came with me.

I held Jesus while Mary got on the donkey, then handed him up to her. We shuffled behind the little houses toward the edge of town. The houses were so close together that we could move through much of the town without having to go out into the streets. When we had to cross a street we waited until no one was in sight and then moved quickly.

Finally, we made it out of town and down over the hill to where the wilderness began. I wasn't sure where the road was, but I knew if we just kept going in the same direction, we would have to come to it soon.

Then, for the first time, Mary spoke, "Joseph, where are we going to go?" I turned to her slowly, "Remember the land our people fled years ago?"

"Egypt?" she answered.

My smile was tense as I answered, "The Son of God is heading to the land of slavery."

We moved as quickly as we could down the dirt road, and escaped in the night.

Amen