

Christmas Eve - 2022

“The Inn-keeper: 30 Years On...”

I had given them space in the stable that night as there was - somewhat famously - “no room in the Inn...”

I had made room for them so that *he* could be born - surrounded by animals and straw and feed - illuminated by a star I had never before seen...

I stood amazed as shepherds came in from the fields, and angels appeared in the night sky...

I have never had a night like it in the past, nor had I in the years that followed. I am still trying to make sense of it all.

You may not remember me - my story was told more than a few years ago. I was (still am, actually...) - the inn-keeper who welcomed the child to this world. Sure, I get the occasional bit of bad press when it comes to sticking them out back, with the animals, in the stable. But what would you have done, if you had been in my shoes...?

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I started that evening as a grump. There were so many people... making so many demands... and not all of them were kind in the way they “asked” for things of me. It was a rough night, and not one I wanted to repeat.

At least, that is, until I noticed the star... and the light it shone upon the hills surrounding this little town of Bethlehem. And in that light, I saw them - walking tiredly, and with no small amount of resignation, up the hill to my small inn.

Not sure what I was thinking at the time, I offered them space in the stable (we were packed to the rafters on the inside). As I said to myself back then - *you'd have thought I'd offered them a suite at the King's Palace... so glad were they to have a place to stop... to rest... to lay their heads. Such a difference from so many of the other guests.* There was something about them - even then - that would later come to light. And - even then - a sense of peace settled on and over the inn, and all within.

After I saw to their needs, I sat down, exhausted - and had the most remarkable dream - of angels... and the light of glory... and of the song. It was a song of joy and hope... and promise and peace. But it was a song that I could not then sing. It was a song sung by others, while I looked on - and yearned to be a part of the singing... yearned to give voice to the same joy and hope and peace. But I could not yet do that...

... I was on the outside - looking in.

I awoke to the sound of a newborn's cry. I was back in my chair at the inn. The angels were gone, the song had been stilled. But - I was awake to a sense of peace and calm that I had not known before. Something had changed. The earth had moved - from a place of discord to a realm of peace. Or - at least... in that brief waking moment - so it seemed to me.

I got up to see what had happened, and came across a tableau that stays with me to this day. The mother and child, with the father looking on (I had not even noticed she was with child... but there they were). And all the animals - strangely silent, and - attentive. Attentive to the child on whom the light of that star shone.

But even then... even with all that I was seeing and sensing that was unlike anything I had seen before - I wondered: was I making too much of this? Weren't they parents just like every other new mother and father...? Wasn't this baby just another newborn - come to bring delight to his parents (and - possibly - a little agitation later in their lives...)? Maybe I had yet to fully waken from my dream...

And then - the shepherds came. And following them - the angels. And then - I knew. And my voice was joined to theirs as I sang the song of glory and joy and hope.

And then...

- they left.

I'm still wondering what it meant... I'm unsure of where it will go and how it will end. But I carry the memory of that night - however faded - in my head and in my heart.

The years passed and the routine broke back in. Guests came, and guests went. Business was good, and I expanded my little inn. I had less and less time to remember. Less and less time to wonder. But every now then - when the Romans pushed down a little harder on my people... when travelers stopped traveling and kept to their homes - every now and then, I sat in my chair - the chair where I had dreamed... the chair from which a baby's mewling cry brought my back from my dreams, and I thought of that night. I thought of them. I thought of *him*.

And here we are - some 30 years or so later on.

Rumours run through the currents of our land - about a rabbi. Some say of him that he is a teacher such as they have never known. Others tell of miracles and healings - performed by the same man. A certain element of society sees in him the promise of deliverance - out from under the harsh yoke of Roman rule. And I wonder - how the same man who says "Let the little children come to me, for it is to such as these that belongs the Kingdom of Heaven..." - how could this man be a general to lead an armed uprising?

But... the people are fired up. This rabbi has captured their imagination. Some are angry with him - he is upsetting the apple cart, and it can't be that long before the Romans react. Others wonder just what it is he intends to do. And still others ignore him as just another in a long list of would-be saviours.

And I think back to that sense of overwhelming peace I felt in the stable - with the animals and the shepherds and the angels. Some of the snippets I'm hearing make me think this is that baby - grown to be a man. But I wonder - if it is he, where is the peace...? Where is that sense that another world... another kingdom... has broken through and stands within our grasp?

Well, you can only listen to so many rumours before you have to get up out of your chair and go see for yourself. I heard he was just up Bethany-ways, going back and forth to Jerusalem, so - I turned things over to my sons and made my way north - to see for myself. To see if this rabbi was that baby - grown up. To see if this child - now a man - could still bring me peace.

I found an inn where I could stay - and asked about accommodations in the stable (my donkey was limping a bit, and I wanted to be near). They had such a room, and it served my needs well. I got her settled, and went into town to see what I could see...

And O my - what I saw...! What I heard...!

This rabbi - Jesus - had come into town on a donkey to great fanfare and no small amount of concern. Some said he would overthrow the Romans. Others were afraid he would bring ruin on us all. He went to the Temple and threw out the merchants. The leaders of the people were irate. On and on it went...

The polarization was palpable. There was no middle ground. All it would take was one tiny spark to set the town ablaze.

And *this* was the baby of my dreams...?

What went wrong?

I still hadn't seen him, but had heard more than I could take in. I went back to the inn for supper, and to see that my donkey was bedded down before turning in myself.

And - maybe it's something about stables... but I had another dream.

I was back in my stable... all those years ago... with the young couple (Mary and Joseph were their names) - and the animals and the shepherds and the angels - it was all just like I remembered it. Except - everyone and everything was still - as if they were carved from stone. I heard a noise coming from behind me, and while I could turn my head to see - my feet were rooted in the ground. If they had been free, I would surely have run away. For a lion was walking into our midst - as stately as can be.

He walked right up to the manger where the baby lay. I wanted to cry out. I looked around for something to defend myself with... to defend the babe - but saw nothing (and - could not have moved to get it even if something was there...).

But then - the most amazing thing happened. A little lamb followed the lion into our midst. They both moved close to the child. And there - they knelt. Actually, it seemed more like they bowed down, as if in worship, or - as one would do when in the presence of a King.

At this thought, a brilliant light burst forth from the manger, and the baby sat up. Except... it was no longer a baby, but a man - a bruised and battered and bloody man - with a crown of thorns on his head, and wounds showing in his hands and side. And I wondered at this, until the lamb and the lion both drew closer and licked his wounds - and in this cleansing - he was transformed. All robed in white, with the crown of thorns replaced by a circlet of pure light. And the lion stood on one side, while the lamb stood on the other.

And, he spoke to me.

Now, when I say he spoke to me, there were no words that I could write down here. Rather, it was that he spoke to my heart... he was "in" my mind... and I knew...

I knew that this was the child, and that the peace I had known so many years ago was real - but that it came at great cost. That I had no cause to fear the lion, for he brought the gift of a righteous reign... a kingdom not of this earth, but one that we could bring to life in the manner of our living.

I knew that the lamb would be slain, and that by this sacrifice - we would know the joy and the hope and the promise of which the angels had sung.

And all this was happening right then - as I slept.

I would never get to see this rabbi, for by the time I awoke, he was already in the tomb. But I knew what was coming. While others ran this way or that, or - cowered in fear and looked for where to hide - I knew that this rabbi would yet live. For he had spoken to me, not as one in a dream... or as one who was bound to this earth... but as one who lived beyond all space and time, and - who was alive even now.

And in this, I thought back to the baby in the manger in my stable at his birth. I had seen him bruised and battered and beaten... I had seen what transpired when they nailed him to the tree... I had seen all that when he spoke to me - and I was able to put the pieces all together.

He came to offer sacrifice, because so great was our need, that so great a sacrifice was needed. His very coming... his birth in such humble circumstances... that this was in itself the beginning of his sacrifices on our behalf. For how could such a one - who lives beyond all space and time - come to be one of us, limited by space and time? How could such a one - lion and lamb together - have come to this world as he did...?

And all I could think of... was love.

I must be loved beyond all measure for such as this to have been offered. We must be loved for this to be the gift that has been given. And in this certainty, I found the peace that I had first felt so many years before...