



CHRISTMAS STORIES

Joseph's Story

(Listen as this unexpected groom gets drawn into the central story of human history)

Betrothed

I've just come from the house. It's nearly finished. Every spare minute of each day has been poured into that dwelling. I make my livelihood building other men's homes – laying foundations, constructing walls, setting beams for the roof, stretching branches across, covering them with reeds and then hard-packed clay. As a carpenter, I craft furnishings to fill them – tables, chairs, benches – rich ornamentation for the rich, simple solid fittings for the poor.

I myself am only a poor carpenter, Joseph by name, living in this out of the way town of Nazareth. My resources are few, but this frontier community allows the likes of me to find space – land within the city walls – small and cramped, but space nonetheless. And so I built the plain, small, one-roomed dwelling of the humble, but my hands adorned wall and ceiling with carved-wood decoration such as only the rich can afford.

It's an empty building still – raw, fresh, new. But it will be a home. I'll fill it with craftsmanship from my hands – table and bench and a chair for her – and a small cradle for each of the children to come. Yes, that shell of a building will become a home. A home for Mary.

Each day I've worked, I've had her in mind. I plastered the inside walls, but it was her I saw sheltered within, gladly preparing food there, or patiently sweeping the hard clay floor yet again. Such tenderness of hand and face. I crafted the table with these hands, but it was hers I saw bringing savoury dishes to rest upon it, laying the evening meal, lighting Sabbath candles. And I fashioned the chair with as much comfort as wood can give, that she might gently rock a child, our child, to sleep.

Ever since I was a boy, I knew I was crafted for this. When I was circumcised on the eighth day of my life, included in the prayer (as in every circumcision prayer I have ever heard!) was the hopeful expectation that I would grow to be married! Ever after, as I grew, Mother and Father would say, "When we get you a wife," pointing me to my future. Even my name, Joseph, means "may He – God – add sons". Well, you don't get sons you can name as your own without a wife!

And then came the engagement. Oh, she was so young. Ten years my junior! But she had a good family, closely related to my own. My parents made a good match. As is the tradition, that was years ago. The issue was well settled but the fruit was yet to be tasted. Long have I waited! Long have I built! And Mary grew in beauty and grace.

Now we are betrothed, Mary and I. We did it publicly, rather than privately, that all might share our joy. It was formalized with the exchange of a small piece of money, as is the tradition, and sealed with a benediction over a cup of wine. The year of betrothal has now begun and we set our sights on the coming day of our marriage, knowing the commitment is sure. Indeed to break our relationship now would require nothing less than a legal divorce. But how could I ever divorce my beloved?

What's more, both of us trace our heritage to the house of David, shepherd-King of Israel. And with that heritage comes the heartening knowledge that Messiah himself, when he comes, will trace his lineage to none other than that same shepherd-King. Truly will he be called "Son of David." Indeed, Mary and I hold a special hope, unspoken, that the Lord Almighty might even choose us for that greatest of all honours, that Messiah himself might be born into our home, the home I've crafted for Mary. Such a thing is almost beyond hoping. But what else is hope for?

Soon I'll finish building. Soon I'll move into that house, making it a home, readying it for the day my betrothed becomes my wife.

Bemused

We're still months away from marriage, but Mary up and left town today, very quickly, with only the briefest of explanations. She said she was going to visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth, wife to Zechariah, the priest. It's three to four days' journey from here. She said she plans to stay there, visiting several months.

I couldn't read her. When she came by to see me, brief as it was, she fairly glowed. Yet something preoccupied her mind, something filled her heart, something weighed on her, yet somehow tinged with wonder.

She seemed to anticipate with relief the soon-coming visit with Elizabeth, as if woman to woman she might unburden herself in a way she could not with me.

So, she's gone. Perhaps waiting for her return will distract me from the slow march toward our wedding day. In the meantime, I'll focus on the work at hand. The building itself is now done. It's simply left to me to move in and make of it a home – a home to wait for Mary.

Betrayed

Why, O God? Why this? How could this have happened? What of all my best hopes and dreams? Where are they now? How can I go on building, with the foundation gone?

Mary's back with the most gut-wrenching news. She's pregnant. That's why she left so quickly three months ago. She knew it then. She told me so.

Already there's a certain fullness about her, a fullness I abhor, a fullness that cuts so deep.

She came to me this morning, timidly, tentatively, yet with open-faced warmth. She had no sense of shame in communicating the most appalling news.

"Joseph, I'm pregnant," she said. "It's of the Lord."

What? My mind reeled as she spilled out the rest. How could I even grab hold of what she said? "A son ... the angel said ... his name will be Jesus ... the throne of his father, David ... it's by the Holy Spirit."

What? I couldn't stand the blaze of those clear eyes. Betrayed, I turned, walked away, leaving her, for good.

I cherish her still too much to expose her to shame. I won't press the charges, I won't divorce her in public. I'll do it quietly, in private, simply. I only need two witnesses.

But there's no overcoming such breaking of faith. My home, fully crafted and furnished, will remain but a shell.

Believing

The rabbis say there are 3 marks of God's favour: *"A good king, a fruitful year, and a good dream."*

Last night I had a dream – amazing dream – filled to overflowing with God’s favour.

I went to sleep, numb in my resolve to divorce Mary. Dreams came to me, fitful and troubled, bathed with pain, soaked in tear. Their swirling darkness confused my mind, unsettling sleep’s much needed rest.

In the midst of that valley of shadow, a light dawned, small and intense at first, then spiraling outward, shaping to a colossal being, angelic in stature, bearing authority from the Lord himself, speaking words of wonder into my appalled ears.

“Joseph, son of David,” the mighty one named me, wrapping my heritage and dreams in one.

“Do not be afraid,” he said (speaking to my pain), “to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

My mind reeled. *“Don’t be afraid ... conceived from the Holy Spirit ... a son ... Jesus.”*

God’s hand is truly behind this! Holy Spirit conception, not betrayal.

And if it’s Mary’s part to give birth to this son, then it’s my part to name him, to claim him as my own, to name him Jesus. The same name, in its Hebrew form, as that great champion of God’s people, Joshua, his name meaning “the Lord saves.” For Joshua, with a mighty arm, fought saving battles in the wilderness against Israel’s enemies, and, leading the people into the Promised Land, brought them victory at the immovable walls of Jericho, walls which crumbled as Joshua commanded the trumpets to blast and the people to shout.

Mary’s baby boy, a mighty champion. I’m to name him Jesus, because he will save his people like that – save them from their sins.

The angel’s words, in my dream, rolled over me. And as I lay dreaming, whether prompted by the angel’s direct intervention or springing simply from long years of synagogue attendance and the frequent recitation of Isaiah’s prophecies, a phrase of scripture illuminated my mind, ringing forth good news and prophecy’s fulfillment in this very moment:

“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel – ‘God with us’.”

Yes. The son ... of God ... with us ... to save ... Jesus, I’ll name him.

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Everything looks different in the morning after dreams have filled up with God’s angel.

“Do not be afraid to take Mary home ... As your wife.” That’s what he said.

I won’t be afraid. I’ve a home, crafted and prepared, lovingly furnished. We’re advancing the wedding. I’m taking Mary there as my wife. There’s a chair set for rocking and a cradle itself prepared and waiting for the baby. It’ll be a son. It’s all prepared.

Though truth be told, somehow, so far, my best laid plans haven’t worked out exactly as I thought, though my best dreams and hopes are fully realized, yet on a divergent angle. Mary, pregnant with a son from heaven? The home’s ready, the cradle is, too, but it seems when the Almighty is working salvation my expectations may be simply too narrow. So, I’ll hold loosely to my plans in order to be embraced by his.