

What a Night!

Busy in Bethlehem

Every day, except the Sabbath of course, Abel sat in the marketplace, making and repairing sandals. He was good at his work, and was able to support his family. They had sheep and goats, and his wife, Zilpah, wove wonderful cloth. When she had enough to sell in the market place, she sat next to him. They joked that they dressed the village from head to foot!

As he worked, he thought about what he had heard at synagogue last Sabbath. He remembered the beautiful poem the rabbi had read. Isaiah the prophet wrote it many centuries ago. It told of the desert singing with joy, and of lame people walking and streams of water in the desert. And then - the best part of the whole poem - all of God's people were welcomed into God's city with joy and all sad things faded away.

"Oh my," Abel thought. "What a beautiful place Isaiah described. Wouldn't that be wonderful! No Roman soldiers pushing the people around, no tax collectors cheating them, no sickness, no hatred."

Carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

Making Room

Abel's family had been in Bethlehem for generations. The first ancestor made a home in a cave. As the family grew over the years, they built a "front room" in front of the cave. Then they had more space for the animals and the people.

This year the Roman emperor demanded that everyone be counted in their hometown, so dozens of family members came to stay with Abel and Zilpah. They slept in the house, on the roof and in the courtyard. Abel had never seen so many of his family all in one place. It was the same with every household in town. Everyone had relatives filling rooms and knocking on doors asking for a place to stay. Such a coming and going! Bethlehem hadn't seen so much excitement since King David's day!

Zilpah had very little time for thinking right now. She was cleaning and cooking, and making sure that all the family had a spot to sit and a bowl of food. Of course, the other women in the family helped but she took her responsibility very seriously.

It was hard not to step on someone as she worked her way through the house, checking on the guests. At least in the warm weather, the sheep and goats were out in the fields with her boys to take care of them - one less thing to worry about. Some of the family had brought donkeys on the journey and those animals stayed in the cave room. At least she didn't have to take care of them. The owners did that.

Carol *People Look East*

The Arrival

Abel came home from the marketplace and joined the crowd for dinner. The women had cooked a huge pot of stew, baskets and baskets of bread and someone even brought sweet sticky dates for a treat. The young girls were busy going to the well for water.

At last the day was over. Abel found an empty corner by the gate to lie down for the night. Zilpah sighed a tired sigh, and went to her bedroll up on the roof. They could hear the sounds of the busy village even this late in the evening.

Knock, knock – Abel heard someone at the gate. Who could that be? Every relative he knew was already here! “Go away,” he said. “We are all settled down for the night.” Knock, knock – this time with a “Please, open the door and let me speak to you.” Abel groaned and got up and opened the little window in the gate.

He looked out and saw a tired man leading a donkey with a pregnant young woman on its back. The man said, “Please, sir, do you have any room for us? There is no space at all at any of our family’s homes. We are exhausted and my wife is going to have a baby very soon.”

Abel couldn’t turn them away, not when he knew how crowded things were in every house. He felt sorry for the man, and opened the gate. He thought quickly, and said, “There is not a square inch of space left in the courtyard, or the roof, or inside the front room, but there may be a bit in the stable with the animals. Would that be all right?”

“Yes,” said the man, “We are very grateful, I am Joseph, and this is Mary.” Abel led them carefully through the courtyard and to the side door into the stable. He showed them in and went to get Zilpah. He explained to her about Mary and that she may need someone to help her. Zilpah gathered a few things, and took some bread, and stew and water to them. She told Joseph to send for her if Mary needed anything. “Poor girl,” thought Zilpah, “all alone with a baby coming! I will do my best to be like her family at a time like this.”

Carol *Once in Royal David’s City*

The Baby is Born

Zilpah went back to the roof. As she got ready to go to sleep, she saw a glow in the sky 'way out over the hills and what sounded like music. “How odd” - she thought. “Who is playing music in the middle of the night?” A small boy came to her, “Joseph says that Mary needs you now.” She got up and went to the stable. She saw that it would be a while yet, but Mary needed to have someone with her so Zilpah settled down next to the young woman.

Zilpah could hardly believe what Mary told her. She said that an angel had come to her, and told her that she would have a baby. The girl had even composed a song about it. Zilpah listened while Mary told her about Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin. Elisabeth was much older and had just had her first child, John. Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband, hadn’t been able to speak until he named his new baby. Zechariah said that John would prepare the way for the Messiah, Mary’s child. Zilpah thought that Mary must be tired and dreaming. The Messiah was supposed to be a King, not a peasant. Could it be true that the Messiah would be the child of such poor people and born in such a shabby place?

Zilpah helped Mary when it was time for the baby to be born. She washed Mary and the baby boy and made them comfortable. She fixed a bed for the baby in the animal’s feedbox.

Carol *Away in the Manger*

The Angel Chorus

Abel was rolled up in his blanket and trying to sleep when he had heard loud voices in the street. Who was up at this hour? He peered out of the gate and saw shepherds walking through the village talking

to each other - excited and definitely not whispering. They spoke of angels and singing, and pointed at a big star in the sky! Abel had to find out what was going on. Quietly he got up and slipped out to the street. He knew the shepherds – he had often repaired their sandals.

They spoke of hearing heavenly music, praising God. “Abel,” they said. “The angel told us to follow the star and find a child sent by God! And we ended up at your house!”

Carol *The First Noel*

Shepherds at the Manger

Astonished, Abel followed them as they led him toward his very own stable. He looked up at the sky - it seemed that the bright star was right over head. As Abel entered the cave he noticed a newborn baby in the manger, and Joseph and Mary smiling at it and Zilpah sitting right beside Mary. The animals in the stable shifted around and made soft noises.

Zilpah looked up and saw the men come into the stable. The shepherds came forward and knelt on the floor. They told the new mother that the angels announced the birth of a King and that the star led them here! The angels had sung and praised God and told them that the Messiah was born tonight in a stable in Bethlehem. “Well, “thought Zilpah, “I never heard anything like this before - shepherds come to see a baby and call him a king!”

Abel and Zilpah listened all night to the shepherds and to Mary and Joseph, as they told how God had spoken to them, that the child was special.

As they left the stable in the morning, Abel and Zilpah wondered what it could all mean. Could this be what Isaiah wrote about? It was a night for strange things. You just never knew what could happen in your very own village. Maybe the Messiah was coming in a way they had never thought of before. Maybe the strange stories they heard tonight were true and things were happening in a very different way than everyone expected. It seemed that God never got tired of surprising people. It was certainly a night to remember!

Carol *Angels We Have Heard on High*