

Christmas Eve

"God With Us"

A first-person retelling of the Christmas Story

by

Walt Harrah

A Moment Of Wonder

Christmas Eve Candle Lighting

1. Explanation of the candle:

The fifth and final candle is the candle of joy. The angel said to the shepherds, "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. Luke 2:11

2. Light the candle

3. Scripture Reading (responsively)

Isaiah 35

LEADER:

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

CONGREGATION:

The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God.

LEADER:

Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."

CONGREGATION:

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

LEADER:

Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

CONGREGATION:

And a highway will be there, it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it.

LEADER:

No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and the ransomed of the LORD will return.

CONGREGATION:

They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Joy To The World

ZECHARIAH:

Here we were, both descendents of Aaron. I had happily served as a priest for decades, and Elizabeth and I had been careful to follow God's prescribed ways. Not only did we love God, we loved each other deeply. Our biggest disappointment in life was that we had not been able to have children.

Of course people talked, and wondered. Children were a sign of God's blessing. We wondered sometimes as well. Sometimes, I admit, I gave in to self-pity. My life was given over to serving God, after all....you'd think that - well, you know.... to be denied the joy of children....and then...suddenly we were just too old to hope anymore.

But God had other plans - wonderful ones. One day, maybe the greatest day of my life, I was selected by lot to go into the temple of the Lord and to burn incense. Do you know what the chances of that are? There were 24 divisions of priests, and my division was eighth in the rotation. So twice every year my division was called up for duty and we traveled to Jerusalem to work in the Temple. Each day about 50 priests would be on duty, and to be chosen by lot was considered a great honor, one that could only come once in a lifetime, if at all.

It was all very exciting, and Elizabeth made me go over my responsibilities one more time. The altar would be heated, and my job was to place incense on it, and then prostrate myself in prayer. The time came, and it was going just as expected. The incense filled the room, the people were outside praying "May the merciful God enter the Holy Place and accept with favor the offering of his people," My joyful task was to offer prayers on behalf of the people, and I put everything I had into it!

Would you believe that right in the middle of my prayers, that an angel of the Lord appeared at the right side of the altar of incense?! Really and truly. An angel. It was terrifying! I was frozen, and he spoke to me, trying to reassure me to not to be afraid. Easy for him to say.

Then he said the most amazing thing, the sweetest words ever. "Your prayer has been heard, and Elizabeth will bear you a son, whose name is to be John." I was dumbfounded.

The angel went on. That's not all, he said. This son, would be a joy and a delight, and not just to Elizabeth and myself, but to all the people. John, he said, would be special, set apart for God, filled with the Holy Spirit, and that many would have their faith in God revived when they came in contact with - my son!!

I couldn't believe it! No really, I couldn't find it in my heart to trust what the angel said. It just seemed - impossible.

So I stupidly said what I was thinking. blurring out, "How can I be sure of this? We're really old, you know!" Suddenly the angel's mood really changed. It was too late to take back my words, and his stern rebuke still rings in my ears:

"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I came here to give you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

And just like that, I had no voice. I went outside, and all I could do was make signs. I really and truly couldn't speak. My doubting heart had gotten the best of me at a time when faith was called for, and I was kicking myself all the way back to our village. Of course the people were excited, assuming that I had seen a vision. Four hundred years of waiting, and now God was apparently up to something. They had no idea!

Sure enough, Elizabeth got pregnant. I can't describe the change that came over her. She glowed, overwhelmed with the goodness of the Lord, choosing to seclude herself for the first five months. "The Lord has done this for me," she would say. "He is showing me favor by removing the disgrace I have always felt."

If I would have had a voice, I would have said, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." I wrote it down instead.

SONG

MARY:

I have an angel story too. Gabriel appeared to me just like Zechariah, and all my plans, well, they were suddenly put on hold. God had something else in mind for me that I couldn't possibly have imagined.

My plans? Well, Joseph and I were engaged to be married, and excited about our future together. We wanted what everyone else wanted, a nice happy wedding, to enjoy life together, to have children eventually, nothing terribly dramatic.

But as the angel delivered his message, I somehow knew that my whole life would be nothing like I imagined. Favor with God, he said! What could that mean? Gabriel saw the look on my face and tried to reassure me, telling me to not be afraid. Easy for him to say. Then he mentioned my favor with God again. I began to sense the goodness of God, almost like a perfume, as my heart settled back where it belongs.

The next words I heard were words unique to me, never to be repeated again in all of history, words that would soon bring me both blessing and disgrace. I was to have child, a son that was to be named Jesus. That was not all. This child would be, the angel said, the Son of the Most High. He would not only assume the throne of David, he would reign forever, and his kingdom would never end.

My heart went back into my throat. What was I hearing? How could I possibly have a child? This had to be a dream, and I would wake up, and just go back to being a young girl making wedding plans.

The next thing I knew, I was talking to an angel. "Just how will this happen," I heard myself say, "since I am a virgin?" The answer was strangely mysterious and wonderful. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you," he said, "and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

He continued slowly and deliberately, to let the words sink in. "The holy one to be born to you 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."

My mind raced with a thousand thoughts. Elizabeth? Pregnant? How exciting! After all these years! What was going on? What was God up to? And what was being asked of me? My parents! What will they think? And what will I tell Joseph? What about our wedding plans? Favor with God - I

have favor with God....he loves me....somehow this will turn out for the best, because God is in it....my heart once again settled down. A calmness came over me, and I spoke again.

"I am the Lord's servant. Let it happen to me as you have said." And just like that, Gabriel was gone. Elizabeth. I had to go see Elizabeth.

SONG

ELIZABETH:

Six months of having Zechariah writing on a tablet got old fast. Eventually I was able to piece together the events that had taken place in the temple. Sure enough, I got pregnant. And for the first five months, I decided to stay out of sight, but after five months I was ready to tell the world. Everyone was thrilled, of course. Zechariah still couldn't talk, but he smiled a whole lot. There was this air of expectancy, and so much hope about this boy growing inside of me.

A young relative of mine named Mary, engaged to a wonderful carpenter named Joseph, was coming to see me. I knew nothing about an angel having appeared to her, nothing about the baby she was carrying. But that all changed in an instant.

I don't know quite how to explain it. I opened the door, and Mary stood there, greeting me. And no sooner did that happen, than baby John in my womb began kicking. No, it was different than kicking. It felt like leaping! And just as suddenly I began to speak, and I was caught up in wonder at Mary and what she was experiencing: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

MARY:

How I needed that affirmation! Ever since the angel visited me I had been doing my best to fight off nagging questions. Surely this meeting was God appointed, showing His favor again, confirming His promise to me through Elizabeth. She knew nothing, and yet was God's instrument to encourage me.

Still, it was shocking to hear those words coming from Elizabeth's mouth. No one knew. I had told no one. And here was Elizabeth, confirming what the angel had said. Immediately I was overwhelmed with the goodness

of the Lord, and just like Elizabeth, praise began to pour out of me, spiritual words that were beyond my years and understanding, praise that blessed the Lord and spoke to the fulfillment of his promises.

ELIZABETH:

I clearly remember what she spoke: She began, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant." She seemed to comprehend the privilege she had been given of bearing the Son of God, how future generations would call her blessed. The Mighty One had done great things for her, she said, as she blessed his holy name.

She spoke of his mercy that goes on and on, his mighty deeds that he had performed, how he puts down kings and rulers and the proud, while at the same time he raises up the humble. The hungry are fed, but not so the rich. He is a friend to Israel, being faithful to Abraham and all his promises.

That beautiful moment passed, John inside of me settled instead for an occasional kick. Mary and I had shared a holy moment, and I cherished the days spent with her. She stayed until it was time for me to deliver, when she returned to her home.

SONG

ZECHARIAH:

Nine months of no talking. Believe me, I told God over and over that with his help I would change my ways and think before I spoke. My desire was to use my mouth to bless him in the future. Well, the time came for our son to be born, and I've never seen everybody so excited as that village was with the birth of my little boy. They totally entered into our joy. We were the ones who had waited so long, but it was like this was their child. I just nodded and smiled approvingly, hoping to convey that yes, he does look a lot like me!

Well, the eighth day came when the circumcision ceremony would take place. Hebrew custom is that this is the day that the child is officially named. Everyone was already calling our boy Zechariah Jr., having no idea of the angel's strict instruction to me. Elizabeth, bless her heart, set everyone straight. "No!" she said. "He is to be called John" You could have heard a pin drop. No one in my family tree had the name John. They looked at me, expecting me to set Elizabeth straight. So I asked for a tablet, and shocked everyone when I wrote for the last time on my tablet, HIS NAME IS JOHN.

And that did it. My tongue was loosed and my mouth was opened. Suddenly the most wonderful praise came out of my mouth.....

ELIZABETH: (interrupting...)

It was not him speaking, it was the Holy Spirit speaking through him, just like what happened to Mary and myself. He began by blessing the Lord, exactly like Mary. He emphasized that the plan of redemption was now accelerating, and that salvation promised by the prophets long ago was now being confirmed. And again, just as Mary pointed out, God still had every intention of fulfilling his promise to Abraham. The day of serving God without fear would soon be a reality. Then he spoke these precious words to our infant son.....

ZECHARIAH:

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

ELIZABETH:

Everyone was profoundly moved, and filled with awe. Of course the word spread, and soon everyone was talking about this child and all the events surrounding his birth. "What then, is this child going to accomplish?" they wondered. God was definitely up to something. You could feel it in the air.

SONG

JOSEPH

Everyone knows that I had a really difficult time accepting Mary's story. Who wouldn't? Her pregnancy put me in a very awkward spot. All my life I had tried to live righteously, to do the right thing according to God's ways and instructions. And then this....it really threw me. What to do? After much pondering, only option that seemed open to me was to just break off the engagement as quietly as possible, and move on with my life.

But God had other plans. I had a dream, strange and wonderfully reassuring. And in that dream I encountered an angel. He knew my name. He knew all about my fears, of my disappointment in Mary, of my having to face everyone, and he knew of my decision to cut off all ties with Mary.

Slowly and methodically he confirmed virtually everything that Mary had said. The baby forming inside her was a true miracle of God by the Holy Spirit. Heaven had already picked out his name - Jesus. He would be a savior, saving his people from their sins. Mary had tried to tell me, and I wouldn't listen. I began to feel ashamed that I had not taken my precious Mary's account more seriously.

Sure I had doubts. I desired a son some day. What father doesn't? But he wouldn't be my son.....my mind was swimming as I awoke. But those nagging questions slowly gave way to an incredible peace. God was clearly in this. I now knew what I had to do. Mary needed me. God would get us through this somehow, although it wasn't at all clear how. What I now knew for sure was that it was God's desire that Mary be my wife. I felt honored to come alongside her in this unique calling. Imagine. My Mary, the mother of God.

SONG

JOSEPH

Talk about bad timing - or so it seemed - the government required that I return to my hometown to register for a census, of all things!

What to do! Taking Mary with me seemed foolhardy, with the baby due and all. But the more I thought about it, with people talking the way they do, and the worst-case scenario of what the authorities can do to betrothed women who are found to be pregnant, and furthermore if she had the baby while I was gone I wouldn't be around to protect her and just be there for her.....given all that, it seemed better to take Mary along. Surely God's favor to Mary can be shown any time, any where.

Since I belonged to the house of David, it meant traveling all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem - 80 miles of bumpy roads, not to mention the discomfort of a donkey! We wondered what God must have thought, as his Son was being carried about inside Mary, in less than ideal conditions. Clearly from the beginning this child was not being born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He would apparently have no special favors.

Lots of people just like us were having to make similar treks for the census, and when we got to Bethlehem, the city was all booked up. No vacancy anywhere.

MARY

The innkeeper took one look at me and his mood softened. "I have a stable for the animals," he said. "It's not much, and you'll have to share it with the cattle, but it's better than nothing." We decided we'd better take it.

The familiar barnyard smells hit us well before we opened the door. But there was no turning back now, for my labor pains were getting intense. What timing! An unfamiliar town, no place to stay, in labor, no family, no midwife, the cattle looking on. My sweet Joseph. What had he gotten himself into? But if I was highly favored, God would see me through.

I had anticipated, God willing, that someday I would give birth, but I never imagined a setting like this. It seemed as though God were trying to make a point. No fanfare, at least that we could see. No comfort. No family....

As the labor pains intensified, Joseph stayed calm throughout, and before long, here he was, our baby boy. The world's baby boy. We counted his toes, his fingers. All there. He was perfect. I wrapped him up as tightly as I could and laid him in the manger.

SONG

SHEPHERDS

Some jobs you're just born into, and that's what you end up doing. Some jobs don't carry much respect. Tending sheep is one of those jobs, and that's what I ended up doing. Not much training required. You mainly have to be vigilant. A sheep wanders off, you better go looking for it. You keep an eye out for marauders. But most the time, there's nothing goin on, like that night. At least when it began.

That night? You know, that night. It was winter, very quiet - maybe too quiet. The sheep were behaving themselves. We may a' dozed off.

Suddenly there was a blinding light. It seemed like a thousand lightning strikes all at once, without the thunder. We never seen a light like that. It lit up the whole sky. Not only that, an angel - appeared. Have you ever seen an angel? Whoa! I don't mind telling you, we were terrified.

The angel? He said, "Don't be afraid." Easy for him to say. We looked around to see who he was talkin' to. He was talkin' to us. He was very excited: "Today in Bethlehem a Savior has been born - to you." We just shook. "He is Christ the Lord." And to confirm that what he was sayin' was the truth, he said that we would find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger, just like he said. He wanted us to go see. Us. He invited us!

And then all heaven broke loose. It was wild. Angels all over the sky, millions it seemed - they began praising God..."Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

And then, it was over. Just like that, they were gone. Dead silence. We looked at ourselves. We weren't dreamin'. It was real. We knew we had to

see for ourselves, sheep or no sheep. This was once in a lifetime, and we weren't gonna miss it. If heaven thought this birth was worth celebrating, how could we just shrug and walk away? Before we could think of all the reasons why not to, we took off for Bethlehem. It wasn't very far.

How Far Is It To Bethlehem

INNKEEPER

Sure I remember that night. Some things stay with you forever. I had to tell them we were full up - it was true. Of course I felt bad, she being pregnant and all. And, feeling some pity for the young girl, I offered the animal shed out back, and they seemed happy enough. Knowing now who they were - and who he was - you bet I regret not having tried harder to give him a decent welcome to this world. My own bed, even.

The inn had settled down, and everyone had been asleep it seems for half the night when there was a knock at the door. Some shepherds, of all people, we standing outside apologetically asking if we knew of a baby boy that had just been born. Half asleep I muttered something about "out back" and closed the door and went back to bed. "What was that about," my wife mumbled. "Crazy shepherds," I said, and we went back to sleep. I should have followed them. I still kick myself for missing out.

It took a while to piece the whole story together. It seems that those "crazy shepherds" had gotten in on an amazing piece of history. Not only had a bunch of angels appeared in the sky, but they had been told about a newborn child, who was no ordinary child, but a savior. And he had just been born in Bethlehem. They had been told to go and see the child, and that they would find him all wrapped up and lying in a manger - as it turns out, my manger out back! Would you believe that - the Son of God born in my stable? And I didn't have a clue.

At first, I doubted their story. Shepherds don't have much credibility, you know. But these shepherds were different. Something about that night had transformed them. You just don't see shepherds glorifying and praising God. They had to have witnessed something, something so earth shattering, so monumental that they didn't talk about sheep any more. They talked about Christ the Lord. They talked about glory, and singing, and wonder. Something about their amazement was contagious. Even though I wish I would have done more at the time, I am grateful that my stable out back was

used of God to house his Son here on earth. A truly humble beginning for a most amazing Savior.

SONG