

Room in the Heart Filled

IT WASN'T HIS TYPICAL CLIENTELE, and the hours they kept were not at all typical. Even at this late hour they kept Simon busy shuttling their demands up and down the stairs. More of this, and more of that, but mostly more wine. "And hold it down up there! You born in a barn?" He shouted up the stairs on his way back down. Nathanael was already there.

"Father, they're asking for more wine—and there isn't any!"

Simon ran a quick mental inventory through his head. Who on this street would have some he could purchase? "Try at Saul's house. They may have some to spare. And hurry; we certainly can't keep our precious guests waiting. And oh yes, if you happen to run into your mother, kindly inform her that I would appreciate her help once in a while."

On his way out the front door, Nathanael passed Eliezer coming in. "Simon," the old man said excitedly, "this is a most curious night—a *most* curious night."

"What's the matter, your wife run out of flour? Don't come crying to me."

"Can't you feel the excitement in the air?"

"The only thing I feel in the air is the stinking breath of two drunken soldiers in one of my rooms."

Eliezer stopped, uneasy. "Soldiers?"

Simon busied himself scrounging more cups from the shelf. "It's not bad enough they push us around in the streets—now they're staying in my own house!"

"I—I thought they were camped outside town," Eliezer said, backing slowly toward the door. "What are they doing here?"

"They've brought more soldiers in because of the census. They ran out of officer billets, so I'm stuck with them for the night."

"I'll be leaving then," Eliezer turned quickly to go.

"No, wait a minute," Simon stopped him.

"I'm not hanging around with *them* in here."

"Aw, they're too drunk to bother with us. What did you come here for?"

Eliezer relaxed some, but kept a wary eye on the stairs leading down from the upper floor. "Don't you know what's going on out there?"

"*Somebody* has to stay here and see to business," Simon said. "Joanna took

"She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us."

Matthew 1:21-23

off with two customers more than an hour ago—and never came back!”

“Can’t you hear it?” Eliezer exclaimed, forgetting about the Roman soldiers overhead. “Practically the whole town is out in the streets. There’s something almost *magical* going on out there.”

Simon took his friend’s arm. “It’s been a rough day,” he said with mock solemnity. “You’ve been working too hard, Eliezer.”

“Don’t be silly,” the older man said dismissively.

“Listen,” Simon said, suddenly serious, “I’ve been thinking about what you said before—about the Messiah—and, you’re right.” Eliezer’s eyes widened with surprise. “No, I mean it. A Jew is just another man without his faith. We *must* be united against our common enemy—and in our hope for the Redeemer.”

“Well, this *is* a magical night,” the old man murmured in amazement.

“Aw, I’m just bullheaded,” Simon shrugged, glancing up. “He made me that way. He understands.”

“Come with me outside.”

“No, I have to see to my customers. You could find Joanna for me, though. It’s time she were in for the night.”

“All right, my friend.”

Simon watched Eliezer move back out into the night. He was right, there *was* more activity in the street than normal, and—what was it? There was a peculiar, silvery glow about the scene. Simon peered up into the black sky, searching.

“Is there a full moon tonight?”

The Birth

“Simon! The most marvelous thing has happened!”

Joanna burst into the inn, searching excitedly for her husband. “Simon!” She called again. Then he emerged from the back, his arms straining under the weight of a full amphora of wine.

“I expected you hours ago,” he grumbled.

“He’s here! He’s finally come!”

“I’ve been here all by myself, you know,” Simon pouted, “and with two Roman soldiers overhead.”

“Simon, listen to me!” She took hold of him. “Messiah! Messiah has come!”

“Not you too. Have you been talking to Eliezer?”

“I’ve been at the stable with Joseph and Mary—uh, those are their names.”

“Who?”

“Mary and Joseph—the couple I took to

the stable because *you* said we had no more room. What soldiers?”

“The two passed out upstairs.”

“Oh! I see how it is. A nice couple about to have a baby, and there’s no room. But two soldiers of the state—and suddenly there’s a vacancy!”

“They had swords, you know.”

“Simon, listen to me. There are *miracles* taking place in our own stable and you’re still worried about business.”

“Fine,” he scowled, “next time *you* can tell the soldiers we have no accommodations. Until Messiah comes and does away with these filthy Romans, we still have to play by their rules.”

“But He *has* come—and in *our* stable!”

“Who?”



“The baby! He’s the one!”

“The Messiah? Come on—”

“If you would ever get your nose out of your accounts receivable,” Joanna sighed, exasperated with her hardheaded husband, “you might notice what’s going on around you. The Redeemer of our people has just been born under your own roof, and all you can feel is the weight of Roman oppression. Come with me,” she took his hand, “and see the future in a baby’s eyes.”

“A *baby*? You’re putting a baby up against the power of Rome?”

“For this baby,” Joanna smiled, “Caesar himself would be no challenge.”

“You’re talking nonsense,” Simon snorted.

“All right,” she answered defiantly. “Be that way. You stay here and continue to live with a past that’s already passed you by. But

I choose the hope resting in that manger.”

Simon felt the tug of both the comfortable, well-worn past, and the unknown future. What was happening in his old, familiar hometown—a place where change had never been welcome, and had never come easily? All his life Simon had lived by the hard and fast rules of commerce: good sense, pragmatism, and the balance sheet. He had always found comfort in what was known—not the unknown. And, he had to admit to himself, he was more comfortable with the *longing* for Messiah, than the possibility that He was now here. Could it really be true? And could it really be happening under his own roof?

He no longer knew how to show himself as anything but strong and decisive to Joanna. He had forgotten how to be honest about his doubts. Awkwardly, Simon stuttered, “But, w—what can be so special about a little baby?”

Joanna had not forgotten the true feelings that had lay buried in her husband for so many years. She knew there was deep within him a man crying out for something better than a single-minded pursuit of ever more money. She took his hands in hers. “Oh Simon,” she said from a full heart, “only that He was announced by the angels of heaven, and people from all corners are coming to worship Him.” Her eyes released the wonder bursting within her. “Strangers are coming from far and wide to worship this little baby. And for the first time, Simon—for the first time, I can see God smiling on this world.”

Simon hesitated a moment more, but then let Joanna lead him out into the night, toward their small stable.

A New Future

The night sky was rising, shifting out of empty black into the lighter hues of another day, and the eastern horizon was just beginning to turn a deep, burning orange when Simon returned to his inn.

It had seemed that for the last few hours the interior of his stable had been the navel of the world—a deep, secret place from which all life began and flowed. It had seemed as if the rest of the universe had come to a halt, that time itself had stood still as a handful of peasants knelt in silent wonder at a baby, fresh and simple, and looking no different than any other baby born that night anywhere else in the world.

But something *had* been different. Because it could not be quantified, because

it could not be listed in a tidy column and brought to a total at the end, Simon was helpless to explain what he had experienced. But even he knew it had been real.

Have I seen Messiah? Could this fragile, little child really be the One? He's too small for a king. But they say He is—the shepherds say this little child is really the Savior, the Christ! How can it be? How can one so small solve the problems of such a big world? Forget the world—what about my problems! What can He do for me? Simon pressed his hands against his aching head. And why is He still in my mind?

Joanna slipped silently in the door. She seemed somehow different to Simon, but he couldn't say how. There was something about her that reminded him of that night long ago when she had given birth to *their* son, Nathanael. A gentle peace had enveloped her face.

"You knew all along," he said to her.

"I told you, Simon."

"I guess I had to see it for myself. I guess no one can speak as clearly as the Savior Himself." He snorted, embarrassed that he was already believing. "Listen to me. He's just a baby!"

"No!" Joanna said forcefully. "No, He's so much more. You heard the shepherds, you saw the star yourself, you can *feel* God's presence in that child. Why do you still resist?"

"Because—," Simon blurted out, "because I can't bear the thought that it's going

to be that easy!"

"For what?"

"I wanted God to sweep His arm down, to wipe my enemies off the face of the earth! I wanted Him to send a strong king to conquer the Romans and lift us back to



the power our people once knew. I wanted God to send a comforting wind that would, somehow, *change* my life."

"I think He has," Joanna said softly.

"Oh, we don't see it—we can't. We can't see what that baby will become. But Simon," she said, going to him, "there *is* a wind, and it's blowing through Bethlehem tonight. And you've felt it—you can feel the change already taking place."

"Yes," he said seriously, "and it frightens me."

"It's what you've been looking for all along."

"I can feel the old ways slipping away—and it frightens me."

"Yes," she chuckled knowingly, "we so easily cling to our imperfections. But I think what you're feeling—what we're both feeling—is the redemption of that child entering our hearts."

"Well, if that's what it is," Simon smiled, "there are a lot of layers for it to get through."

"But you *can* feel it."

"In the stable, when I looked down into that bed of straw," Simon said thoughtfully, "I looked into His eyes, and it was the most amazing thing. I remember when Nathanael had just been born, his eyes seemed to be a blank slate, waiting for something to be written there. But when I looked at that child in the straw, He looked right back at me—right into my eyes! It was almost as if He were speaking to me. I know it sounds ridiculous, but, it was like looking into eternity itself. And it was then," his voice went suddenly quiet. "It was then He became a part of me. Suddenly, all the other things in my life became very small—all the pressures, the problems, all the burdens of living became, well, *livable*. Because of Him."

And outside the inn, as the first rays of the morning sun pierced the gray half-light of dawn, the sleepy village slowly awakened to a new day.

Paradise Restored

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

Romans 16:25-27

And now man and woman had the opportunity to restore fellowship with their God. Once more man and woman, born with an empty God space within their heart, could fill that space and be returned to sweet communion with their Maker.

Man, from the first generation, had insisted on living with his own depravity. But in the fullness of time the heart of a compassionate God opened to release the way for him to rise out of his sin. The Way was offered—a perfect fit for the God space—but man would have to choose. From the beginning, the Maker had chosen *fellowship* over simple management; He would make that fellowship again available to man through the Incarnation.

God chose to fellowship with man, reserving a place for him in His heart. Now man would have to choose. Would he once more fill the vacancy in *his* heart? dsj