

The First CHRISTmas

by Ruth Bell Graham (June 10, 1920 – June 14, 2007) ¹

Luke 2:1-20 ²

Hello! My name is Nathan. Nathan Jacobson. I'm from Bethlehem in Israel. Actually, I live in heaven now. I lived in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. I was twelve years old then.

Of all the times in the world to live, can you imagine living then!? What if you had been alive on that very day? What if you had lived not only at the very time, but had lived in the very town where Jesus was born!?

None of us can choose when we will be born. You were born nearly two thousand years after that first Christmas Day, and you had nothing to say about it. Nor did I have anything to do with the fact that I was there. But I was, and I've come today to tell you the story. So settle back, and imagine yourself on the other side of the world, in Bethlehem. Some of you have been there. Now—and this is harder—imagine yourself back through time.

Imagine yourself back through all those years. Back to the day when your bed was a blanket on the floor, when traveling by camel-back was the best way to get anywhere, and when Caesar Augustus was the ruler of the world.

My parents, my sister, Anna, and I lived just off the main street in Bethlehem. My father worked in the Temple in Jerusalem—you would say he was a commuter—and my mother was a midwife. While you're imagining, why don't you imagine that you and your family were among the many descendants of David who had come to Bethlehem to be taxed. You might very well have stayed in our house. Bethlehem had only one small inn, and that had been filled by the first travelers to arrive, so the rest had to find a place to sleep in the houses of strangers, or in stables, or wherever there was room to lie down.

In that way, that first Christmas in Bethlehem was like your Christmas today. Our house was full of guests then, too, both grownups and children. But it wasn't a happy get-together as it is today. It was no holiday then. Families were coming to Bethlehem to pay taxes to an emperor they hated. They came in fear and anger. They didn't know, you see, that Christmas was about to happen.

We didn't have a bed to offer you to sleep in. In those days ordinary people didn't have beds. We all carried sleeping blankets with us. During the day we wrapped them about us as a cloak, and at night we spread them out on the floor or on the ground and lay down on them. Not very fancy, but it made it easy to have guests. There was no counting noses to make sure there were enough beds to go around. No, a family in Bethlehem could have as much company as it had floor space!

Another thing that you might find interesting was that there was a lot of work to do to get through the day, and all children—even the children of guests—were expected to help with the work. The boys would have gone with me to help the men in the fields outside the village. The girls would have gone with Anna to fill water jars at the public well down the street.

Bethlehem was really crowded with travelers that day. Men tugged and shouted at heavy-laden donkeys. Women carried tiny children. Older children lugged bundles of food. The people in the streets looked cross and tired. Some of them were headed for the large

¹ From *Our Christmas Story*, by Ruth Bell Graham, as told to Elizabeth Sherrill (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1959), pp. 82-95. Edited by Rev. David Stancil, Ph.D.

² A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on December 24, 2020. CHRISTmas Eve.

house where the Roman soldiers were taking names for the tax rolls. Others had just arrived in Bethlehem and were peering anxiously into the crowded doorways, wondering where they would find a place to spend the night. All they needed was room enough to spread out their cloaks and a little water to wash the dust of travel from their feet, but even those simple things were hard to find then.

Toward the end of the day, when the work was done, you would have come with me to the gate where the north road came into Bethlehem. You would have climbed up onto the sun-warmed stone wall and sat down with me and the other children and the old men to watch the latest strangers coming into town.

Here came a whole family: four children, the mother and father, the grandmother, and that very old woman on the donkey must be the great-grandmother. They looked tired as they trudged up this last hill. Probably they looked forward to a comfortable place to stay. I wished there were more room in our house.

Alone and in groups the people came, walking rapidly on this last bit of their journey, up the hill to Bethlehem. Some of them, the old men said, were coming from as far away as the town of Nazareth. I could hardly believe it. Almost a hundred miles! That meant three or four nights of sleeping beside the road.

That man coming now, down in the valley, must be rich; he was riding a camel! Not even his gold would buy him a room in Bethlehem tonight, I thought. You turned to the old man sitting beside you on the wall, and, because old men knew everything, you asked him, "Why do all these people have to come to Bethlehem to be counted?"

The old man closed his eyes as if he were looking back over hundreds of years. "Their great-great-great-great-grandfathers once lived here," he said at last. "That makes this their home town, too. And Caesar"—the old man leaned forward and spat on the road to show what he thought of Caesar—"Caesar doesn't care how far people have to travel if it makes his bookkeeping a little easier." The old man's eyes glared with anger.

The camel was lurching past us now. The rich rider's eyes were angry, too . . . angry, and a little sad. It was the look in the eyes of all the travelers coming into Bethlehem. They didn't like having to make this trip, and they didn't like having to pay taxes to Rome. But what could they do? That was the way the world was. The strong took from the weak, the man with the sword made the laws, no one loved anyone but himself. It had always been that way, and always would be. There was nothing you could do to change it.

The afternoon sun made the wall warm on your back. For a minute, your eyes closed. When they opened, two people were coming along the dusty road down in the valley, a man walking and a woman riding a donkey. But how slowly these two were coming. The woman had her hand on the man's shoulder and she seemed very weary. The man kept looking at her anxiously.

Two men walking rapidly with tall staffs passed the couple and the donkey, climbed the hill, and went in through the town gate. Now the man and woman had reached the hill and you could see that the donkey was covered with dust, as if he had come a long way. Why were they stopping so often, now that their trip was almost over? They stopped again, right in front of us. The woman turned to look at the man, and as she did you saw her face. You saw it and your heart gave a little leap.

For on this young woman's face, so pale and travel-weary, was a smile that made you forget taxes and Roman soldiers and even Caesar Augustus himself. In hot, noisy, crowded Bethlehem, her smile seemed to say that all the joy of heaven had come down to earth.

That night, wrapped up in your cloak on the crowded floor of my house, you could not get to sleep for thinking of her smile. It was an unusual thing, these days, to see a happy face. You wondered if the man and woman had found a place to sleep.

Why was she so happy? And you, why were you so wide-awake and excited? Was it the thought of that smile that made you want to get up and dance and run through the streets? You didn't do it, of course. You lay still . . . still as a log, so that you wouldn't wake your parents who were squeezed up against you on the crowded floor. But a few feet away you saw me lift my head, and you knew that I was not asleep either. None of the children who had seen Mary were asleep that night.

This was a special night. You didn't know how you knew it, but you knew that something wonderful was about to happen to you. To you and to everyone. Something so wonderful you were almost afraid to breathe for fear of breaking the stillness.

For tonight Bethlehem was very still. On other nights donkeys coughed in their stables and wolves howled from their hill tops. But on this most special of all nights, even the donkeys and the wolves were quiet. The wind itself stopped blowing. The animals and the sky and some wide-awake children were quiet. Listening. Waiting for something.

It was very late in the night when you and I suddenly jumped up from the floor. In an instant all of the children were on their feet. There was a commotion out in the street. We could hear men shouting, running, their sandals scuffing on the rough stones of the street. We ran to the door, stepping over sleeping grown-ups wrapped in their cloaks.

We stared at these men who were talking so loudly in the middle of the night. They looked like country men, shepherders. What was it they were saying? They had seen an angel!

We looked at them again to make sure they were really shepherds and not lunatics. No, they were tough-looking, surely, but not crazy. They were strong men who lived out of doors and who fought wolves away from their sheep with nothing but sticks and sling-shots. These were not the sort of men who would be imagining things.

They had seen an angel, they repeated. And the angel had told them about a baby born in Bethlehem and called the baby "Savior" and "Lord." They had just seen the baby with their own eyes—out in The Tower of the Flocks, just beyond the edge of town—and they wanted everyone else to know about him too.

We didn't wait to hear any more. All of us children set off down the street as fast as we could run, past the houses where sleepy people were stumbling to the doors, asking what all the racket was about. Just outside of town to the enclosure of the Temple flocks . . . then inside it to The Tower of the Flocks . . . then, slowly, softly, in at the door.

And there she was—the young woman with the radiant smile. She was leaning against one of the stalls, and the eyes in the happy face were closed. The man was at her side. And behind them, in the manger where the birthing ewes came for their food, was the baby.

He was a tiny thing, wrapped tightly in a long band of cloth and sleeping as soundly as any newborn baby. Sleeping as though the world had not waited thousands of years for this moment. As soundly as though your life and my life, and the lives of everyone on earth

were not wrapped up in his birth. As though from this moment on all the sin and sorrow of the world were not his problem.

Should you speak to his mother resting so quietly there? Should you ask her if you might touch the baby . . . not to wake him, but just to touch his hand? What a moment that would have been . . . to have reached out your own hand and touched the Son of God!!!

And yet, as wonderful as this is to imagine, you need not envy the fact that I really was there. Don't envy the others who lived in Bethlehem that night, though many of them saw Jesus and Mary and Joseph with their own eyes. For we didn't begin to understand what we were seeing.

We didn't know all that this baby was born to do: the words of joy he would speak to a despairing world, the love he would show to people too used to hatred, the victory he would win over sin and death.

No, you are greatly blessed to live now, when his work of love is finished. He is as close to you today as he was to me in Bethlehem. Closer, really, for today you don't even have to reach out your hand to touch him.

If you really want to know him, if you're really ready for him to change your life, you can come to Jesus just as truly as the shepherds and I did in Bethlehem. And at your invitation he will forgive you and give back to you that joyous fellowship with God that was lost so long ago in the Garden of Eden. This is the Christmas gift that God gives to you, and to everyone on earth.

And if, on Christmas morning, when all the presents are opened and the fire is burning low, you want to go back to Bethlehem, you have only to open your Bible to the second chapter of the Book of Luke, knowing who this man and this woman are, coming up the hill to Bethlehem. Knowing why they have come, and why the angels sing. . . .

"While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.'

"Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men.'"

Have a joyous CHRISTmas!