

Sermon Scripts Advent-Christmas Season

By Craig S. Pesti-Strobel

Copyright © 2017 by Craig S. Pesti-Strobel
All rights reserved.

Permission granted for performance in worship services or church
gatherings provided credit is given:
*“Copyright© 2017, Craig S. Pesti-Strobel, all rights reserved. Permission
granted for performance granted by the author.”*

Interview With an Angel

First performed November 28, 2010

© 2010 by Craig S. Strobel

Host

Good morning, good morning! Welcome to the Sunday Show. This morning we have a very special guest with us. Every year about this time, stores and radios begin playing Christmas carols and songs about babies in mangers, angels and shepherds and so on. Or driving down the street you might see little figures on peoples' lawns with sheep, cattle, camels, and people dressed like refugees from a costume party. But have you ever wondered just what the story is behind all these songs and decorations? Who are these people, and how did they come to be on our greeting cards, our lawns and in our loudspeakers? To help us answer this question we have with us someone who, you might say, had a hand in starting it all - who was there at the beginning of the story - please give it up for the Archangel Gabriel!

(Gabriel walks in, acknowledging the applause and sits in chair. He is dressed in a business suit, with an FTD emblem)

Well, good morning, Mr. Gabriel, sir. Can we call you Gabe, for short?

Gabriel

No.

Host

I see, okay. Well, I must say I am a bit surprised to see you in a business suit.

Gabriel

What's so surprising? I'm an Archangel, the CEO in charge of Earthly Communications.

Host

I see. And the FTD emblem on your jacket there...?

Gabriel

That's for when you care to send the very best - you send me.

Host

(Quickly moving on)

So! Mr. Gabriel, Sir, you are credited with delivering 2 very important messages in the regions of Galilee and Judea about 2000 years ago, more or less, is this correct?

Gabriel

I presume you are talking about the Zechariah of Jerusalem and Miriam of Nazareth incidents?

Host

Yes, I believe so.

Gabriel

You know, let me begin by saying this. When the Commander-in-Chief called me in for these 2 assignments, I had to register my misgivings about the whole enterprise. Humans are so cowardly, fickle, undependable, and, frankly, dense. You know, thick in the head? And easily impressed by a good show, you, know what I mean?

Host

Not really. What do you mean?

Gabriel

Well, you show up in a blaze of light, a flurry of wings, a whirlwind, a blazing bush, you name it, and people's jaws drop and they just stand there staring, or more often than not, drop in a dead faint. With the right smoke and mirrors you can do most anything.

Host

Hmmm, that explains most political campaigns.

Gabriel

My point exactly. Take the Zechariah case. I was sent to deliver the good news to Zechariah that his wife's prayers had been answered and that he was going to bear a son. I decided to approach him when he was serving in the temple. Now here's the thing. You are serving in the Temple of God, right? The place where God's Shekinah Presence you would expect to find, right? The Temple is a holy place, right?

Host

Right....

Gabriel

So I go there, blaze of light, flurry of wings, probably some wind blowing around the altar, and you know what Zechariah does?

Host

No.

Gabriel

He faints! I tell God, “Hey, this isn’t going to work. Whenever I appear, people faint. They’re too weak to carry out your scheme here. They’re cowardly, they have divided loyalties or they’re in it to get rich. You can’t depend on humans. This is a job for trained professionals. Listen, I’m in charge of several legions of angels. We’ll come in with blazing swords, we’ll level the earth, and that’ll put the Fear of God in them.

Host

I suppose it would. So what did God say?

Gabriel

God wouldn’t have anything to do with it. No, the plans were very specific: Birth as a completely human baby in the normal fashion, somewhere in the tooleydoos of Galilee and grow up like any backwater kid. He needed an emissary or “preparer of the way,” a front man, I guess, so we helped Elizabeth conceive his cousin, John.

Host

So you went to tell Zechariah about all of this and he fainted?

Gabriel

He didn’t believe me. Here I am, fresh from the throne of God, dressed in full messenger regalia, appearing to him behind closed doors, no other way to get in, and he doesn’t believe my message. I’m telling you, I’m in the middle of the Temple, in the Holy of Holies, for heaven’s sake - which is the point, by the way.

Host

So what happened next?

Gabriel

So he’s standing there stammering and yammering, and I say, fine, be that way. You think you’re incoherent now, I’ll give you the next 9 months to come up with a reply. Until then, silence. Give him time to think it over.

Host

Seems a bit extreme.

Gabriel

Aaaa, you’re dealing with humans. The obvious escapes them. You’ve got to do extreme things even to get their attention.

Host

So tell me about Mary, er, Miriam of Nazareth. How did that go?

Gabriel

Yeah, well, now that was an interesting one. You see, I had to meet her at her house. So she was out hanging up the laundry. I show up, flash of light, flurry of wings, breeze blowing the laundry around, the usual drill. I say to her, "Hail Mary!"

Host

And what happened?

Gabriel

What do you expect? She fainted. I said, "God, here we go again. Look, maybe this isn't such a good plan. I mean, she's only what, maybe sixteen? She's young, she's inexperienced, she's innocent, she's really still only a girl, what does she know about the world, she can't understand the ramifications. Besides, she's going to run screaming when I tell her what's up."

Host

But God didn't have any of it, right?

Gabriel

So what's this - you reading ahead? Yeah, God says stay the course. So I stand there cooling my heels. Mary comes to. I try a more formal approach. I clear my throat and say, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." She faints again.

I say, "God, she isn't going to want to do this. This is way beyond her. She's just a poor little peasant girl. You need to find some heroine like Xena the warrior princess, someone who is used to taking on impossible chances." Just then, Mary awakens. I continue: "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son..." Mary faints.

I say, "God, this isn't going to work." You see, Mary was crucial to the whole enterprise. If she said, No," then the whole gig was up.

Host

Couldn't God just make her say yes? You know, like "Let there be light!" Zam! Kapow! Mary gets hit right between the eyes!

Gabriel

Good heavens, no! What kind of theology are you working with? God doesn't work like that. Human free will is inviolate. One of your poets, W. H. Auden, has a nice way of putting this whole thing: "Child it is in your power of choosing to choose the child who chooses you." It's all about choosing. That's what's scary about humans, the power of choice.

Host

So it all hung in the balance there in that backyard in Nazareth, while you talked with Mary, then? What happened next?

Gabriel

Mary awakens. I think to myself, Hang on Mary, I'm going to get this all out, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Host

Yeah? And what happened next?

Gabriel

Well, I'm standing there waiting for her to faint. Mary doesn't faint. She looks right at me like she's some kind of prosecutor. "How will this be since I am a virgin?" she asks me. I think to myself, Ha! This will get her. Let's see what she does with this: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

Host

And???

Gabriel

There was this long pause. Then she says, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

I stand there blinking. I say to her, "What?"

She says, "Yes. I'm in." Just like that.

Host

And then what happened?

Gabriel

I'd rather not talk about it.

Host

No, I'm serious. What happened next?

Gabriel

(Stands and starts to leave)

It's kind of embar... no it's not really..

Host

Come on, after everything you were worried about, what happened next?

Gabriel

(Long pause) I fainted. (Exits)

Host

(Applauding) Well, there you have it: the Archangel Gabriel. Thank you for tuning in, and join us next week when we'll have as our guests: _____ . Have a blessed week!

“A Magnificat Moment”

copyright © 2019 by Craig S Pesti-Strobel

Host:

Welcome back everyone to this Sunday’s show. You recall that our special guest last week was the Archangel Gabriel, the very angel in charge of announcing to Mary of Nazareth that she was to bear God’s child, the Savior of the World. Our guest this week is another witness to those incredible events 2000 years ago, Elizabeth of Jerusalem, wife of Zechariah of the Temple Priesthood, and cousin to Mary of Nazareth! Please give her a warm welcome!

(Applause. Elizabeth enters, is greeted by the Host, who directs her to a chair. They both sit.)

I am so excited to have you with us today, Elizabeth. May I call you that?

Elizabeth:

That is my name.

Host:

Yes, well, good... so, Elizabeth, you and your cousin, Mary, had some very interesting experiences regarding the births of your firstborn children.

Elizabeth:

My, you do get right to business, don’t you?

Host:

(Caught off-guard) Uh, oh, sorry, it’s sort of an occupational hazard. Small talk isn’t really my thing.

Elizabeth:

You could ask me how the weather was when I left home.

Host:

Uh, sure. How was the weather when you left home?

Elizabeth:

It was beautiful: sunny and warm. Of course, that was 2000 years ago. I haven’t the slightest idea of what it is like today.

Host:

(To the audience) This is why I don’t do small talk. (To Elizabeth) Soooo, my understanding is that there were several occurrences associated with your pregnancy and Mary’s pregnancy, isn’t that correct?

Elizabeth:

My, this is rather personal. Does everybody talk so freely about such things these days?

Host:

Uh, well, we do have it written down in our Holy Scriptures.

Elizabeth:

Is that so?

Host:

Yes, right here. Let me show you. (Hands her a Bible opened to the first chapter of Luke. She reads it quickly.)

Elizabeth:

I see. The whole family saga is right there for the world to see.

Host:

And all of human history as well.

Elizabeth:

Well, as they say, I guess my life is an open book. What would you like to know beyond what is written there?

Host:

Many people over the centuries have been struck by how similar your story is with that of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel. Hannah, as you recall, lived about 1000 years before you, and she faithfully came to the temple at Shiloh once a year with her husband, Elkanah, to offer sacrifices. Hannah was unable to bear children but Elkanah's other wife bore him several children, which was a source of deep shame to Hannah.

Elizabeth:

As if that is all a woman is worth: bearing children. You conceive: it's a moment in time. You carry the child for nine months. You still have a million things to do, meals to prepare, a house to keep, property to look over, fields or gardens to care for, if you have a forward-thinking family you can learn to read the holy writings, take care of finances, create art, sew your clothes, debate philosophy, write poetry, calculate the course of stars in the sky. And yet all we are valued by is if we have children or not. There is a lot more to being a woman, you know.

Host:

Well, that's so very true. I hope we are finally acknowledging that today. But, we do have a way to go before women are valued in the same way men are valued.

Elizabeth:

Seriously? After 2000 years? (Shakes her head)

Host:

Sooooo, getting back to Hannah, she went to the temple this one time after they had offered sacrifices and prayed her heart out to the LORD, and Eli the priest asks her if she's drunk, and she tells him she is barren and is asking the LORD for a child, and Eli blesses her and sends her home.

Elizabeth:

Yes, and don't forget, she promised that if she bore a son, she would loan him to the LORD's service for his whole life. She entered into a covenant with God, and she started the covenant. That's important.

Host:

I agree, that's an important point. So, you and she shared a common predicament, you might say.

Elizabeth:

You might say.

Host:

And for both of you it was rectified by some divine intervention, you might say.

Elizabeth:

You might say. But keep in mind, we both conceived in the normal way. Not like Mary, at least as she tells it.

Host:

Yes, please tell us about that.

Elizabeth:

Well, we had gotten wind of Mary's pregnancy, and it seemed to have some unusual aspects to it, and ours was a bit unusual as well, so we arranged to get together. Of course, by that time, I was already six

months along, and I was older than Mary, so she decided to come to Jerusalem to visit me. I remember the day she arrived distinctly. I was up on the roof of our home, setting some things out to dry. We actually lived in a small town outside of Jerusalem, but no one has heard of it, so it's easier to say we lived in Jerusalem. I heard footsteps crunching in the sandy roadway outside the house, and then someone at the doorway calling for me. At the moment I heard her voice, the most amazing thing happened, my baby started kicking and leaping like crazy in my womb. He had kicked before, of course, because he had quickened several weeks previously, but this was new. At that moment, I felt a complete rush of joy flow right through me. It was as if warm honey poured through my veins, as if every part of my body was filled with light and radiance. I quickly climbed down the ladder and ran to the door to greet Mary.

Host:

This is what we have recorded that you said, in our English translation: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Elizabeth:

Well, that sounds close. I can't remember the precise words, but I do know that in that powerful moment, both Mary and I felt as though Heaven and Earth had become one, that God's will was not a vague hope or desirous longing, but was actually happening. Something big was going on, and we were at the center of it.

Host:

It reminds me of the prayer that Jesus taught us: "thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Elizabeth:

Jesus?

Host:

Yes, you know, Mary and Joseph's son?

Elizabeth:

Oh, you mean Yeshua?! Yes. That is exactly it. Mary and I realized that the LORD was breaking into human affairs in a mighty way. And when that happens, things get shaken up in amazing ways. We realized that if the LORD was involved with these two children we were bearing, then the world was not going to be the same.

Host:

Mary gave expression to that in her song, didn't she?

Elizabeth:

Well, we both were singing, let me tell you. I remembered Hannah's song:

"My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in the LORD,
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.

"There is no Holy One like the Lord,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God."

And then Mary joined in:

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name."

We just went back and forth, making Hannah's song our own, her proclamations our own, her witness to the LORD's justice and mercy our own. Like this, for instance: one of my favorite lines in Hannah's song is this:

*"The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil."*

Just think about what that says about the LORD, what God's priorities and vision for the world are!

*"He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap."*

The LORD is on the side of everyone that the rich and powerful put down or shove aside or discard in the world!

Host:

Yes! Mary sings this:

*"He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

Elizabeth:

Do you see, this wasn't something totally new, this wasn't a change in the LORD, this is what the LORD has *always* been about, but the rich and powerful and war-happy rulers all glory and revel in dominating people, thinking *that* is strength and glory and valor. Not to the LORD, not to those who want to walk in God's ways. No, if you want to walk in God's ways, do the LORD's will, be the people of God, the sheep of God's pasture, then you have to see that justice reigns, live with mercy, share things, if you have more than you need, share it with those who have greater need. Most rich people don't need all they have, right? The LORD put us here to watch out for one another, to share burdens, to make the way easier for one another. But we get it all backwards. My son, Yo'an, and Yeshua, they both worked to bring this message home to people. The LORD doesn't care about all our sacrifices of animals and plants, God wants the sacrifice of our hearts and minds, to do justice,

love mercy and kindness, to be humble of heart and to love one another. Nothing more, and certainly nothing less.

Host:

Wow! These are powerful words and a powerful testimony. I have a new appreciation of how important you and Mary must have been in helping John and Jesus, or, as you say, Yo'an and Yeshua, shape their movement, a movement that changed history, and as you have been talking, it seems to me that at this point in human history, we need to return to these central truths that you just outlined. And I think you are reminding us how important women have been in all of this. So, any last words you'd like to share with us?

Elizabeth:

Here's the thing to keep in mind: time after time in our history, when the LORD wants to do something terrific, something momentous, women have been at the center of it. Sarah's birth of Isaac, Miriam at the Red Sea leading the Israelites in worship and song, Hannah devoting Samuel to serve as a prophetic leader, Mary giving birth to Yeshua and teaching him about God's justice and mercy and love, Mary Magdalene and Joanna and all the women who traveled with Yeshua and the others, who proclaimed the resurrection of Yeshua – all these were at critical turning points in our history. These were all moments of God's will being done, on earth as in heaven, like you pointed out. Think what could happen in the world if women and men would quit fighting against each other, or if men would just reach out to women as equals and both seek to do the will of God together in our world. Just think of what could happen!

Host:

Indeed. It may be happening again. We just might be at another crucial moment in human history. Thank you for joining us today.

Elizabeth:

Thank you for having me.

(Both Host and Elizabeth stand and exit.)

What's In a Name?

An Interview with Joseph and Mary

Copyright © 2004 by Craig S. Strobel

Host

Good morning, good morning! Welcome to the _____ Show. This morning we have two very special guests with us. Every year about this time, stores and radios begin playing Christmas carols and songs about babies in mangers, angels and shepherds and so on. Or driving down the street you might see little figures on peoples' lawns with sheep, cattle, camels, and people dressed like refugees from a costume party. But have you ever wondered just what the story is behind all these songs and decorations? Who are these people, and how did they come to be on our greeting cards, our lawns and in our loudspeakers? Well, our two guests today just happen to be the very two people who can answer these questions for us. Yes, you guessed it, we have with us today, Joseph and Mary of Nazareth. Let's give it up for the Holy Couple!

(Applause. Joseph and Mary enter, greet the host and sit down)

Well, well, what an honor to have you with us today. You two have quite a story to tell. It has all the elements of a romantic mystery, or a made-for-TV drama: love, public scandal, an arduous journey across a desert, political intrigue, a murder plot, an eleventh hour escape. Not to mention some more fantastic things like visits by angels and astrologers - magi as they call them, right?

Joseph and Mary

Yes.

That's right.

Host

But I understand that you have a rather unusual story about Mary's pregnancy. Is that right?

Joseph

Oh yes, that is very interesting.

Mary

Well, I was outside hanging up the wash to dry, when suddenly out of nowhere this angel appears in front of me, and says, "Hail Mary, full of grace!" Or was it, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you?" Oh well, at any rate, it took me a few moments to regain my composure. Then this angel, who was named Gabriel, by the way, told me that I would conceive and bear a son and this son was to be the Son of God, and would sit upon the throne of his father David, and a bunch of other crazy stuff.

Joseph

And then he left.

Just like that.

No "think about it and call me in a week."

Mary

Just "this is the way it is. Have a nice day. Good-bye."

Joseph

Mary, she's so excited, she comes running to me and yells out at the top of her lungs, "Joseph, I'm pregnant!"

"Great, Mary, " I tell her, while I'm dragging her in the doorway out of the street. "Go ahead and tell the whole world about it. We aren't even married yet and you're pregnant? That's wonderful news!"

Host

You don't have to be married to get pregnant, you know.

Joseph

(Looks at him as if to say, "Do I look like an idiot?").
Slight pause)

Look, the point is that I knew for a fact that Mary wasn't pregnant by me.

Mary

That's absolutely true.

Joseph

I couldn't believe my ears. Here we were, engaged to be married, but not yet married, and she's pregnant. As if I didn't have enough to worry about. The Roman emperor just decided to raise more taxes for himself, as if we didn't have enough to pay already, and then he decides that he needs to get an accurate census of his empire, in order to collect the proper amount of taxes. And I will have to journey down to Bethlehem to get "enrolled" as they call it. So all of this, and here stands Mary out in the street announcing to me and the neighbors that she's pregnant. So I'm standing there, knowing that she's not pregnant by me, I mean, a guy knows these things, right?

Mary

So he asks me, "Who is the father?"

Joseph

...and she says, "The Holy Spirit."

Host

The Holy Spirit? You mean number three of the Three-in-One?

(Mary and Joseph nod)

Joseph

Hoo boy! I'm telling you, I just stood there for about two, maybe three minutes. You might say that I had a hard time believing her story. Wouldn't you? "The Holy Spirit" indeed! I mean, I'd lived in Nazareth a long time, and I'd heard a lot of tall tales from the merchants who travel through town, but this one topped them all. I didn't know what to do. I was really torn apart about it.

Mary

He just walked away in a daze. I didn't hear from him for several days. I was afraid of what he was thinking about me. I didn't know what to do. I prayed a lot, hoping that God would do something, anything.

Joseph

Mary was everything to me - *is* everything to me. A wonderful person. I couldn't believe that she would do this to me... to herself - why, the penalty for adultery is death by stoning! And here she is announcing that she's pregnant to half the city... I loved her. I decided that I would divorce her quietly, maybe send her to another village where no one knew her situation, send her something to live on. I didn't want to see anything bad happen to her. It tore me up inside. And then I'm laying down one night fast asleep, and I have this amazing dream, and now it's my turn to see things like angels. And this angel tells me that Mary's telling the truth, that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit and who am I to argue with God anyway?

Mary

How could he argue with logic like that? And so we go ahead with the wedding, and nine months went by and our eldest son was born and we wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no room in the inn in Bethlehem.... You've all sung the songs and seen the statues, you know the story.

Joseph

But do you know how we decided to name him? Now this is an interesting story, as if talking with angels and virgin births are dull reading. I don't know how they left it out of the Gospel stories

Mary

Maybe it had to do something with the fact that we never told anyone about it.

Host

That could have something to do with it.

Mary

Near the end of the nine months, when I was, shall we say, great with child, we set out from Nazareth to go to Bethlehem to be enrolled.

Joseph

Remember I told you about Caesar and his taxes? Well, they registered everyone according to family lineages, so we went to Bethlehem because I am one of many descendants of David.

Mary

On our way to Bethlehem, we talked about a lot of things, but finally we got around to the subject of names. It had to be Hebrew, of course, and so we went through all the popular names like Adonijah,

Obadiah, Shear-Jashub, Jechonidab, and Mattathias as well as some more obscure ones like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and we didn't like the name Saul because it sounded too much like the Greek name "Paul" and we couldn't imagine any good coming out of someone named Paul.

Joseph

Finally, Mary stated her preference. She felt the child should be named "Emmanuel." Can you imagine that? Emmanuel!

I asked, "Why Emmanuel, for God's sake?"

She said, "Yeah, that's why,...for God's sake!" I had a momentary lapse and forgot that she talks with angels.

"But isn't that a little pretentious?" I asked.

Mary

I was adamant. I can be like that, you know. I said, "I believe this child is a child of destiny, a child of promise - of God's promise. After all, didn't God send an angel to tell me about this birth?"

Joseph

How could I forget that, huh?

Mary

"And didn't an angel also visit my cousin Elizabeth and tell *her* that I would conceive, and didn't the angel tell *me* that Elizabeth, even in her advanced age, had conceived, and just a few months ago didn't she give birth to their son John just like the angel said?"

Joseph

"Okay, okay!" I said. "So our child is a child of God's promise. Why Emmanuel?"

Mary

"Well, do you recall that passage in the book of the prophet Isaiah where it says a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and that his name shall be called Emmanuel?"

Joseph

I said, "Yes."

Mary

"Well, so here I am!"

Joseph

"Wait a minute," I said, "It only refers to a virgin in the Greek translation. The original Hebrew only says a *young woman* shall conceive and bear a son. It could refer to anyone. And besides, Isaiah was referring to a sign that would be fulfilled in the lifetime of King Ahaz. We're several centuries later than that."

Host

Wait! You know Greek and Hebrew? I thought you guys spoke Aramaic? And weren't the Romans in charge? Didn't they speak Latin?

Joseph

Yeah, but everybody spoke mainly Greek. It was the language of trade. That's why they translated the Hebrew into Greek. But most of us learned Hebrew in our local yeshiva. Hey, I may be a carpenter, but we aren't ignorant, okay? These are our holy scriptures we're talking about.

Mary

I wasn't going to give up. I said, "Well, I like the name Emmanuel because it is also a statement of fact. Names mean something, and they carry a

deep significance. Emmanuel means 'God with us,' and I believe that God is with us. I know that personally. God is with me. I felt it when the angel visited me and somehow I've felt it for the past nine months. Joseph, God *is* with us, and this child I'm carrying is a child of God. And not the way all of us are children of God, but this is a child of God in a unique way. I can't explain the way I feel. I just know that God is with us in a special way, and that God will remain with us in the years to come. 'Emmanuel' is our declaration of hope to Israel, maybe even to the whole world. What better time is there than now to tell people that God is with us? That God is with us here, now, on this world, somehow feeling our pain and sorrow, sharing in our hopes and dreams? Joseph, I can't explain it all, I just know it, deep down inside."

Joseph

It was hard for me to argue with this. Argue isn't really the right word. This was perhaps the most interesting and important conversation we had had our whole married life. But I had my own choice for a name: Joshua. In Hebrew, it's pronounced "Yehoshua," in Aramaic, "Yeshua," and in Greek, "Iesous." I, too, believe that names carry tremendous meaning, and I reminded Mary that Joshua means "Deliverer" or "Savior." Or more precisely, "The Lord is salvation," or "the Lord will save." I reminded her of the story of how Joshua the son of Nun led the Israelites out of the Wilderness into the Promised Land. Moses had changed Joshua's name from "Hoshea" to "Yehoshuah" to serve as a reminder to the Israelites that their salvation was from the Lord, not from their own devices or the might of their weapons or their military valor. I didn't believe that our son's mission was military. I believed that he was to be a spiritual leader, and that he would

save us from our sins. Besides, I added, that was what the angel told *me*, and he told me to name him Joshua, so I couldn't think of a better reason.

Mary

I couldn't argue with that. It *is* hard to argue with an angel, right?

Joseph

And besides, I was the papa and the papa always has the final word, right?! "Tradition!" So we finally agreed upon Joshua, or Iesous, Jesus.

Mary

Of course, both names were correct. We called him Jesus, "Deliverer," but he was *in fact*, "Emmanuel, God with us." And what a beautiful testimony, that when we need to be delivered from bondage to our selfishness and sinfulness, God comes in person to save us. "Jesus. Emmanuel."

Host

Wow. That's quite a story. But that is *your* story of what you came to call him.

(Out to audience)

What about the rest of us?

What do we call him?

"Rabbi?" Is he our teacher? Will we learn from him?

Or "Master?" Do we live as a servant of God?

How about "Lord?" Does he reign supreme in our heart?

Joseph

Or can you call him "Emman-*i*-el, God is with *me*?" and know deep inside, like Mary did, that God is indeed with you?

Mary

A name is such a little thing, but it means so much.

Copyright © 2004 Craig S. Strobel. Permission to use must be secured from Craig Strobel.

What's in a Name?: Joseph's Story

(Monologue by Joseph)

I suppose you've all heard the story of how Mary, my wife became pregnant? If you haven't, you're the only one in these parts who hasn't. The story is basically this: she was outside doing something, I think she was hanging up the wash to dry, when suddenly out of nowhere this angel appears in front of her, and says, "Hail Mary, full of grace!" Or was it, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you?" Oh well, at any rate, it took her a few moments to regain her composure. When she was recomposed, this angel, who was named Gabriel, by the way, told her that she would conceive and bear a son and he told her this son was to be the Son of God, and would sit upon the throne of his father David, and a bunch of other crazy stuff.

And then he left.

Just like that.

No "think about it and call me in a week." Just "this is the way it is. Have a nice day. Good-bye."

Mary, she's so excited, she comes running to me and yells out at the top of her lungs, "Joseph, I'm pregnant!"

"Great, Mary, " I say to her, dragging her in the doorway out of the street. "Go ahead and tell the whole world about it. We aren't even married yet and you're pregnant? That's wonderful news!"

Now, I'm not so naive as to think that only married people get pregnant. But I did happen to know for a fact that Mary wasn't pregnant by me. I couldn't believe my ears. Here we were, engaged to be married, but not yet married, and she's pregnant. As if I didn't have enough to worry about. The Roman emperor just decided to raise more taxes for himself, as if we didn't have enough to pay already, and then he decides that he needs to get an accurate census of his empire, in order to collect the proper amount of taxes. And I will have to journey down to Bethlehem to get "enrolled" as they call it. So all of this, and here stands Mary out in the street announcing to me and the neighbors that she's pregnant.

So I'm standing there, knowing that she's not pregnant by me, I mean, a guy knows these things, right? So I ask her, "Who is the father?" and she says, "The Holy Spirit."

Hoo boy! I'm telling you, I just stood there for about two, maybe three minutes. You might say that I had a hard time believing her story. Wouldn't you? "The Holy Spirit" indeed! I mean, I've lived here in Nazareth a long time, and I've heard a lot of tall tales from the merchants who travel through town, but this one topped them all.

I didn't know what to do.

I was really torn apart about it.

Mary was everything to me. A wonderful person. I couldn't believe that she would do this to me... and to herself - why, the penalty for adultery is death by stoning! And here she is announcing that she's pregnant to half the city...

I loved her. I decided that I would divorce her quietly, maybe send her to another village where no one knew her situation, send her something to live on. I didn't want to see anything bad happen to her. It tore me up inside.

And then I'm laying down one night fast asleep, and I have this amazing dream, and now it's my turn to see things like angels. And this angel tells me that Mary's telling the truth and that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Ghost and who am I to argue with God anyway? How could I argue with logic like that? And so we go ahead with the wedding, and nine months went by and our eldest son was born and we wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no room in the inn in Bethlehem.... You've all sung the songs and seen the statues, you know the story.

But do you know how we decided to name him? Now this is an interesting story, as if talking with angels and virgin births are dull reading. I don't know how they left it out of the Gospel stories unless it had to do something with the fact that we never told anyone about it. That could have something to do with it.

Near the end of the nine months, when Mary was, shall we say, great with child, we set out from Nazareth to go to Bethlehem to be enrolled. Remember I told you about Caesar and his taxes? Well, they registered everyone according to family lineages, so we went to Bethlehem because I am one of many descendants of David. On our way to Bethlehem, Mary and I talked about a lot of things, but finally we got around to the subject of names. It had to be Hebrew, of course, and so we went through all the popular names like Adonijah, Obadiah, Shear-

Jashub, Jechonidab, and Mattathias as well as some more obscure ones like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and we didn't like the name Saul because it sounded too much like the Greek name "Paul" and we couldn't imagine any good coming out of someone named Paul.

Finally, Mary stated her preference. She felt the child should be named "Emmanuel." Can you imagine that? Emmanuel!

I asked, "Why Emmanuel, for God's sake?"

She said, "Yeah, that's why,...for God's sake!" I had a momentary lapse and forgot that she talks with angels.

"But isn't that a little pretentious?" I asked.

But she was adamant. She said, "I believe this child is a child of destiny, a child of promise - of God's promise. After all, didn't God send an angel to tell me about this birth?" (How can I forget that, huh?) "And didn't an angel also visit my cousin Elizabeth and tell *her* that I would conceive, and didn't the angel tell *me* that Elizabeth, even in her advanced age, had conceived, and just a few months ago didn't she give birth to their son John just like the angel said?"

"Okay, okay!" I said, trying to halt this onslaught. "So our child is a child of God's promise. Why Emmanuel?"

"Well, do you recall that passage in the book of the prophet Isaiah where it says a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and that his name shall be called Immanuel?"

I said, "Yes."

"Well, so here I am!"

"Wait a minute," I said, "It only refers to a virgin in the Greek translation. The original Hebrew only says a *young woman* shall conceive

and bear a son. It could refer to anyone. And besides, Isaiah was referring to a sign that would be fulfilled in the lifetime of King Ahaz. We're several centuries later than that."

She wasn't going to give up easily, however. She said, "Well, I like the name Emmanuel because it is also a statement of fact. Names mean something, and they carry a deep significance. Emmanuel means 'God with us,' and I believe that God is with us. I know that personally. God is with me. I felt it when the angel visited me and somehow I've felt it for the past nine months. Joseph, God *is* with us, and this child I'm carrying is a child of God. And not the way all of us are children of God, but this is a child of God in a unique way. I can't explain the way I feel. I just know that God is with us in a special way, and that God will remain with us in the years to come. 'Emmanuel' is our declaration of hope to Israel, maybe even to the whole world. What better time is there than now to tell people that God is with us? That God is with us here, now, on this world, somehow feeling our pain and sorrow, sharing in our hopes and dreams? Joseph, I can't explain it all, I just know it, deep down inside."

It was hard for me to argue with this. Argue isn't really the right word. This was perhaps the most interesting and important conversation we had had our whole married life. But I had my own choice for a name: Joshua. In Hebrew, it's pronounced "Yehoshua," in Aramaic, "Yeshua," and in Greek, "Iesous." I, too, believe that names carry tremendous meaning, and I reminded Mary that Joshua means "Deliverer" or "Savior." Or more precisely, "The Lord is salvation," or "the Lord will save." I reminded her of the story of how Joshua the son of Nun led the Israelites out of the Wilderness into the Promised Land. Moses had changed Joshua's name

from "Hoshea" to "Yehoshuah" to serve as a reminder to the Israelites that their salvation was from the Lord, not from their own devices or the might of their weapons or their military valor. I didn't believe that our son's mission was military. I believed that he was to be a spiritual leader, and that he would save us from our sins. Besides, I added, that was what the angel told *me*, and he told me to name him Joshua, so I couldn't think of a better reason.

She couldn't argue with that. It *is* hard to argue with an angel, right? And besides, I was the papa and the papa always has the final word, right?! "Tradition!" So we finally agreed upon Joshua, or Iesous, Jesus.

Of course, both names were correct. We called him Jesus, "Deliverer," but he was *in fact*, "Emmanuel, God with us." And what a beautiful testimony, that when we need to be delivered from bondage to our selfishness and sinfulness, God comes in person to save us. "Jesus. Emmanuel."

But that is *our* story of what we came to call him.

What about you?

What do you call him?

"Rabbi?" Is he your teacher? Will you learn from him?

Or "Master?" Do you live as a servant of God?

How about "Lord?" Does he reign supreme in your heart?

Or can you call him "Emman-*i*-el, God is with *me*?" and know deep inside, like Mary did, that God is indeed with you?

Think about it.

A name is such a little thing, but it means so much.

What's in a Name?

An Interview with Mary

Copyright © 2016 by Craig S. Pesti-Strobel

Host

Good morning, good morning! Welcome to the Sunday Show. This morning we have a very special guest with us. Every year about this time, stores and radios begin playing Christmas carols and songs about babies in mangers, angels and shepherds and so on. Or driving down the street you might see little figures on peoples' lawns with sheep, cattle, camels, and people dressed like refugees from a costume party. But have you ever wondered just what the story is behind all these songs and decorations? Who are these people, and how did they come to be on our greeting cards, our lawns and in our loudspeakers? Well, our guest today just happens to be someone who can answer these questions for us. Yes, you guessed it, we have with us today, Mary of Nazareth. Let's give it up for Mary!

(Applause. Mary enters, greets the host and sit down)

Well, well, what an honor to have you with us today. You have quite a story to tell. It has all the elements of a romantic mystery, or a made-for-TV drama: love, public scandal, an arduous journey across a desert, political intrigue, a murder plot, an eleventh hour escape. Not to mention some more fantastic things like visits by angels and astrologers - magi as they call them, right?

Mary

Yes. That's right.

Host

But I understand that you have a rather unusual story about your pregnancy. Is that right?

Mary

Well, I was outside hanging up the wash to dry, when suddenly out of nowhere this angel appears in front of me, and says, "Hail Mary, full of grace!" Or was it, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you?" Oh, well, at any rate, it took me a few moments to regain my composure. Then this angel, who was named Gabriel, by the way, told me that I would conceive and bear a son and this son was to be the Son of God, and would sit upon the throne of his father David, and a bunch of other crazy stuff. And then he left. Just like that.

No "think about it and call me in a week."

Just "this is the way it is. Have a nice day. Good-bye."

Host

Wow. An angel, huh? So how did Joseph take it?

Mary

Yeah, well, I was so excited, I went running to me and yelled out at the top of my lungs, "Joseph, I'm pregnant!"

"Great, Mary, " he tells me, dragging me in the doorway out of the street.

"Go ahead and tell the whole world about it. We aren't even married yet and you're pregnant? That's wonderful news!"

Host

You don't have to be married to get pregnant, you know.

Mary

(Looks at him as if to say, "Do I look like an idiot?" Slight pause)

Look, the point is that he knew for a fact that he wasn't the father.

So, he asks me, "Who is the father?" ...and I say, "The Holy Spirit."

Host

The Holy Spirit? You mean number three of the Three-in-One?

(Mary nods)

Mary

He just walked away in a daze. I didn't hear from him for several days. I was afraid of what he was thinking about me. I didn't know what to do. I prayed a lot, hoping that God would do something, anything. And then I heard from him. He came, and sat me down next to a table he had made for my family. He told me that he had decided to divorce quietly, maybe send me to another village where no one knew her situation, send me something to live on. It tore him up inside. I started to panic. But he tells me to hold on and hear the whole story.

He tells me that he fast asleep one night, and he had this amazing dream, and now it was his turn to see things like angels. And this angel tells him that I am telling the truth, that I am pregnant by the Holy Spirit and who is he to argue with God anyway?

Host

How could he argue with logic like that? And so you went ahead with the wedding, and nine months went by and your eldest son was born and you wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no room in the inn in Bethlehem.... Right. We've all sung the songs and seen the statues, we know the story.

Mary

But do you know how we decided to name him? Now this is an interesting story, as if talking with angels and virgin births are dull reading. I don't know how they left it out of the Gospel stories. Maybe it had to do something with the fact that we never told anyone about it.

Host

That could have something to do with it.

Mary

Near the end of the nine months, when I was, shall we say, great with child, we set out from Nazareth to go to Bethlehem to be enrolled. On our way to Bethlehem, we talked about a lot of things, but finally we got around to the subject of names. It had to be Hebrew, of course, and so we went through all the popular names like Adonijah, Obadiah, Shear-Jashub, Jechonidab, and Mattathias as well as some more obscure ones...

Host

Like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?

Mary

Exactly. Finally, I stated my preference. I felt the child should be named "Emmanuel."

Joseph asks, "Why Emmanuel, for God's sake?"

I say, "Yeah, that's why,...for God's sake!"

"But isn't that a little pretentious?" He asks.

But I was adamant. I can be like that, you know. I said, "I believe this child is a child of destiny, a child of promise - of God's promise. After all, didn't God send an angel to tell me about this birth?"

Host

How could he forget that, huh?

Mary

"And didn't an angel also visit my cousin Elizabeth and tell her that I would conceive, and didn't the angel tell me that Elizabeth, even in her advanced age, had conceived, and just a few months ago didn't she give birth to their son John just like the angel said?"

Host

Okay, so your child was a child of God's promise. Why Emmanuel?

Mary

Well, do you recall that passage in the book of the prophet Isaiah where it says a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and that his name shall be called Emmanuel?"

Host

Yes.

Mary

Well, so here I am!

Host

Wait a minute, I happen to know a little bit about Bible translations, and it only refers to a virgin in the *Greek* translation. The original *Hebrew* only says a young woman shall conceive and bear a son. It could refer to anyone. And besides, Isaiah was referring to a sign that would be fulfilled in the lifetime of King Ahaz. You were several centuries later than that.

Mary

I wasn't going to give up. I said, "Well, I like the name Emmanuel because it is also a statement of fact. Names mean something, and they carry a deep significance. Emmanuel means 'God with us,' and I believe that God is with us. I know that personally. God is with me. I felt it when the angel visited me and somehow I've felt it for the past nine months. Joseph, God is with us, and this child I'm carrying is a child of God. And not the way all of us are children of God, but this is a child of God in a unique way. I can't explain the way I feel. I just know that God is with us in a special way, and that God will remain with us in the years to come. 'Emmanuel' is our declaration of hope to Israel, maybe even to the whole world. What better time is there than now to tell people that God is with us? That God is with us here, now, on this world, somehow feeling our pain and sorrow, sharing in our hopes and dreams? Joseph, I can't explain it all, I just know it, deep down inside."

Host

It is hard for me to argue with this. But you didn't end up naming him Emmanuel. How did you come up with "Jesus?"

Mary

Well, Joseph had his own choice for a name: Joshua. In Hebrew, it's pronounced "Yehoshua," in Aramaic, "Yeshua," and in Greek, "Iesous." He reminded me that Joshua means "Deliverer" or "Savior." Or more precisely, "The Lord is salvation," or "the Lord will save." You remember the story of how Joshua the son of Nun led the Israelites out of the Wilderness into the Promised Land, don't you? Moses had changed Joshua's name from "Hoshea" to "Yehoshuah" to serve as a reminder to the Israelites that their salvation was from the Lord, not from their own devices or the might of their weapons or their military valor. Joseph didn't believe that our son's mission was military. He believed that he was to be a spiritual leader, and that he would save us from our sins. And

then he added the clincher: the angel told him to name our son Joshua, so he couldn't think of a better reason. I couldn't argue with that. It is hard to argue with an angel, right?

Host

And besides, he was the papa and the papa always has the final word, right?! "Tradition!"

(Mary looks at him with a coked eyebrow. Pause. Host clears his throat)
So, you finally agreed upon Joshua, or Iesous, Jesus.

Mary

Of course, both names were correct. We called him Jesus, "Deliverer," but he was in fact, "Emmanuel, God with us." And what a beautiful testimony, that when we need to be delivered from bondage to our selfishness and sinfulness, God comes in person to save us. "Jesus. Emmanuel."

Host

Wow. That's quite a story. But that is your story of what you came to call him.

(Out to audience)

What about the rest of us?

What do we call him?

"Rabbi?" Is he our teacher? Will we learn from him?

Or "Master?" Do we live as a servant of God?

How about "Lord?" Does he reign supreme in our heart?

Mary

Or can you call him "Emman-i-el, God is with me?" and know deep inside, like I did, that God is indeed with you?

Host

A name is such a little thing, but it means so much.

Copyright © 2016 Craig S. Pesti-Strobel. Permission to use must be secured from Craig Pesti-Strobel.

Make Room! The Innkeeper's Defense

Host:

Christmas is perhaps the biggest annual show in our culture. Most of the trappings of Christmas have little to do with the original reason and meaning of the holiday, but even that story is one of the biggest shows around. The Christmas storyline - the one dealing with the birth of Jesus the son of Joseph and Mary of Nazareth, that is - is filled with adventure, intrigue and mystery. It features other-worldly visitors, murderous tyrant, seekers and practitioners of occult wisdom, rustic ruffians, a young family on the run, a birth in desperate circumstances. It is a drama through and through. The story has been so thoroughly rehearsed and replayed for us that we rarely pause to consider who the people might be in this story. For the first three Sundays in Advent, we are preparing for Christmas by getting to know some of the key players in greater depth through a series of "interviews." The first Sunday, we met the Archangel Gabriel and heard about his encounter with Zechariah of Jerusalem and Mary of Nazareth. Last Sunday we met Joseph and Mary and discovered the significance of the names we call Jesus. Today, we will meet someone who actually isn't mentioned in the Biblical stories, but who must have been there - someone who usually gets a bad rap - the one who said, "there's no room" - please **welcome** the Innkeeper!

(Innkeeper enters, dressed in common clothes, perhaps a cook's apron, or barkeep apron. Sits.)

Welcome to our show this morning. I'm sure that people are very curious to get your side of the story concerning incidents that occurred in Bethlehem 2000 years ago.

Innkeeper

Well, I'll do my best. I'm presuming you are referring to a birth in the stable cave out back of my inn. Funny, you know, I'll walk into a room and not know why I went in there, but I can remember that incident quite clearly.

Host

Great. So, to refresh our memories, Judea was a province of the Roman Empire, and Caesar had issued orders that a census be taken of the empire, isn't that correct?

Innkeeper

Sure, that's what kings and emperors do. They want to know how many ducks and chickens you've got so they can take the feathers to make their pillows. I don't understand the traveling thing, though.

Host:

Traveling thing?

Innkeeper

You know, why people had to travel to some ancestral home to register. Never made sense to me. I mean, the government wants to know where you live *now* because they want to know where to find you to get your money. All I know is there were a bunch of people in town. It was a madhouse. People were arriving looking for places to stay, food to eat, places to put up their animals. You know the roads weren't safe, so people would travel in big groups, almost like a caravan. One or two caravans at a time I can handle, but not so many.

Host

But weren't you set up to handle guests?

Innkeeper

Do I look like Howard Johnson? Listen, I basically modified and enlarged my own house a little. I inherited a nice-sized house that had a few extra rooms, and decided, hey, why not take in guests and bring in a little extra money. My wife, she's a good cook, my brother he makes beer, it all came together, you know what I mean? I pay taxes to the Romans, a little to the Temple in Jerusalem, support the local synagogue, and my wife, she doesn't have to dress shabby, okay?

Host

So, what could you tell us about that couple that arrived that night, on a donkey, ready to give birth according to the stories?

Innkeeper

Yeah, like I said, I remember them. A tough case. It was late, and all my rooms were completely full. I brought out extra mats for people to sleep on. I had people sleeping in the dining room, for crying out loud. Like I said, why they had to travel to do this census thing is beyond me, but let me tell you, most things Roman are beyond me. Me? I just try to stick to myself, do my own business, not get in anybody's way. But wham! The emperor says do this, and before you know it, thousands of miles away from Rome, in little Bethlehem, we get all these travelers. What are you to do, you know what I mean?

Host

According to my recollection, you couldn't make room for them, is that right? But wasn't it obvious the woman was really ready to give birth at any time? Couldn't you have asked someone else to change rooms?

Innkeeper

Would you judge me harshly? Remember, there

were all these new people in town. Respectable people as well as riff raff. For weeks my place was full of grumpy customers, no one wants to be here, you know what I mean? They are here because they have to be. It was constantly “Innkeeper get me this. Innkeeper my room is missing this, innkeeper my room is crowded, innkeeper this wine tastes sour, innkeeper the bread is cold.” I’m running day and night up and down the stairs, out to the store room, my wife she is working her fingers down to the bone - the very bone I tell you - fixing meals, she even hires out a girl to help. Day and night it goes on. All because of Rome. No one likes the tax. In fact, there’s talk of mounting a revolt against Rome. I say, don’t let me know, keep me out of it. If you’re successful, great, one less brick on my back, you know what I mean? But everyone’s grumpy. Why not, huh? And now this bedraggled Galilean duo from Nazareth.

Host

So into this mess, Mary and Joseph came. What were your thoughts when they came to your door and you saw them standing there?

Innkeeper

My thoughts? Well, I listened to their story - a real tale of woe, let me tell you. I thought to myself,

Why he drug her along on that long journey on donkeyback just to come here and register is beyond me. And she being ready to deliver. What husband in his right mind would do that? I have no room for them, my inn is filled with nasty, surly sweaty paying guests as it is. I felt for 'em, you know? But if there's no room, there's no room, right?

Host

But you didn't completely turn them out, did you?

Innkeeper

Of course not. My wife comes along, she sees the situation, she takes me aside, she reminds me about the cave out back. So, "Fine," I said, "I have a stable out back. It's a little cave, built right into the hill, next to the house, but it's off the road. It's clean, you can make a warm bed in the straw, here are some blankets. And don't worry, its on me. No charge.

Host

No charge?

Innkeeper

Who do you think I am, of course no charge. It's not a real room. The guy, the husband, says, thank you very much, they'll never forget me. I mumbled to myself, "I'll never forget this myself."

Host

And tell us about the baby.

Innkeeper

Oh yeah, well, that's why I'll never forget it. So, it's getting late, I'm bushed, my wife is bushed, and another knock comes on the door, and it's the husband again, only this time he's like panicked. "My wife is having a baby! Can you help?" He's like desperate, pleading with me. Do I look like a midwife? But my wife is there, she comes to the rescue. She says, "My sister is a midwife. I'll go get her." So she goes, and she helps her sister. Later that night, a baby boy comes out, kicking and screaming. The mother had brought the cloths to swaddle the baby in. We put some hay in the feedbox to keep the child warm, put a blanket on him, hung some blankets in the doorway to keep out the draft.

Host

And what was the baby like?

Innkeeper

A baby is a baby, you know what I mean? He was cute, though. I mean, all babies are cute, especially when they're asleep. But I did find myself just standing there looking at that family, thinking to myself, "What's in store for them now?"

After all this travel, it couldn't have been easy. Now with this precious little child, where do they go from here? Times are hard. There's unrest in the streets, the highways aren't safe. I really felt for the father, you know what I mean? And what of the baby? Who will he grow up to be? Such humble beginnings - where will he end up?

Host

Who would have known back then? Who ever knows what will happen to anyone we encounter?

Innkeeper

Here's the thing: we all have a part to play, that's what I say. The question we all have to answer is when it comes time for your part, what are you going to do? Me - my part came that night. I didn't have room, but I made room. I made room. (To the audience) What about you? When the babe of Bethlehem comes knocking on your door, will you make him room?

Host

Thank you for coming.

“The Shepherd’s Surprise”

(This script is meant to be embedded in a full Christmas Eve Service. The service can begin with the normal accustomed greetings, litanies, and hymn. It is especially suggested to begin with “O Come, All Ye Faithful.”)

The worship Leader prepares to continue the service with a reading, when the Shepherd appears up front, wandering around as if looking for something. There is a pause as the Worship Leader just looks at the shepherd. The shepherd continues to wander, looking puzzled out at the audience.)

Leader:

Uh, hello, excuse me, but can I help you?

Shepherd:

Yeah, you sure can. Where in the name of Judah am I?

Leader:

You’re in a church.

Shepherd:

Right.... What’s a church?

Leader:

It’s a building, a place of worship. Like this.
(Motioning around)

Shepherd:

Right.... You mean a synagogue. That’s what we call ‘em where I come from.

Leader:

And where is that?

Shepherd:

Where is what?

Leader:

Where you're from.

Shepherd:

You've probably never heard of it.

Leader:

Try me.

Shepherd:

Bethlehem.

Leader:

Bethle...? But you can't be..., I mean that's not poss.... Uh, tell me, who is the head of your government?

Shepherd:

Government? What's that?

Leader:

Who rules you? Who's the highest in command?

Shepherd:

Highest in command? You sure talk funny. Do you mean Caesar? He's off in Rome, but he seems to order everybody around, if that's what you mean. He's got his soldiers messing in our lives, tramping in our streets, patrolling the roads. Or maybe you mean our own little king, Herod, king of Judea. He pretty much dances to Caesar's tune. But don't get me started.

Leader:

(To audience) This is exciting! I think we have someone who is a Time Traveler with us tonight!

Shepherd:

Time traveler? Right.... I don't know what you're talking about. I mean, it takes me a lot of time to travel, 'cuz I have to walk everywhere, and when you're moving a herd of sheep, you don't move too fast. Speaking of which, I seem to have lost one of my sheep, a little lamb. I've been looking for it everywhere. I followed it into a cave, and then wound up here. Have you seen my lamb?

Leader:

No, I haven't seen it tonight. But if you don't mind, I need to get on with our service here. This is a very special night of celebration for us. This is Christmas Eve.

Shepherd:

Krissmuseev? Never heard of it.

Leader:

It's the night when the Savior of the World was born.

Shepherd:

Savior of the World? Some people call Caesar the Savior of the World. I haven't seen much from him beyond his tax collectors and soldiers.

Leader:

This is a different kind of savior. He brought a new way of living based on Love. He showed us that God is Love.

Shepherd:

God is love? Well, that's something new. I could get behind that. So, tell me some more about this Savior of the World who says God is love.

Leader:

I tell you what, why don't you just have a seat right here, and we will tell you all about it.

(Shepherd takes a seat down below pulpit, off to the side slightly.)

First, let's hear how The Prophet Isaiah foretells the Glory of God. Listen to these words from Isaiah 35:1-2:

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.”

This is a promise God gave to the people of Judah when they were captive in Babylon, longing for freedom and a return to the land they were taken from. Isaiah speaks words of comfort for all people who live in exile, saying that God makes hope blossom when all seems dry and barren as a desert. Our next hymn speaks about a similar yearning for hope: “Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus” found in United Methodist Hymnal #196. Why doesn't somebody get our friend a hymnal and show him how to find the hymn?

(An usher brings hymnal to shepherd and opens the hymnal to the page indicated as the intro to the hymn is played.)

Hymn “Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus”

Leader:

Our next reading is from the prophet Micah which tells where to look for this Savior:

“But you, O Bethlehem Eph'rathah,
who are little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me

one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.”

Shepherd:

Wait a minute! Did you say that a ruler of Israel is to come from Bethlehem? Little old Bethlehem? My Bethlehem? What does the Savior have to do with a ruler?

Leader:

Well the difference from regular rulers is that this Savior rules in human hearts. Say, I tell you what, our next song talks all about it. Please turn to "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

Hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

Shepherd:

You know, some of this is starting to sound a little familiar to me. I remember something strange happening in Bethlehem a few years back. I seem to recall a birth that had some gossip and rumors associated with it.

Leader:

You hear much gossip out in the fields?

Shepherd:

Are you kidding? Shepherds are the worst! I mean, what do we have to do while watching a bunch of sheep graze but talk about the latest gossip? So, what do you know about this birth?

Leader:

It just so happens that our next scripture reading talks about this. Reading from Matthew 1:18-25, we find this:

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; ¹⁹ and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; ²¹ she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emman’u-el” (which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.

Let’s sing another song about this: “He Is Born.”

Song “He Is Born”

Leader:

I think you might be interested in this next part. It’s also found in the Scriptures, this time in the book of Luke:

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. ² This was the first enrollment, when Quirin’i-us was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to be

delivered. ⁷ And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

Shepherd:

Wait a minute, this is sounding real familiar! You say it occurred during the census of Rome, when Quirinius was governing the Province of Syria? That was about 30 years ago! I was just a kid then, tending sheep with my father. But I remember something really amazing and scary and crazy happening one night.

Leader:

(Getting excited) Oh, please tell us about it!

Shepherd:

Well, it was a chilly night. We had rounded up most of the sheep, my father and I and several other shepherds. We had this kind of stockade made of rocks that we liked to keep them in at night. We weren't too far out of town that night, because we were taking some of them into market the next week, so we were coming down out of the hills. We were all sitting around the fire doing that thing I talked about earlier...

Leader:

Gossiping?

Shepherd:

Yep, that's it. So there we were, gossiping, telling stories, generally laughing and giving each other a bad time, when my abba just starts staring at something over there with a dumb look on his face.

Leader:

What did he see?

Shepherd:

Well, we all turned and looked, and there was something that looked like a human figure, but not completely, and I swear it was glowing, but all these years later, thinking back on it, I'm not sure. But then it spoke to us, or not exactly spoke, I couldn't see its face so I couldn't see if it opened its mouth, but it was more like hearing it in my head. All of us could. We talked about it later.

Leader:

What did it say?

Shepherd:

“Do not be afraid.” It must have seen the look on our faces. How could we not be afraid? It said to listen up, that it had great news, great joy to share with all people. That very night a savior had been born in the City of David. Now that we're talking about your Savior guy, it comes back to me. Yeah. A savior, born in the City of David. Now that could mean Jerusalem, you know, we talked it over, and then we remembered that David had originally come from Bethlehem before he became king, when he was a shepherd like us. We shepherds like to point out that fact to people when they try to look down on us. “You just watch yourself, we say, one of us could be the next King of Israel, you know.”

Leader:

It seems every era has its prejudice and bigotry against some group or other. What else did it say?

Shepherd:

I was just getting to that. It said to go into that city and find a baby lying in a manger, just newly born, all swaddled in cloth.

Leader:
Because there was no room in the inn.

Shepherd:
How'd you know that? We didn't know about that until we found the couple. But that was later.

Leader:
I tell you what, let's sing a song about that manger in Bethlehem, and the baby lying in it. "Away in a Manger."

Song "Away in a Manger"

Leader:
This is so exciting to hear about it from someone who was there. What happened next?

Shepherd:
Then we heard what seemed like singing, a hundred million voices, I swear, just seemed to be everywhere, in our heads, in the skies, out on the hills, I swear even the sheep were singing, but it was getting late, and we had been drinking some fermented ewe's milk.

Leader:
What were they singing?

Shepherd:
I don't recall exactly, a lot of it we didn't understand, but I think the singing was praising God and stuff. It was incredible! The music just flowed right through us, became part of our breathing, a couple of us started dancing, I was

jumping up and down. I don't get too religious, you know, but this one time I just couldn't help it.

Leader:

You know, our next song might bring back some more memories: "Hark the Herald Angels Sing."

Song "Hark the Herald Angels Sing"

Shepherd

That's a great song, but I don't think that was exactly what the angels were singing.

Leader:

Really? Well, can you recall just what they sang?

Shepherd:

I was pretty young, but I do think I remember something about "Glorious eggshells."

Leader:

"Glorious eggsh...? Oh, you mean "Gloria in excelsis Deo!" It's Latin.

Shepherd:

The Latins sing about glorious eggshells?

Leader:

No, it means "Glory to God in the highest" in the Latin language. I tell you what, let's sing the next song and see if it might sound familiar.

Song "Angels We Have Heard on High"

Shepherd:

Well, that was a fine song. Even had the glorious eggshells.

Leader:

So, tell us what happened next.

Shepherd:

Well, we all just sort of stood there with our mouths hanging open. Then we all looked at each other and said, “Maybe some of us should see what’s happening in Bethlehem.” A couple people were chosen to stay with the sheep, and the rest of us trudged over the hill into Bethlehem right then, in the middle of the night! I thought it was a great adventure: looking for a newborn savior. I didn’t have the slightest idea of what a savior was supposed to look like, let alone what a savior was. I was just bored out of my gourd sitting around watching sheep. It took a bit of searching but we noticed some women running around excitedly. I think they were midwives. Apparently, some woman had given birth to a son in a set of stables on the backside of an inn. So, we were in luck!

Leader:

This is fantastic! So, you found them alright?

Shepherd:

Sure enough. We found the inn and went around back and there they were.

Leader:

What did you see? What did they look like? Was the baby glowing like in all the pictures?

Shepherd:

What you been drinking? Glowing babies? No, the mother was exhausted, just laying next to the baby, him all wrapped up in cloth and what not. I guess the midwives had got everybody cleaned up, ‘cuz they were just all resting. We had a nice conversation with the father, though. He told us an angel told him to name the baby Yeshua, because Yeshua means “savior” and this baby was going to be a mighty leader of people somehow.

Not a lot of details at that point, but what the heck? We also told him we thought maybe an angel had visited us that evening as well. We sort of compared stories.

Leader:

Well, I think this might be a good time to sing our next song, “What Child Is This?”

Song “What Child Is This?”

Shepherd:

Wow, a song about us, shepherds and angels and all. Say, I think I’d better get to looking for my lamb. I don’t want it to get too lost.

Leader:

Before you go, I think you might like to know just who that little baby actually was. Let me read this to you here. It’s from our Gospel According to John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not comprehended it.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the Only Begotten, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Shepherd:
This baby is that kind of savior?

Leader:
He is indeed! I tell what, we have one more candle here to light. How would you like to help us light the Christ, er, Messiah candle?

Shepherd:
(As he lights the Christ Candle) Wow, a Messiah candle! We're looking for the Messiah. Wait a minute, if that birth was 30 years ago, there's a chance he might still be around. Do you think I could find him?

Leader:
I don't see why not. Just look for a teacher by the name of Je..., uh, Yeshua. There's usually a large crowd around him.

Shepherd:
I'll do that! *(Hurrying off, he pauses to say)* thanks for the stories and songs. You all have a great... what do you call it again?

Leader:
Christmas Eve.

Shepherd:
Yeah, Have a great Krismusseev! *(Exits)*

(Service continues)

Leader:
Well, that was something, wasn't it? A visit from an authentic shepherd from 2000 years ago. I hope he finds his lamb. I wonder if he left ninety-nine other sheep to find it? And I also wonder if he ever meets Yeshua, the Messiah? What a gift *we* have

received this evening as we have gathered to celebrate the greatest gift *the world* ever received: a gift of God's eternal Love, wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger! Let us respond to this gift with our gifts of offerings this evening, as we all sing, "Joy to the World."

Service can continue with candle-lighting, hymns, etc.

Herod Speaks

Host

Good morning, good morning! Welcome to the Sunday Show. During the Sundays in Advent, we invited into our presence four persons who were at the center of events over 2000 years ago when Jesus of Nazareth was born. We have entered into the Christmas season now, but with this morning's scripture reading, we are reminded that the birth of Jesus was not universally greeted with joy and celebration. In fact, outside of a few shepherds and the magi, no one else seems to have known about his birth. No one else, that is, except for someone charged with keeping a close eye on potential threats to the Powers that Be: Herod, King of the Jews. The poet Robinson Jeffers describes this situation in his poem:

Only an hour, only an hour from wars and
 confusion turn away
To the islands of old time when the world was
 simple and gay,
Or so we say.

And light lay the snow on the green holly

While oxen knelt at midnight,
Or so we say.

Caesar and Herod shared the world,
Snow over Bethlehem lay,
Iron the empire, brutal the time, dark was that
first Christmas day.¹

The writer of the Gospel According to Matthew doesn't want us to forget what the first Christmas was really like, in spite of our pretty Christmas cards and sweet carols. Jesus wasn't born into a dream world, Matthew is saying. Jesus was born into the real world. The real world of Caesars and Herods, where newborn children pose threats to the rich and powerful. Where families already on the edge of society are forced to flee for their lives. But what threat could a newborn baby pose to Rome, or to Herod, or to the rich and powerful in the world?

To help us answer this question we have with us someone who was, you might say, on the other side of the fence. This man never set foot outside of Jerusalem that first Christmas, but is known for one of the most horrific attempts on the life of a

¹ (quoted in H. Laron Hall, "A Tale of Two Kings", in *No Darkness at All*, p. 50)

newborn baby in the nearby town of Bethlehem. I
introduce Herod the Great!

(Herod enters, greets the Host, sits imperiously in chair)

Well, sir, I must say this is the first time we have
had a person of royal stature on this show.

Herod

Royal stature, you say? Hmmmmmph.

Host

Well, perhaps you could explain to us how you
came to be called “King of the Jews?”

Herod

One doesn’t “come to be called King of the Jews.”
One wrestles it out of the cold bleeding hands of
anyone who opposes you. It is granted by the
Roman Senate and the emperor in recognition for
one’s accomplishments, ability and loyalty.

Host

Perhaps you could give us a quick biographical
sketch of some of that.

Herod

The facts are simple and straightforward. My
grandfather and father both held high political
offices during the last part of the Hasmonean
dynasty. Then the Roman general Pompey
conquered Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judea
became a client of Rome. My family is not

composed of fools. Rome was the unquestioned power in the Mediterranean, so we supported Rome. My father, Antipater, was given charge over the civil government of Judea. He named my brother Phasael governor of Jerusalem and appointed me governor of Galilee. As governor of Galilee I had to engage many hostile military groups that threatened incursion upon Roman territory. I repelled them all, which brought favorable attention from Rome. I was then given the additional governorship over Syria and Samaria. Four years later, Antigonus, the last member of the Hasmoneans, invaded Jerusalem with the help of the Parthians and made himself King of Judea. I removed myself to Rome where Octavian (who was later named Augustus) accepted me and the Roman Senate named *me* King of Judea. All that remained was to take back Jerusalem, which I did with the help of Roman troops three years later.

Host

But how could you as a Jew accept Roman rule in Judea and Galilee?

Herod

Let me make something very clear here. My ancestry was Idumean. My family came from the

older territory of Edom. When the Hasmonean dynasty of the Maccabees overthrew the Greek Seleucids, and set up the new kingdom of Judea, they conquered the territories of Idumea, and Moab and Ammon. They then forced my ancestors to convert to Judaism. In reality, my blood is more Arabian than it is Judean. But I govern Judeans and Galileans, and so I respect their religion and make sure they are able to practice it, which is no easy task let me tell you.

Host

What do you mean, “no easy task?”

Herod

This kingdom is constantly on the verge of revolt and anarchy. Terrorists lurk around every corner ready to assassinate anybody who suggests that Alexander and his successors might have done us a favor by bringing us Hellenism, or that the Romans just might effectively bring us peace from the interminable skirmishes and warfare that has marked our history for a thousand years or more. Religious fanatics appear out of nowhere and cultivate their armies of zealots camped out in the wilderness. Every year it becomes harder and harder to defend this outpost of civilization.

Host

Just exactly what do you mean by outpost of civilization? The Jewish people had a long history of ruling themselves in that region and of basing their laws upon the commandments of God.

Herod

Everyone claims to be under the command of God, or of Zeus, or Minerva, or Isis, or whoever's name you want to put on it. When Alexander the Great conquered the world from Greece to India to Egypt, he brought along with his troops a culture so sublime, so philosophically coherent, so infused with aesthetic ideals that it was clearly superior to all others. It was a culture that presented for the first time in history the possibility of uniting the various tribes, clans and petty states who were constantly at each other's throats. The Romans adopted Greek culture when they came to power, and I saw it as my duty to maintain that culture.

Host

How did you do that? I understand that you are famous for many of the massive building projects of your time. Did these serve in some way to infuse Greek culture into Palestinian life?

Herod

I'm glad that the art of teaching history is not entirely a lost art. Yes, I did undertake several building projects. One of my greatest was to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem into one of the most magnificent architectural achievements of the Empire. I utilized Greek aesthetical concepts in designing the large courtyard, and the pillars and colonnades that surrounded the temple. I wanted to show my people that it was possible to adopt the advances of Greek culture while maintaining our worship of the One God.

Host

There is one burning question that this assembled audience would like to ask you. It concerns your order near the end of your reign to seek out and kill a young child in the town of Bethlehem and its near vicinity.

Herod

Bethlehem? Oh, I suppose you are talking about the purported newborn King of the Jews, eh?

Host

Yes. This resulted in the deaths of all baby boys under the age of two in this town. It might be true that it only resulted in the death of about twenty infant boys, but still, what threat did this young child pose to you?

Herod

Have you not been listening to what I've been telling you? Terrorists and revolutionaries wandered the streets and lurked in the alleys. In spite of every attempt to bring enlightened thinking to the masses, superstition and jingoistic religious prejudices oozed like an infection in every nook and cranny of my part of the Empire. The birth of someone who was a son of god was nothing new elsewhere. Zeus had numerous children by mortal women. But not so in Judea. Not so among those who worshipped the One God. When these Eastern Astrologers came talking about some star in the sky and its announcement of a new King of Judea, I knew I had to ask.

Host

AS I recall, your scholars located the town of the birth of this king as being Bethlehem according to this prophecy: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

Herod

Yes. The problem is that the prophecy goes on to say that this new shepherd's origin was "from of old, from ancient days." I realized that if this prophecy were to be linked with this infant, all the fanatics and malcontents would view this infant as some sort of Messiah, and we had plenty of trouble with this and that person proclaiming himself to be God's Chosen Instrument. It was easier to act preventively than to risk any more bloodshed.

Host

Certainly you weren't afraid of shedding blood, with your history of assassinations of family members and rivals?

Herod

Hmmm, so this is how history has treated me, huh? My methods were like surgery: cut out the threat while it was small instead of allowing it to grow and spread and sweep up the multitudes in its poison and violence. Remember, I had a kingdom to run, to keep in order. If I failed, the Romans would invade and put in a governor who had no sympathy for all the religious peculiarities of my people. Believe me, my decisions were always in the best interests of my people. And in that regard, were my policies any different from the

decisions your leaders and governments make today?

Host

Perhaps not, as long as one considers the wielding of power and control to be the purpose of government and the pinnacle of civilization. But what if the pinnacle of civilization is to realize our common humanity and spiritual relationship with every other person on earth? If this King of the Jews were really the Prince of Peace, wouldn't that represent a whole leap forward for humanity? And if this Prince of Peace were truly God Incarnate, wouldn't that mean that God had seen the suffering of the masses and had personally come to raise them up?

Herod

Can't you see that the notion of a finite God is absurd? Because it is. And suppose, just for the sake of argument, that it isn't, that this story is true, that this child was in some inexplicable manner both God and Man, that he were to grow up, live, and die, without committing a single sin? Would that make life any better? On the contrary it would make it far, far worse. For it could only

mean this; that once having shown them how, God would expect every man and woman, whatever their fortune, to lead a sinless life in the flesh and on earth. Then indeed would the human race be plunged into madness and despair. And for me personally at that moment it would have meant that God had given me the power to destroy Himself. I refused to be taken in.² This vision of a God who comes to share in the suffering of humankind is too dangerous. It is better for the Deity to remain ignorant. Only then will the Empire and Civilization remain as it is. No, the weed had to be pulled while the leaves were still tender. The yeast had to be removed before it leavened the dough of the world. My actions were completely understandable and excusable according to the rules of Empire. I challenge everyone here to live by anything different.

[Herod stands and imperiously leaves. Host stands and watches him leave, then turns to audience:]

Host

So that is our challenge: To live by a different set of rules, a set of rules and a way of life based upon the rule of love, that treats everyone else the way we ourselves wish to be treated, that proclaims

² The preceding section of this paragraph is adapted from W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being."

justice for the oppressed, release to the captives, restoring of sight to the blind, that says to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, to visit the imprisoned - to touch and share fellowship with everyone with whom Jesus shared fellowship. And so it is that now that the presents have been opened, the carols sung, and the tinsel put away, the real work of Christmas begins.

