

## Reading

The people walking in darkness  
are seeing a brilliant light –  
upon those who dwell in a land of deep shadows  
light is shining!

God, you have made the nation greater –  
you have brought them abundant joy!  
They celebrate in your presence  
as with the harvest celebrations,  
or as warriors celebrate when dividing spoils.

For the yoke that burdened them,  
The weight on their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressors –  
you have shattered it,  
as you did at the defeat of Midian.

For every boot that tramped in battle,  
every cloak that was dragged through blood,  
is now used as fuel for the fire.

For a child is born to us,  
an heir is given us,  
upon whose shoulders  
dominion will rest.

This One shall be called  
Wonderful Counsellor, the Strength of God,  
Eternal Protector, Champion of Peace.

This dominion, and this peace,  
will grow without end,  
with David's throne and realm  
sustained with justice and fairness,  
now and forever.

For the zeal of Yahweh Omnipotent  
will accomplish it.

## The Prophet

I wrote this poem to celebrate the birth of a child in a dark time. Babylon was at our gates, and we had previously seen our friends in the north taken away, never to return. Would this be the end of our people, in the same way the Assyrian invasion had been for the kingdom of Israel? People needed hope – they needed hope to know that Yahweh would save them. They needed hope to this is not the end.

In the Jewish tradition of Midrash, each generation can encounter this story in new ways and with new meaning. In that tradition the early Christians saw the child born as the Messiah. Let us see how the author called Luke tells the story.

## Reading

In those days, Caesar Augustus published a decree ordering a census of the whole Roman world. This first census took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All the people were instructed to go back to the towns of their birth to register. And so

Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to “the city of David” – Bethlehem, in Judea, because Joseph was of the house and lineage of David, he went to register with Mary, his espoused wife, who was pregnant.

## Man

I knew Joseph as a boy. It all seems so long ago that child who ran in the streets, playing with other children when he had finished his chores at home. He grew up here in Bethlehem and like other boys learnt his trade at his father's knee. I still remember how proud he was the first time his father took him with to the building site to start learning the real work. Being a Technon was hard work and could easily be dangerous. I was a bit anxious to see this lovely young man going off to learn his trade. You see, the masters did not really care about the safety of us workers; accidents could easily happen and many a healthy young man on a building site would come home broken for life.

But Joseph was careful, or perhaps lucky, and he survived to become quite a good Technon. He could do all the important jobs – carpentry, brick laying, preparing a floor for the artisans. It was a shame there was no chance he could learn other skills and get a better job, but such is the lot of a poor village boy. Then one day when times were hard, he heard the Romans were building a town called Sephoris. It was a long walk to get there – many days – but the work was good for a promising young Technon and the village of Nazareth was only a short walk over the hill. We didn't expect to hear from Joseph again, not until the work had dried up in Galilee, so I guess the census was a blessing in disguise.

When Joseph and his young wife Mary turned up, the place was heaving – relatives from all over had already arrived, so there were kids and people everywhere. Mary looked like she was about to pop, so some of the women took her to the only quiet space – the animal barn under the house – so she could at least have some peace. Meanwhile, Joseph and I caught up on what had been happening since he had left Bethlehem.

It turns out the couple had not been married that long – less than six months ago. I'm not sure if I would have married my wife if I had known she was already pregnant, even with this story about an angel. Still, I can understand why Joseph did not want to take the usual actions of putting her aside or having her stoned. He was a stranger in a village, so perhaps this was his opportunity to marry into an otherwise good family. And Joseph always was a thoughtful boy and willing to stand up to bullies. He's going to need it to counter the village gossip when he goes back to Nazareth, so maybe he is the best person to support this girl and her baby. What can I say other than I wish him luck. It makes me think there might be more to this than meets the eye.

## Reading

While they were there, the time came for her delivery. She gave birth to her firstborn, a son; she put him in a simple cloth wrapped like a receiving blanket, and laid him in a feeding trough for the cattle, because there was no room for them in the guest room.

## Woman

It was late in the afternoon when they came – Joseph and his new wife Mary. We ran out to greet him, the long-lost son come home again, but then I caught a glimpse of her face. So young. So tired. Heavily pregnant and with that tell-tale

periodic grimace of pain. I just wanted to take her in my arms and make her comfortable, but I thought of the living area upstairs full of people – full of men – having come home to Bethlehem for the census, busily catching up with each other. Children were running everywhere. It was noisy and chaotic, and not the place to have the baby who was clearly coming very soon.

I sent one of the older girls to fetch a couple of the women experienced in these matters and we helped Mary into the animal shelter. At least here she could have some peace and quiet as she laboured away. We cleaned it up a bit, made a bed of fresh straw, and got together everything we would need to support Mary.

Poor kid! What an introduction to a woman's life. She would have expected to have her first child surrounded by the women she had grown up with, women she already knew. It must have been awful to have had to journey for days, knowing her time was near and wondering if she would have to have the baby on her own on the side of the road. I would not want to see any of my daughters going through what Mary had just been through. But she is here now, and the midwives of the family can support her through this next stage.

Bubs came alright – yelling the house down! “With a voice like that, he'll make a good preacher” my sister said and Mary smiled weakly. I think she was just relieved it was all over. We tidied them both up and settled them both to have a good sleep. Helping a woman give birth is a magical experience – it's amazing to watch the start of a new life – and I am glad we could be there for that poor girl so far from everyone she knew. As I do with every baby, I looked at this tiny baby and wondered what life would bring him. All that potential gathered up in a fragile child – what will become of him?

## Reading

There were shepherds in the area living in the fields and keeping night watch by taking turns over their flock. The angel of God appeared to them, and the glory of God shone around them; they were very much afraid.

The angel said to them, “You have nothing to fear! I come to proclaim good news to you – news of a great joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in David's city, a saviour – the Messiah – has been born to you. Let this be a sign to you: you'll find an infant wrapped in a simple cloth, lying in a manger”

Suddenly, there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying,

Glory to God in high heaven!

And on earth, peace to those on whom the favour of God rests.

## Angel

It's not bad being an angel, though it's sometimes just a whole lot of choir practice. Every-so-often, though, we get to go and have a chat to a human so we can live up to our name as Messengers from God. Usually this is to someone who is IMPORTANT – a prophet or a king, perhaps. I had missed out on a couple of recent messages, so I was a bit keen to go, even if it was just to be in the choir. It must be someone really important if the whole choir is going – that's a very rare event. I wonder who is so important.

Well, it turned out we were just visiting a mob of shepherds. I mean shepherds – I know there's that tradition about kings being like shepherds, but really, that's just

romanticised flap-trap. How to explain it? You know, there's work that needs to be done and no body want to do it, so you give it to the people who don't have a voice and are just pleased to keep themselves from completely starving... well, that's the job given to the shepherds. Plus, they smell. Why are we going to shepherds to give this news?

And it turns out the news is about the birth of the Messiah – surely that's news to give to the important people and not to ... shepherds? Wouldn't the priests and lawyers want to know about this so they can make all the appropriate arrangements? What on earth could shepherds do with that news? This is simply ridiculous. I know humans often get things the wrong way round, but it looks like God is making these arrangements to take the micky out of them!

I can't help but wonder if instead God is making a statement about the Messiah's ministry. Perhaps this messiah will be different to what we all expect.

## Reading

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see this event that God has made known to us." They hurried and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger, once they saw this, they reported what had been told concerning the child. All who heard about it were astonished at the report given by the shepherds.

Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart. The shepherds went away glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as they had been told.

## Shepherd

I was sitting around with my mates, a couple of dogs and, of course, the sheep and goats. Sheep are easy. They do as they are told without thinking much. Get one going in the right direction and the rest will follow. Goats, on the other hand, are the opposite. If goats don't respect you, they won't do what you say and they have a wicked sense of humour.

Anyways, so there we were yarning around the campfire trying to keep warm on a night that was anything but, and sharing the grog and what tucker we had. Suddenly the sky light right up like you've never seen it and we were told about this bub born not too far away followed by a whole hallelujah chorus.

First, I wondered if one of my mates had put something extra in the grog for a laugh. Then, when I realised we could all see them, I wondered if it was a group of God-botherers coming to bother us as well, though why they would come out here is beyond me.

Well, we decided to go and see the kid but still felt a bit scared. I mean, we were shepherds. If we were near a village and anything went wrong, we would get the blame whether or not it was us. People didn't want us near them. They needed us, alright, but they didn't want us. We are the untouchables of our world.

How would this family react to a mob of shepherds coming to visit at night. If they believe the stereotypes, they will be terrified. The men will force us to go away. Besides, men aren't really welcome just after a baby is born, not even the father. So why are we putting ourselves through all of that... again. Well, it was something to do with the message we were given. Something in that gave us a flicker of hope.

I knocked on the door quietly, almost hoping they wouldn't answer, but someone did and I saw the suspicion flash in his eyes. I tried to use their lingo as I explained why we had come and his eyes suddenly smiled. He called to one of the women who led us from the chaos of the crowded guestroom to the animal shelter and there he was – the tiny bub, his exhausted mother nursing him.

We didn't stay long – they all looked as if they needed their rest – but in that time we were treated kindly... more kindly than I had been treated for a long time. In that moment I was once again just another human being, just as they were, and I remembered that I was also a child of God.

### The Prophet

Is this just a story about long ago that when we look at it from an historical perspective has questionable details or is it something more? This story foreshadows the person Jesus was to become, what his ministry looked like, and his message of God's love for all.

I wonder who would be in this scene if it was happening today. Where would you be in this story? Who would make up the other characters? Most importantly, are you going to leave this here as a cute story for this time of year, or will you take it with you into your daily life through the year ahead?