

*with Richard J. Foster, Lauren F. Winner, Philip Yancey,
Walter Wangerin Jr., Eugene H. Peterson, Luci Shaw,
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A

Radiant BIRTH

*Advent Readings
for a Bright Season*

Edited by Leslie Leyland Fields and Paul J. Willis



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *A Radiant Birth* edited by Leslie Leyland Fields and Paul J. Willis.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

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Foreword *
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RICHARD FOSTER



A *Radiant Birth* takes us between two glorious events in the Christian liturgical calendar: Advent and Epiphany. Advent is the four weeks before Christmas Day, guiding us into an expectant, hopeful anticipation of the miraculous birth of the Christ child. Epiphany comes at the end of the twelve days of Christmas, providing us with generous space for celebrating the wondrous revelation of God incarnate in Jesus, the Christ. Both events—Advent (the waiting) and Epiphany (the celebrating)—have one grand focus, which is to lead us into the ever-living reality of “God with us” in and through the person of Jesus. Indeed, the name Immanuel, in Hebrew meaning “God is with us,” is the title given to the one and only Redeemer because it refers to God’s everlasting intent for human life—namely, that we should be in every aspect a dwelling place of God.

We might call this reality “The Immanuel Principle.” It simply and profoundly confesses that in and through Jesus Christ, God is always with us. It is a radiant with-God kind of life. Jesus lives among us as our Savior to forgive us, our Teacher to instruct us, our Lord to rule us, and our Friend to come alongside us.

One experience especially planted this reality deep into my heart and soul. I was approaching eight years old . . . young enough to be oblivious to the skeptic’s arguments against the Incarnation and old enough to enter into the greatness and wonder of the

Christmas event. It was a Christmas Eve service led by Eugene and Jean Coffin, “my pastors,” functioning so completely as one that I never separated their roles. Indeed, Eugene and Jean liked to refer to themselves as “a pair of jeans.”

The Christmas Eve service itself was simple enough with Jean playing the organ and leading us in well-known Christmas carols. Then Eugene came forward, sat in a large rocking chair, and gathered us kids at his feet. He scooped up one small child and sat her on his lap.

In such settings children will often be nervous and fidgety. But not this night! This night a holy hush seemed to cover us all, children and adults alike. Eugene looked at us children, each one individually, lovingly, quietly. Then he opened his Bible and read us Luke’s rendition of the Christmas story.

As I said, the elements of the service were quite ordinary. No dimming lights. No flickering candles. None of the things that are supposed to create just the right mood. It wasn’t the outward, physical things at all. It was the holy hush that fell on us. It was “the Presence in the midst.” It was the breaking in of the Shekinah of God. It was the overwhelming, interior, experiential reality of the Immanuel Principle, God with us. Even today, many, many years later, I still vividly remember that silent night, that holy night.

A Radiant Birth contains poems, stories, and essays by twenty-six members of the Chrysostom Society, a small fellowship of writers that two other colleagues and I formed several decades ago now. Hence, I have personally known each of these writers, some of them for many years. While we come from many branches of the Christian family, each one has a deep commitment to Jesus Christ and a genuine passion for the craft of writing. May I speak for our entire fellowship in hoping that in our words you will discover life-giving tidings of great joy.

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* Introduction *

LESLIE LEYLAND FIELDS



I t's Christmas morning, not yet light. I am ten years old, creeping down the stairs, and I am full of hope. My siblings and I were told there will be no Christmas. Our mother told us. She always tells the truth. But I believe in more than truth. Once our father surprised us on Easter with speckled chocolate eggs in the backyard. And once we had a special Thanksgiving with pies and everything and people were happy. I read fairy tales, too, and I've read *The Secret Garden* and *The Wizard of Oz*, so I know for a fact that the world can crack open at just the right time with a grand gift.

I float down the pine staircase, as light as a cloud, buoyed by all the happy endings I believe in. Just before I see the living room, I catch my breath and pause—maybe I even pray. There is likely a god out there somewhere, and maybe he is the kind of God who visits living rooms on Christmas. Finally I dare to look. There—the old Persian carpet, the wooden cupboard, the painting of the girl on the wall. And a deep echoing silence. I blink, deflate, fold to sit on the stairs. It is the Monday-Tuesday-always-everyday room without a tree, without tinsel, without the scatter of presents we had last year. Last year I got a blue bathrobe and a doll. My mother was right. Christmas is over.

And it was. But the loss grew lighter year by year. Our holidays had always been muted, sparse. There were no family gatherings to miss. There was never any money for presents. One year when we were young, my mother had a quarter to spend on each of us six kids. And we were not church people. What was there to celebrate then—our poverty? My father without a job and no prospects? This would be better, then. And there were compensations. Two of those Decembers my mother and the six of us loaded our tents and sleeping bags into our old Country Squire station wagon and drove to Florida to camp for two weeks in the sun. Who needed presents when we came back with a tan?

More than this, the *Plain Truth* magazines on our tables, my dour grandparents who were devoted Jehovah's Witnesses, and my mother all informed us that Christmas was a pagan holiday. As were all of the religious holidays, we were told. This was a bonus contributing enough self-righteousness to carry me through the long, empty holidays each year. Not celebrating surely made me more spiritual.

When, as a teenager, I discovered that a Savior had been born even for me, everything changed—except Christmas. My home-grown asceticism wasn't easily dislodged. I could not reconcile the unending holiday muzak and gaudy consumerism with God's entrance into the world. Shouldn't we be fasting instead of feasting? Shouldn't we be holy instead of happy?

Then I married. Several decades, a husband, and six children later, I am the magic merry godmother of all things Advent: light the fireplace, cut down the tallest tree, hang every ornament, set the table with a dozen candles, invite the neighbors, write plays, host open houses, make cookies for the sick, send shoe boxes overseas, make presents with the kids, and do it all with ribbons, sprinkles, carols, a real Christmas goose, and homemade wrapping

paper of course! Most of all, don't collapse until after New Year's and Epiphany. And above all, perform it all with a holy mien, a contagious cheer, and a gentle, quiet spirit inviting Christ anew into your weary heart.

And every year I fail. Every year, come December, I vow to do better and still end up hosting these same uninvited guests—exhaustion, guilt, inadequacy, perfectionism, anxiety, failure—who push through my doors and shadow my every move. Maybe my mother was right. Maybe we should just let the baubly hulla-baloo pass by our doors entirely. How much simpler and maybe more spiritual the season would be!

Don't we all do this? We all bring our complicated family histories to the season, which we live out in the midst of a noisy culture hawking its own version of celebration, and some of us add to that cacophony our local church culture, with its own peculiarities and traditions. Are the holy days supposed to be this hard?

No. Let's make it easier. Paul Willis and I are here with twenty-four others, wise guides all who will help shepherd us through the mistletoe wickets of the season. Let us start right now by turning around and looking behind us for a moment. How did the ancients in the faith observe the Advent season? Consider the first Christmas sermon preserved and passed down through the centuries. It was preached in Antioch in AD 386 by St. John Chrysostom, a priest who later became the Bishop of Constantinople. Can you see him standing in a cathedral, the gathered sitting beneath him? How did he begin? "Behold a new and wondrous mystery!"

"Behold!" Were they missing it already so soon, the wonder that "He who is, is born"? The miracle that "He who is above, now for our redemption dwells here below"? With eloquence and beauty and likely a measure of thunder, St. John called his listeners to holy attention.

Are we listening? One thousand six hundred and thirty-seven years have passed since that first sermon. More than two millennia now since God split the night with angels and delivered a bloody mewling infant from the body of a teenager. We try not to forget. We've created an elaborate web of remembrance and celebration. We hope we're doing enough. We wonder if we remember wonder. As the years go by, we behold through dimming eyes.

This is why we're here. We are here in these pages to behold, together, anew. We are following our namesake. All of us in these pages belong or have belonged to the Chrysostom Society, an informal gathering of writers of faith. St. John spoke so eloquently, so passionately that he was named *Chrysostom*, meaning "golden-tongued." We do not claim such eloquence, but we do as he did: twenty-six of us here use our pens to call ourselves and others to attention one more time. To behold—again. To hear the good news—again. To know hope—again. We offer up these poems, short stories, essays, and meditations as a choir of voices singing the "tidings of great joy" again.

The daily readings take us from the first Sunday of Advent through to Epiphany on January 6, the Twelfth Day of Christmas, celebrating the kings' worship and recognition of Jesus as the Messiah King. There are readings, then, for forty-two days.

We'll enter Advent, from the Latin *adventus*, meaning "coming" or "arrival," through three avenues:

Part One: Jesus, Born in Bethlehem takes us to the astonishing events surrounding his birth. Enter slowly. Let the familiar become strange and wondrous again.

Part Two: Jesus, Born in Us illuminates the holy disruption caused by his entrance into our minds and hearts.

Part Three: Jesus in Us for the World reveals surprising ways and places Jesus shows up when we walk our faith out into the world.

St. John's sermon ends, "To Him, then, Who out of confusion has wrought a clear path, to Christ, to the Father, and to the Holy Spirit, we offer all praise, now and forever. Amen."

May our stories, essays, and poems in these pages create a clear path out of confusion to heart-filled praise, joy, and hope, now and forever. Amen.

Part One

* Jesus, Born in Bethlehem *

THIS FIRST PART OF OUR ANTHOLOGY, “Jesus, Born in Bethlehem,” is much what you would expect—a celebration of the coming and arrival of Jesus Christ in the flesh. We begin, then, with a passage of Scripture from *The Message*, memorably paraphrased by one of the longtime members of the Chrysostom Society, Eugene H. Peterson. Of course, there is painful waiting involved, a sense of being almost but not quite there, for that is the nature of Advent. But for the most part, the mood is one of tiptoe happiness, the childlike anticipation of tearing open a ribboned package that Philip Yancey so clearly recalls. But this happiness, to be real, is also tinged with sorrow. Tania Runyan and Lauren Winner take pains to remind us of the bloody reality of Jesus’ birth—and of the death he is born for. But it is a birth and death for us. And so we say, in the words of St. John Chrysostom, “Praise this holy feast.”

* *Tuesday, Day Three* *

Meditation on Waiting

MATTHEW DICKERSON



I delight in fishing. But fishing involves waiting. And waiting involves patience.

Unfortunately for the angler in me, lakes and even many rivers freeze over in the winter where I live. They turn from liquid to solid, at least on the surface. And this makes many types of fishing rather difficult. So November through January, the seasons of Advent and Christmas, usually mean only two types of fishing for me: fly fishing for steelhead and ice fishing for trout.

It's true that fly fishing is usually an active sport. I can sometimes traverse three or four miles of river in a morning of fly fishing. Even when I'm not migrating up or down a riverbank in search of a fish or a likely spot for one, I'm constantly on my feet, moving my arms. Nonetheless, despite all that movement, fly fishing still involves a lot of waiting. Days when my arm gets sore catching one fish after another are exceedingly rare. Far more common are the days when for every minute I spend with a fish on my line, I spend fifteen (or twenty or thirty or forty) minutes waiting for a fish to strike my fly.

Winter fly fishing for steelhead trout stretches patience even further. It isn't unusual for me to hook just two fish on a full day of steelhead fishing, and to land only one of them. I've had plenty

of steelhead days without a single fish. A full day of waiting. I stand in ice water, making hundreds if not thousands of casts in almost the same place, drifting a heavy fly along the bottom of the river—where I can't even see it—waiting and hoping for a strike.

Indeed, the waiting begins even before I start fishing. The river where I most often fish for steelhead draws anglers from all across the region. If I want to get a good spot on the river, I have to beat the crowds. The legal fishing day starts half an hour before dawn. I show up an hour or more before that to stake out my claim. Then I just sit down on the cold wet riverbank and wait. In the dark and cold. With my thermos of hot coffee.

Then there's ice fishing, my other form of winter fishing. It may begin with a brief flurry of activity, but—even more than with steelhead fishing—it soon becomes an exercise in waiting. On the eighth day of Christmas, the traditional start of the ice fishing season in Maine, I head out onto the ice about an hour before dawn and drill five to ten holes through several inches of ice with a hand auger, all the while watching the eastern sky, waiting for the first hints of dawn. When the legal fishing day begins thirty minutes before dawn, I have the one flurry of activity as I rush to get all my rigs in the water: baiting each hook with a live shiner minnow, dropping them down to varying depths, placing my tip-up down in the hole I just drilled, and then setting the spring-loaded flags to alert me if a fish takes the bait.

Once all those tip-ups are placed, then I wait. I don't even hold them. I just wait. And wait. And wait some more.

Okay, some years I don't have to wait long. One year, the sun hadn't even risen, and I was just baiting my third tip-up when a four-and-a-half-pound landlocked salmon sprang the flag on the first tip-up. Dinner for the family appeared almost like manna from heaven. There have been occasional years when I've caught

my limit of fresh trout by mid-morning. Most years, however, my flags are out all day just to bring in two or three fish. Some years, I don't see a flag up for hours. One year I didn't catch a single fish until the third day of the season.

As our climate has warmed over the past fifty years, the season for ice—and thus also the season for ice fishing—has noticeably shortened. On the lake in Maine where my family has spent lots of time, we wait longer each winter for the ice to form. Several years ago, we did two previously unheard-of things: we all dove into the unfrozen lake on Christmas morning for a quick “swim”; a year later we actually took the canoe out on New Year's Day. That year, I couldn't even ice fish until about the twelfth day of Christmas!

All that waiting recently had me thinking about Advent. In the Christian tradition, it's an important season that starts four Sundays before Christmas and ends on Christmas morning. The word *advent* comes to us from Latin, from a word meaning “arrival” or “coming.” Despite the name, however, the season is not so much about arrival as it is about waiting. The arrival doesn't happen until the end of Advent. Christmas is the morning of arrival. Advent is the time of waiting for that arrival—perhaps patiently, or perhaps not so.

On the first Christmas roughly two millennia ago, the long-awaited arrival was a big deal. It was none other than the eternal God himself, the one who created the world, entering into his own creation in order to save it, taking on the form of a helpless infant baby born to a poor refugee family living in a captive nation. Jesus in the world. God in the world.

That period of waiting—the first Advent, we might call it—was a time of great suffering for many. The suffering had gone on for centuries, from when the prophets first foretold of a coming savior to the arrival of a baby in a manger.

On a really cold morning of ice fishing or winter steelhead fishing, I sometimes experience a small bit of suffering, which in the moment can feel like a great bit of suffering. I can do some preparation wearing my gloves, but at some point I need to take the gloves off and tie on a fly or grab live bait out of a bucket of ice water. I fumble around with cold fingers long enough to do the task, with an icy wind blowing needless pain into the exposed flesh of my fingers, down my spine, across my cheeks and into my eyes, making the task that much harder and slower. The truth is, though, that I choose this momentary agony myself.

And here is the real confession. Our cozy, heated family cottage with a pellet stove and a coffee pot sits right on the edge of the lake with windows looking out over the ice. That means that most of my ice-fishing mornings, once all my tip-ups are set on the frozen lake, I can head back inside for a cup of hot coffee. If I'm lucky, there's even a piece of leftover Christmas apple pie I can warm up in the microwave. And that's where I do my waiting: in a warm room with a hot drink, watching my tip-ups through the window. I only have to go outside if one of those orange flags actually pops up, and even then I only stay out long enough to pull in a fish and rebait my hook.

But two thousand years ago, those who were waiting for the long-promised Savior of the world had no choice about their suffering. And for most of them, their waiting was far more unpleasant than anything I've had to endure. I think especially of the suffering of Mary and Joseph, the chosen parents of the Savior, who had been driven out of their homes by an oppressive government and forced to live as a refugee family that couldn't find a home to take them in. After living for a time in another city in their own nation of Israel, they eventually fled all the way to Egypt to escape political persecution. What do I know of this?

There is, however, one way that my experience fishing is at least a bit like the waiting of Advent for a special arrival. Though waiting may require patience and even stillness, it is not passive. Rather, like many modern-day celebrations of Christmas, it is supposed to entail preparation. The Savior entered into the world to bring peace, and also justice for the oppressed, the poor, the stranger, and the refugee (which may be why he chose to be born to a family living in oppression). If we want to welcome that arrival, a good place to start our preparation is by practicing the same sort of peace, hospitality, and compassion. In these ways, as we are out in the world, we find Jesus—the very one we are waiting for—already present.

Wednesday, Day Eleven



Somewhere in the Judean Hills: Part One

JAMES CALVIN SCHAAP



And there were, that night, shepherds in the fields, keeping watch over our flocks, when waterfalls of light flooded into the darkness, let loose by a legion of heavenly hosts.

It had been a night like any other, each of us keeping one sleepy eye peeled on the flocks while Ezra, the boss, ran through who would be camp tender or herders or lambers. When the angels appeared on the black stage, no one could look away. But the minute the angels left, no one could remember where they came from or how they'd appeared. Suddenly, a whoosh of silver wings. No boom, no charge, just a bath of sparkling brightness.

I thought I might have died and gone to heaven. When I shielded my eyes, I realized I had tumbled to the ground. There we all sat, sprawled out as if a mighty wind had swept through. The angels' firepower made the desert hills shine. *Stunning*. Even before those angels spoke, even before they sang—just *stunning*.

I cocked an elbow beneath me, and when the voices came, the words hummed like a lullaby line. "Don't be afraid," they said. The angels' words awakened a joy we'd never known that spread all over the Judean hills.

“Incredible news,” the angels sang. “Not just for you guys but for all people.” They said it again—“for *all* people. For everyone.”

Their booming music erased every doubt. There we sat, bowled over, blind as bats in the astonishing radiance. “Today in the city of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Not one of us doubted. We should look for a sign, the angels said, a sign we couldn’t help but chuckle about just a few minutes later as we picked up our things for the trip. “You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes,” the angels told us, “and lying in a manger.”

“A savior—the Messiah!” Old Hadrian said, eyes starlight bright. “Honest to God, it’s the Messiah!” He shook his hoary head. “In a barn?” He raised both hands. “Glory be,” he said.

The hills turned inky dark again when those angels departed, but no one doubted what we’d seen because all of us had felt something pour like honey into our hearts. In ten minutes, no more, we were packed and ready to go to find this baby in “swaddling” clothes, whatever that was.

“Someone has to stay behind,” brother Ezra said. “We can’t all go. Someone has to stay with the sheep.”

The moment he said it, I knew it would be the youngest—me. Couldn’t be anyone else. The others were men. I was the kid. I’d be left behind.

“Surely the Lord will watch over the flock,” Brom said, pulling his rucksack over his shoulder. “Surely the angels will keep an eye peeled.” He pulled up his sleeves. “This is the Messiah—this is the King!”

“We can’t just leave ’em alone,” my brother said. “We can’t take that chance.”

“Bring them along,” Brother Brom said. “Round ’em up and herd ’em to Bethlehem, the whole flock.”

Ezra shook his head. “A roundup now? That child will be starting kindergarten by the time we get there.”

“I’ll stay,” I said. “I’m the youngest. I don’t want to—don’t get me wrong.” Ezra looked at me strangely. “But someone has to stay. Just make sure I hear the story when you return.”

The silence made it clear I’d be the one.

“Bless you, Jesse,” said Brom. “I don’t know if it’s right . . .”

“Just go,” I told him. “Find the stable with the manger.”

Brom mussed my hair. Hadrian punched my arm and squeezed my shoulder, and Arie laid his shepherd’s crook over my shoulder and mumbled something about thanks. It was—and I knew it—one of the best things I’d ever done, but also the worst. The command had been clear: “Go to Bethlehem. See the miracle.” Seriously, however, why wouldn’t God’s legions watch over the sheep on this very special night?

As soon as the men turned their backs, they were off, running toward this place called Bethlehem. In the pale moonlight, the sounds of their joy carried over open fields as if they were only an arm’s length away.

I stared out into the deep, starry sky. Here and there, a lamb bleated, most bedded down in cloudy clumps in the moonlit darkness. *Lousy sheep*, I told myself. I’d become a shepherd because my father and my brother were, and so many others. I loved the sky and the long hills and stars all around, loved the end of the day—and the beginning too, the glorious light of dawn. But I told myself right then that I’d never really liked sheep all that much. They were needy and silly, and tonight I was stuck with them, alone in the desert hills with a thousand brainless sheep.

I looked for the highest spot on the land, then started to climb. Tonight, the night of the angels, my job was to watch sheep. I felt like bawling. I’d never been left alone with them before. Even though I knew volunteering was the right thing to do, my heart

felt split as a melon because I so longed to be on the way to the King. There I was, alone, a million miles from joy.

The moon's glow opened up over the hills, and a scattered flock bedded down against stony ridges. I'd been around sheep my whole life, long enough to know their only sure defenses were noses that made them move into the wind, eyes sharp enough to pick out quick movements.

Maybe the choir of angels had worn them out, I thought. A million pinholes danced out of the nightfall. I turned east. The dawn was nowhere close to arriving. Ezra and the others wouldn't sleep—how could they? And I shouldn't. My job was to protect the sheep. I couldn't help but feel alone. I thought about a quick run back to get my baby brother, but Sammy was too little. I was alone and I was going to miss the biggest miracle of all—a king in a manger.

The sheep snored away the night. Nothing moved. Silence fell over me like a quilt, and my eyes grew heavy. I shook myself awake three times but heard no sound from the hushed hills. Painted images danced before me—a brand new baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, bathed in heavenly light, my friends all sweaty from the run, all of them on their knees.

“Glory to God in the highest”—it was like nothing I'd ever heard or seen before. I knew the night would be stuck in my memory forever.

I jumped awake. The hillside was so silent that my having to be there seemed silly. Who cared about sheep when the King had been born? I sat back, spread my legs out to lie down, and soon enough let myself go, bright ribbons of angel music playing through my soul.

“Jesse, the crook! Grab your crook.”

I rubbed my eyes. A robed man was looking west, a white bandana around his head. It wasn't Ezra, Brom, or any of them,

but I was foggy with sleep. Big shoulders, loud voice—someone who called me by name and knew I'd been napping. "Where?" I said. "What's happening?"

"Something's out there," the man said. "I can hear it—listen!"

A low rumble rose.

"Come with me!" The man pointed to my crook, then took off. I tried to stay with him, crook in my hand, sandals slapping over the sharp grass.

He put out a hand to signal me to stop. Still as a statue, he stood looking at a small flock rustled from sleep. He leaned into a crouch and signaled me to do the same. I was just an arm's reach behind him, and that's when I heard a hushed gurgling from behind a spiny oak cut in black silhouette against the night sky. A growl. A wolf. Probably two, maybe more.

A dozen sheep kept budging their way back toward us, snoots up against each other's flanks as they surged down the slope in reverse to keep the wolf in front of them.

"Behind the tree," the man whispered. "You take him, and I'll wait to see where the others show up." He pointed with his crook.

Ezra had taught me what to do when a wolf came, but I'd never stared one flat in the face, not alone anyway, until now.

"Go on," the man said. "That one may be the leader. If we run him off, the others may scatter—wherever they are."

The sheep kept staring at the shadowy oak while backing down the hill toward me.

"Just run?" I asked.

"You've got to scare him more than he scares you," the man said, nodding his head once more. "He's got to know he's not going to tangle with you."

The whole world seemed to disappear into the shadow created by that single oak tree. The low gurgling growl meandered

toward them from somewhere out there, somewhere from behind the tree.

“Run! Go right at him!” the man said. “Just run.”

So I did. I gathered courage into the tightest fist I could and took off, circled the flock to the left and ran directly at the tree, crook in hand like a sword, until I came close enough to see him.

That wolf was even bigger than he'd been in my imagination, gray and dark and wide across the face. Bright and shiny eyes glowed with devil's glitter. I didn't move—not a muscle, as if I wasn't scared. I stopped a crook's length away so the two of us, frozen in time, stared wildly at each other.

“Scream!” the man in the bandana yelled. “Swing that thing in your hands and scream!”

I couldn't raise my arms. The monster wolf's eyes were glowing hot embers. His growl grew into something fierce, and he deepened his crouch as if to take a flying leap. I imagined myself being dragged to the ground, felt its teeth in my legs and shoulders.

“Run him off!” the man from town yelled from behind me. “Run him off!”

I took the crook in both hands and pulled it back behind my head. I swung that stick with so much force that I almost lost my footing. The crook thudded into the wolf's ribs, and that beast yelped like a puppy before scrambling off into the darkness.

“And don't you ever, ever come back, you devil!” I screamed.

When I turned around, I saw the sheep had vanished too, scared off just like the wolf had been. I wiped away my sweat with the back of my arm and looked into the darkness. “He was alone?” I asked the guy, without looking back.

There was no reply.

The sheep were gone, but so was he. I stepped back from around that spiny oak where the wolf had crouched, then listened, once again,

to the sounds of nightfall, trying to hear any sound at all coming from the broad and hidden hillsides. No sound—nothing at all.

I had no idea where they'd gone—or the man in the bandana who had awakened me to all the danger. No idea.

I was alone in the darkest hour of night.

Thursday, Day Twelve



Somewhere in the Judean Hills: Part Two

JAMES CALVIN SCHAAP



I wished the others had seen the way I'd taken care of that ratty wolf, but then again, maybe they wouldn't care after following the angels into town for the baby King in swaddling clothes. Those fierce yellow eyes had made me nearly forget where they all were.

If it hadn't been for the stranger, there would be a very sad story to tell, for no matter whether that wolf was alone or in a pack, he would have feasted on a lamb or two, maybe ten. He would have then left them bloody and dead, or maybe still dying, while I slept. My brothers would return to find dead, mangled sheep, which would be terrible because the men would be so full of joy. That baby in swaddling clothes was the Messiah, the angels had said. Real live angels, too. Right in front of us, filling the sky.

Hours had passed now, and with every minute it seemed harder to believe that what the angels had proclaimed could be true. I looked up at the sky, at the darkness. I hadn't forgotten. How could anyone ever forget?

But who was the man who had appeared out of nowhere? Thanks be to God, I'd run off that wolf and done the job I'd been left behind to do. There would be that to say when the others returned.

I looked out into the darkness, then listened for stirring. No sound. I wished the guy in the white bandana would show up again because I needed to thank him for so much.

Stones rattled beneath the hooves of some pokey animal coming up the path, but when a snorting blast leaped out of the darkness, I knew it had to be Boaz, the old ram who always kept his distance from the flock—Boaz, the field general, who had a thing about me.

“Not to worry, sir,” I said. “That wolf is long gone. Ought to be quiet now, I’m sure, even after all that music.”

I dug my fingers into the wool behind the old guy’s ears, just like I always had after he took me on. “You see ’em, Boaz?” I asked the old guy. “Did you see all those angels up there in the sky?”

Boaz nodded his hoary old head, then pulled away.

I got to my feet and stood for a moment. *A King in a manger*, I thought again. “You ever hear of such a thing, Boaz? How nuts is that anyway—a king in a barn?”

Boaz snorted then turned his head back and gave me a blank stare.

“Ah, you’re a sheep,” I told him. “I just wish I was there, you know—who wouldn’t want to be?”

Boaz stomped off, looked back at me, snorted a couple of times again, and went halfway into the darkness.

Somehow, I got to thinking that Boaz maybe had something on his mind. I caught myself yawning again. I could feel sleep creeping back into me, but Boaz seemed to want to tell me something. I looked around, hoping to find the guy in the bandana, and I wondered how long it might be before the guys returned to tell me what great things they’d seen.

Then Boaz turned on a dime and charged me, came right up the path as if he wanted to knock me off my feet. Then he turned around again and trotted off into the darkness, lifted his big head, and bleated.

“Okay, okay,” I said.

Just down the hill he went, toward some rocks, but he was always in the moonlight. I stepped along carefully through the sharp grass and stones, wishing I were as nimble as Boaz, whose shoulders rocked as he walked.

The ewe lay on her side, almost motionless, in a dusty circle where she’d tried to create a bed. When I came up beside her, I knelt down and put my hands on her stomach to be sure she was breathing. She had just now had a lamb, or maybe even two. I looked around to find them but found only one, in a puddle of afterbirth, dead.

The ewe’s ribcage moved with a few faint breaths. She was still alive. I’d seen dozens and dozens of births, but I’d never seen a ewe quite like this. There was no bleeding. The lamb had probably been born dead, but it didn’t look as if its mother had suffered greatly, even though it seemed she was dying.

“What must I do?” I said to Boaz, but the old ram simply stared. “I don’t know what to do,” I said. “She doesn’t seem to be in trouble—it’s almost as if she wants to die. Is that it? What must I do? Good Lord,” I said, “I don’t know what to do.”

I got down on my hands and knees beside her and rubbed her head. I laid my arm around her and felt slight heaves through her body when she grasped for breath. She wasn’t fighting. It was almost as if she didn’t want to breathe.

I slipped my feet from under me so that my body would be closer to hers.

“You’re doing it right,” a voice said, a voice I knew belonged to the man with the white bandana. “Don’t get up. Just stay right there—you’re doing the right thing.”

“Her baby is dead.” I said. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Let me take care of that,” he said.

“Must have died when she was being born, but there’s nothing here that makes it look as if it was an awful delivery—not even much blood.”

“You’re doing the right thing,” he told me. “Stay there. What that mother needs is you beside her.”

“What can I do?” I said.

“Bring her peace.”

“I don’t want her to die,” I told him. “I want her to live.”

“You’re doing the right thing,” the man said. “Let me take care of things, you hear? You stay with her, just stay put—all night even.”

“Seriously?” I asked.

“Every living thing needs comfort—every living thing needs love,” he said. “I’ll get her little one out of here. That’ll help.” He heard the man get back to his feet. “Just stay right there until morning—whether she lives or dies, she needs you.”

When I felt her ribs, it seemed they were barely moving.

I didn’t hear my brother and the rest of the guys return that morning, even though they were singing as they came up the side of the hill. I was sleeping. Big brother Ezra was in no mood to scold me for falling asleep.

“I’m so sorry,” Ezra said, looming over me almost mournfully. “I was out of my head last night after the angels came.” He slapped his forehead. “I should *not* have let you stay with the sheep—that was *my* job. I should have let you go.”

“To the King?” I said quickly.

“The same. We found him all right, in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”

“You were there?”

“In a manger and yet a king.” Ezra shook his head.

“Praise God,” I said.

Ezra's face was bright red in the morning light, as if he'd been looking into the sun all night long. "The angels were there—this time in silence, like all of us, even his mother. Just a girl she was, Jesse. Not much older than you. The King is the child of a child."

"And you were there?"

Brother Ezra took a deep breath. "I should never have let you stay. You're too young." His dusty robe danced beneath his long hair when he shrugged his shoulders. "I wanted so badly to be there at the birth of our King." He threw his arms around me. "You go now, by yourself, back to Bethlehem, go see for yourself," Ezra said. "My little brother needs to see the King."

My heart was hammering so hard I thought it might jump right out of my chest.

Still, there was so much to tell Ezra—the wolf, the stranger, the ewe who probably died. That's when I looked around. The sad mom was no longer beside me. Maybe it was all a dream. *No, it really did happen*, I told myself.

"How'd you get way over here anyway?" Ezra said.

"There was a ewe here," I said, but I realized it would be a long story, too long. "A baby lamb died, Ezra—and the mother . . ." He looked around. There was no trace of anything anywhere near. "I was with the mother," I said. "I was lying here with the mother because the man—"

There was so much to say, but no stories seemed so important as the Bethlehem king. Here, I pointed, because the baby, the little lamb, was already gone. The dusty earth around me was thick with tufts of sharp desert grasses, but no mother or baby.

"Never mind, never mind," Ezra said. "Go and see what has given all of us such joy." He reached into his rucksack and took out some jerky and berries and bent down. I felt my brother's kiss on the top of my head. "To us a child is born, to us a King."

* * *

The hills seemed to fall away beneath me, little more than the smooth surface of the sea. I ran when I could, slowed to get my breath when I had to, climbed the hills like a goat, and streamed down the other side as if I were aboard a wave, the wind at my back. In my mind, I'd hidden away the map my brother had drawn in the sand, so I knew exactly where to go.

When I arrived, I slipped my arms out of my rucksack, wondering how one entered the palace, even if the palace was a stable. The doors were closed. Was I supposed to knock? Should I remove my sandals?

I licked my hand and pushed back the hair from my face, trying to look clean—not just some shepherd boy from the hills of Judea. There I stood at the door, listening for anything, even the cry of this baby, the King. Nothing. There was no sound at all.

Bethlehem was moving along as if nothing had happened—merchants opening their shops, mothers milling about and choosing what they needed, children playing behind me in the streets. Old men in gray beards sat on benches, leaning on their canes, pointing into the hills from which I'd come.

I knocked on the loose barn door politely, then pounded it with the heel of my hand. *Bang, bang, bang*—I couldn't have been mistaken.

I had seen the angels, too, and heard them; their voices were still ringing. "Be not afraid," they chanted over and over. I lifted the latch an inch or so, then waited, but no sound came from within. I wanted that glow I'd seen in my brother's face. I stood there, the door opened a bit, and a long shaft of light from the crack I'd made was running along the floor in front of me.

No one was there.

I opened the door wider, and light fell in all around. Just an empty manger in the center of the stable. A murky cloud of sadness

pressed something inside me, tears from my own broken heart. No child who had become a mother. No angels. No king. No savior.

“He is not here, but he is not gone,” a voice said, from the silhouetted figure at the door behind me. “Don’t be afraid. He is safe. He is a child and a king, but he is not here.”

“Where have they taken him?” I asked, running back toward the door. “My brother sent me here to see the baby King.”

The man’s face was guarded and dark. Then, in a flash that came to me just as those angels had done, I knew. The man in the bandana was back. He took a guarded look up and down the streets outside, then shut the door behind him.

“You were with me last night,” I said. “You were beside me, all the time.”

The man nodded. “I wish you could have seen him,” the stranger told him. “But when King Herod heard of him, his parents thought it best to leave—they’ve gone to Egypt.”

“To Egypt?” It seemed impossible.

“He is still the King,” the man said. “Fear not.”

“But I wanted to see him—I wanted to see the baby.”

“There will be time,” the man said.

“My brother said it was the best thing he’d ever seen.”

“You will too,” the stranger told him. “I know you will.”

“Not here?”

“Not here, but in all his glory, he will return,” the man in the bandana said. “You will see him yourself—I know you will.”

“Not as a baby.”

“Not as a baby, but never as anything less than King.” He put a hand on my shoulder. “Now go back to the hills—go back to the sheep.”

Honestly, I had to wipe back tears. “I don’t want to go back—I want to see the King,” I told him. “I want to serve the King.”

“The sheep are his, my son,” he said. “The sheep belong to the King. You will serve him as you serve them—as you did last night. They are his own.” He bent down and looked into my eyes, his hand still on his shoulder. “Someday the King will tell the world that he is the good shepherd,” the man said. “He will say it and you will know.”

“And I will see him?” I asked.

“Face to face, I swear.” And then he put his arms around me. “But it’s time for you to go back to the hills, to the sheep. There will be a sign, too. It’s time for you to be what the King wants you to be—like him, a good shepherd.”

I couldn’t help myself. “You’re an angel, aren’t you?” I asked. “You’re one of those who came to us on the hills, out of the darkness—you’re one of those who sang, one of those who told us to go to the city of David for Christ the Lord?”

Just like that, the man in the white bandana slipped away, disappearing into the half-darkness of an empty stable.

The hills never seemed so steep or so high as when I returned. It would be difficult to tell Ezra that no baby lay in the stable, that the King had been stolen away because King Herod wanted to find him.

The sun stood up above the hills like a great, golden shepherd, but the air was cool and light; and while the hike went slowly, I kept hearing the promises the angel in a white bandana had brought me.

When I saw old Boaz, the grandpa ram who had awakened me just last night, it was as if nothing had happened between us. The old guy gathered his gait into a run and came galloping down the side of the hill, his face up into the wind. He didn’t stop for a moment but ran right into me, knocking me down the way he loved to do.

That's when I saw the ewe who had lost her lamb and wanted so badly to die. Right there with Boaz was the ewe I'd stayed to comfort, and she had made it. She was alive. There she stood beside Boaz.

"There will be a sign," that angel had told me. When I looked into the eyes of that mother ewe, I couldn't help but think she was the sign the angel promised, because it wasn't a dream—nothing that happened last night was a dream.

Then what he had told me was true too: someday I'd see the King myself. I'd hear him speak and say that he was the good shepherd.

Thanks be to God, I told myself. Thanks be to God.

Part Two

Jesus, Born in Us

THE SECOND PART OF OUR ANTHOLOGY, “Jesus, Born in Us,” begins to answer the *So what?* question posed by the incarnation. As Luci Shaw reminds us, “Jesus himself gleams through / our high heart notes.” Or as Diane Glancy confesses, “My wayward heart is the manger into which he was born.” Or as Jill Peláez Baumgaertner testifies, “His spirit muscles us, he lunges / for our breath.” Walter Wangerin Jr. tells the story of discovering the physical presence of Christ in his mother who has just taken Communion. “It’s Jesus inside of me,” she tells him. (That is a story he thinks might be from Easter week, but it might as well be Christmas!) In short, because Jesus was born, each one of us can be born again. And again. “Now,” says the wise old man in Gina Ochsner’s short story, “go and fly as only you can.”

* *
After the Annunciation

JILL PELÁEZ BAUMGAERTNER



He tumbles, toeing the walls of his captivity,
hears her muffled chatter, tastes the fog
of the sweet foods she eats, is startled
by the noise of saw on wood, the pounding
of nails. The amniotic fluid in his throat
teaches him to swallow. Much later, he
learns pain as his neurons begin
to fire. This was before.

After, he upends us as he somersaults
our vision. Our words, yes, he as Word
words us. We taste the savor
of the bread, the spice of wine,
his lifeblood coursing our hearts' chambers.
He is pulse born. He is pulse borne.

His spirit muscles us, he lunges
for our breath. He is where we are.
He feels the lilt of our delights,
the blazes of our sufferings.

Fresh as new skin, taut as nerve strings,
he drums and whistles us, our beat, our melody.
Our bodies know his gifts.
Our everlasting bodies.

Wednesday, Day Eighteen

He Came to Even Me:
A Reader's Theater



LESLIE LEYLAND FIELDS



CAST

Mary	Peter	Paul
Joseph	Herod	Julia
Shepherd Boy	Innkeeper	
Anna	Pilate	

NOTES

- The characters on stage are not frozen. They visibly listen and respond to those who come up and speak.
- In between the characters' entrances, congregational songs and carols may be added.

House lights are dimmed. Just soft lights on the platform.

Julia, in contemporary dress, slowly walks up the aisle to the platform, holding the Christ candle. She holds it almost reverentially. Places it slowly, gently in the center of the Communion table in center stage. She lights the candle. Stands for a moment regarding it, slowly walks back down the aisle.

Mary *walks down the aisle holding an unlit candle in a candlestick; she speaks reflectively.*

He came to me. . . . At the wrong time. I wasn't married—yet. I was so young. I almost lost my husband because of him. . . . I grew large and heavy, carrying him. He was heavy. He was always heavy. Always weighed on my heart, especially as he got older. I knew who the angel said he was. I raised him and fed him and tucked him in at night, but I was watching him all the time. Everything he did was so . . . so, right, so . . . good. Even at the end. I knew he would make all things right. This twisted, sorry world—he would make it right and whole again. . . . I don't know why I was chosen. But I do know that I was waiting for him. Maybe that's why he came to me—because I was looking for him.

She lights her candle with the Christ candle. Sets it down in front of her.

Joseph coming from the pews or the aisle; holding unlit candle in his hand; stands next to Mary; he looks at her, then speaks.

He came to me too. First the angel came, and what he said, I didn't believe. My betrothed is pregnant by someone else! I was furious! This was not the Mary I knew! And then the angel came and told me. I would have turned her out, her and someone else's baby, if I didn't know. . . . Then he was born. I hadn't been a father yet—what did I know about being a father? But I learned, day by day. I loved him. Every day of his life, I loved him. Mary and I, we never got over it, that the God over all, YHWH, would choose us to raise his son. No one chooses people like us . . .

Joseph brings his candle, lights it from the Christ candle and sets it beside her.

Shepherd Boy comes up from a pew; stands beside Mary.

He came to me too. I was out doing my job, like I had been taught all my life. Taking care of the sheep. I watch them like they're my own family. I was kinda sleeping—we all were. It was night, the sheep were lying down, all asleep—and then it happened. The whole sky, like it burst, and like pieces of heaven falling out—all of these angels! It was about him . . . about him coming, being born and . . . I don't know why heaven opened up to us that night. Everything so white and bright and—holy! 'Cause we're the dirty men, they call us. We always stink like sheep, everyone says. No one comes around us. But he did! He came to us! Us dirty people . . .

Lights candle from the Christ candle. Mary and Joseph watch him do this.

Innkeeper comes down aisle with a candle in his hand, but no candlestick.

Yep, he came to me too. (Looks at the unlit candle in his hand.) I saw him, first in his mother's belly. I knew she would have him anytime—but my house was full! Every room in my boarding house—taken. I turned them away. I didn't have to. I could have moved some people around, juggled here and there. I could have made room in my house. But I didn't. I'd have to return some money. It would make my other customers unhappy. They didn't have any money anyway. So yeah, he came to me, and I sent him into the barn with the animals. I heard some of those shepherds calling him a king. . . . Kings aren't born in barns, you know? Not even in good hotels, like mine. King or not, I don't really care. But I'm not gonna just give my rooms away. It's a business. I'd do it again, too.

Looks at the candle in his hand, at their lit candles on the table, puts his down forcefully on the table. Walks to the side. Doesn't join the group.

Herod *walks up on stage boldly, swaggering.*

He *didn't* come to me. If he had, that would have made things so much easier! And you all wouldn't be standing there with your little candles. I heard about it: "A king is born. King of the Jews!" *I'm king!* There's no other king! Then came these astrologers, foreigners. They were going to find him for me! But they tricked me . . . they never came back. Well, there's more than one way to take care of the problem. I had them all killed, all the babies two and under. Simple. You eliminate the opposition. It's what a good king does. You think I did "wrong"? You want to blame someone? Blame those astrologers, those peculiar men. If they had come back and brought the child to me—I wouldn't have had to kill all the others. Just him! There's only one king.

Elbows everyone aside until he's right in front of all the candles. He blows out everyone's candle and tries to blow out the Christ candle—but cannot. Frustrated, he leaves to sit on a "throne" behind and to the side of center stage so he is still visible to the audience.

Anna *comes up, walks past Herod, gives him an angry look.*

He *was* the king; he *is* the king! He came to me too. But I had to wait a very long time. I was eighty-four. He was eight days old. Can you see that: me, the old woman holding this child, this just-born king? In the temple all those years. I told everyone the Messiah was coming! Not many believed me. Not many remembered to wait. Sometimes during those years, I think I forgot what I was waiting for. And when he came and Mary put him in my arms—*Mary, do you remember that?*—I knew it was true. All I had said, all I had hoped for: the Messiah! Come to save his people! And I just laughed, later, by myself.