

If Only We Had Known . . .

A Sermon based on Luke 2.1-20 and Matthew 2.1-12

In the form of an imaginative dialogue between

Deborah and Jacob, Innkeepers of Bethlehem,

Written by the Reverends Kathleen Robertson King and Lawrence W. Farris

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Jacob (on food)

You can't really blame me, can you? I mean, all those people come to Bethlehem because of that ridiculous Roman census. And you mark my words, taxes will go up as soon as they get the counting done! But all those people, here, in Bethlehem, all needing food and lodging. You can't blame me if I didn't put out the best food I am capable of making, can you? So, I watered the wine a bit. So, I put in more vegetables than meat in the stew. So, I made the bread loaves a little smaller. I am no saint, Deborah. You've been married to me far too long to think otherwise. [You don't have to agree quite so heartily!] And you must admit, we made a handsome profit and even tucked some money away, for the first time in a long time. Now if we can just keep it out of Roman hands.

But that couple. That poor couple – Mary and Joseph - we put them out in the stable. If only I had known who they were, everything would have been different. They looked so tired, so weary. So pregnant! Talk about 'great with child'! She needed my good food to have strength for her labor and to make sure she had enough milk for her baby, just as every mother does. And I? I was too busy thinning the stew to make sure they had what they needed. If only I had known who they were, who their child is. Why, I would have slaughtered a calf, at least a goat. I would have made my most savory stew. I would have brought out the best wine, the bottles I've got hidden way back in the cellar. I am ashamed I did not do my best cooking for them, that I gave them only that tough old rooster to eat. Not a single one of my famous cheese stuffed figs dipped in honey did I give them! If only I had known. The mother called the child her lamb, and I could not be bothered to serve them lamb. Too busy watching the money roll in to roll out my finest food. If only I had known.

Maybe that hungry mother and father – Joseph and Mary – maybe they will teach their baby how important food is, good food, for everyone, all the time. Maybe they will teach him what I could have shown. If only I had known. I would have cooked them a meal fit for a king.

Deborah (on hospitality)

At least you can find comfort in the fact that a woman in labor is not at all interested in food! Where is my comfort, Jacob? And how did you not know, after the birth of four of our children that no woman in the throes of labor wants food?! The mother of the Messiah came to our door when her time was near, and I gave her a place meant for animals! Dirty and smelly, lacking any creature comforts at all. If only I'd known, I would have at least given the poor woman a reed filled mattress and an animal pelt to keep her warm in the night. For gracious sakes, I made that poor woman sleep on a dirt floor! When my time came, I had pillows to comfort me, and my

mother and sister to support me, and I still felt a wreck. And I left that poor woman to birth her first baby on the floor by herself.

Remember when our children came? I was so uncomfortable with the labor pains and so nauseous as the time to deliver drew near, feeling too cold one moment, and burning up the next. My discomfort was eased by the cool water from the cistern on my lips and a cloth on my forehead, the sweet myrrh filling my nostrils and disguising the odors of labor, the midwives holding my hand as contractions peaked. What did this poor young woman, practically a child herself, have? I didn't offer her a deep drink of water after her long travels with that swollen belly, and then I sent her to sleep in a place that smelled of animal excrement, and didn't even offer to sit with her until her time to deliver came.

Jacob, remember how fearful I was the first time, how utterly alone I felt? If only I'd known who this woman was, and how powerfully her son would transform the world through his love, I'd have offered the kind of hospitality the Torah so clearly teaches. I am a devout Jew, a mother, a woman, for goodness sakes! If only I'd known the way this baby would transform the world and the way his mother would make this possible, surely, if only I had known, I would have followed the teachings of my faith and common human decency, and taken pity. If only I had known, I would have offered hospitality with compassion to this woman, a migrant stranger in this strange land. How was I to know I was entertaining the anointed one for whom we had waited so long?

Jacob (on the Magi)

And what about those three, those three, those – I don't even know what to call them! Riding in here on their camels, dressed like the strangest of foreigners, speaking so oddly, spending half the night looking up at the stars. They looked like fortune tellers to me, Deborah, and you know what our scriptures say about fortune tellers! Every time they looked at me, I felt like I couldn't remember my own name. What were they all about? Folks dressed like that weren't here for the census, I can tell you that. And did you see the way they bowed their heads to touch the ground before the baby? Did you see the gifts they laid before him? Must have cost them a fortune? Did you see the shocked look on his parents' faces?

One of their servants told me they had stopped in Jerusalem on their way here and had even had an audience with King Herod himself. And lived to tell about it! I bet they could have told us a thing or two about this baby. They gave him gold, for heaven's sake, but that's a gift fit for a king, not a baby. They gave him incense – burned enough of the stuff to about fumigate the whole stable, truth be told – and that's a gift for a priest. They gave the baby myrrh, but that's a gift for someone's who's suffering, like a mother in labor, or even going to die. What kind of gifts are those for a baby? A big bundle of swaddling clothes would have been a lot more useful, if you ask me. And then they slip away into the night without so much as a 'good bye and good luck', like they didn't want anyone to know where they were headed. Not very friendly, those three. But then, maybe we weren't either.

But, you know, I had the feeling they knew who that baby was. Not just the child of some poor couple a long way from home, but someone beyond special. Maybe he is going to be a king or a priest. But I sure don't see how with those parents.

And did you notice that amazing star that seemed to be right over our village all the time they were here? If only I had known what all this meant. About the child, I mean. Never seen anyone that high and mighty fuss over a baby like that before, I'll tell you that.

Deborah (on the Shepherds)

I couldn't believe it when those dirty, hairy shepherds came to our door asking after the couple who were expecting the baby. It takes a lot for shepherds to remove their focus from their flock—who was watching over their sheep, I wonder?! I couldn't for the life of me see anything special about an unwed mother and her betrothed. They kept blathering on about being terrified by the bright light and the angel who told them that this tiny baby was the Messiah, the anointed one. At the time, I figured maybe all of those hours alone in the wilderness with only woolly sheep as companions had driven them a bit mad. And my land, they smelled as bad as the stable itself.

If only I had known that the divine visit they reported was true. If only I had believed their story about the glory of the Lord shining around them! If only I had realized that these common shepherds had heard of the coming of the Good Shepherd, I would have led them to the manger with gentleness and kindness, instead of huffing and puffing my sighs of annoyance and frustration and wagging one of my bent fingers out back towards accommodations fit for NO guest. If only I had known what sign this was, I would have offered them drinks of water, and a place to freshen up. If only I had believed their story, Jacob, I would have asked for more details and given thanks for what they had seen and experienced instead of calling them unclean simpletons under my breath. If only I'd known what they knew, and if only I'd trusted it! If only I had known or understood how the world would change because of this little Prince of Peace, I wouldn't have guffawed when they told me what the angel said about "good news of great joy" or dismissed them out of hand. If only I'd known who and what that baby would grow up to become, Jacob, I'd have believed the shepherds, wide eyed, with looks of joy and devotion on their tired faces!

Jacob (on the Angels)

You know, Deborah, I thought I was losing my mind that night. I swear I heard music, singing, all around me, all night long, soft but sure. Did you hear it? Like every angel that ever was was singing softly so as not to wake the baby. But not a lullaby, more like one of the psalms of praise we recite at synagogue. Weird. Creeped me out. I'm not sure I ever want to see an angel; hearing that singing was enough for me.

But you know what? I haven't told anyone this, but when I took some leftovers out to all those smelling-to-high-heaven shepherds, I heard them saying to Mary and Joseph that it was singing angels who had told them to leave their sheep and come here, middle of the night or not. How else would they know about the birth and why would they care, just as you said. And later I heard the mother whisper to her husband that everything that had happened was just like the angel had told her. And still later I heard him say that an angel had spoken to him in a dream, telling him they couldn't go back home to Nazareth, oh no, they have to go to Egypt. Egypt, for heavens' sake!

Answer me this? How can angels have any time for one poor couple in a not so clean stable in a no count village like this? Yes, yes, I know David – blessed be his name – was born

here. But really, that is ancient history. Angels. I'm not sure I even believed in angels before this. But the comfort they brought to Joseph and Mary, that was beyond obvious.

And one more thing. I may be crazy, but I swear when baby Jesus opened his eyes, he could see angels all around. If only I'd known something about angels, I might have seen them, too.

Deborah (on the birth of Jesus)

I know about the sounds and smells and sights of birth, Jacob. After all, I've given birth to six of my own children, and have been present to help at the births of my sisters and cousins and friends in our village. If only I had known that this simple girl Mary was to give birth to a baby who would grow to turn tables at the temple, turn five loaves and two fish into a feast for thousands, turn water into wine at the wedding in Cana, and turn all of our ideas about love and justice and compassion on their heads, I would have made sure that she was surrounded by women who would help her understand what was happening in those pains of labor. If only I had known, I would have helped her breathe through the tightening of her abdomen and I would have calmed her fears about what would come next. If only I had known, I would have welcomed her as a sister and friend instead of sending her out to the stable with a donkey and her betrothed, who looked even more overwhelmed than she. If only I had known the way this baby would turn into a man who would turn the world on its side, I would have made sure that he was washed tenderly with warmed water, and then nestled in a soft and cozy cradle with sweet smelling bedding. If only I had known, Jacob, I would have taken the time to talk with his exhausted and worried mother about how to feed a tiny infant, and how to interpret the different cries of a new baby.

And surely, if I had known, I would have been aware that this baby who grew to walk in a way that inspired others to follow, who healed even the woman who secretly touched his hem and commanded us all that in caring for the hungry, naked, and imprisoned, we were caring for him, this man would have expected me to care for a frightened and foreign pregnant woman, regardless of the status of the fruit of her womb. If only I had known that the baby who I allowed to be born outside the warmth of hospitality without the comfort of a community of sisters would have been the very one who encouraged me to consider even the least of these. Dear God, if only I had known.

Jacob

If only we had known we were giving shelter to the messiah, to our savior for whom our people have waited so, so long, how different our lives might be. If instead of getting distracted with our work and trying to squeeze out a few more shekels, if instead of being so busy we couldn't see what was right in our own home, if we would have taken the time to hold a baby and comfort a poor couple far from home and family. If only. The messiah. The one we long for. Right here. Not a thousand leagues off who knows where. Not a thousand years in the past or a thousand years in the future, but right here, right now. If only I'd stopped being so busy long enough to be curious about those kings and shepherds behaving so oddly. If only we had opened, not just our inn and our pantries, but our hearts and lives to him. Who knows what might have been?

Well, maybe we'll see him again some day. He's still here, many have said so. Maybe he'll pass through our lives again, even if just one more time. And maybe, we won't miss him next time. Maybe. I do so hope and pray.