

28. JOSEPH'S FIRST CHRISTMAS (A fiction)

Joseph stood alongside the shed and relieved himself into the dust that had been pounded fine as talc by generations of hooves. The moonlight turned his stream into an arc of diamonds as he leaned his head in exhaustion against the rough wooden wall. Drained. He was emotionally drained. The past week's travel had challenged his endurance and his body had welcomed the rest at the end of each day's journey. But this day! And now this night! Though he had walked only a few miles and despite having eaten warm food for the first time in a week, still he slumped wearily against the wall of the shed. His fatigue was overpowering. The only thing that kept him from melting into the dust was his dogged attentiveness to the soft murmurs of the village women inside as they tended to the girl.

The girl...he still had trouble thinking of her as his betrothed, as his soon-to-be wife. Before this journey, he'd talked to her very little, always with either his or her family present. They had barely spoken at all before the families had agreed that this match was suitable. Both he and the girl--her name was Mary, he'd known that for years of course-- both of them had accepted this matchmaking process and the decision. That was the way of their people. And the fact that she was ten years younger than he, that too was acceptable and customary. But that was where the customary had stopped in their relationship.

A sharp cry from inside the shed jolted Joseph out of his stupor. He instinctively reached for the door and then as quickly jerked back his hand. "No men allowed," the portly midwife had growled as she scowled and pushed him out of the shed. Waiting and watching--this was exhausting him. Waiting and watching... these were not customary for Joseph.

Five months before, Joseph had sat on the bench outside the rabbi's home, waiting for him to finish his morning prayers. His knee bounced incessantly. It slowed for a moment as he noticed that the bench was one of his own and he felt quietly proud of its smooth finish and solidness. But soon the knee began dancing again, draining off just enough energy to keep him planted on the bench.

Finally the old rabbi emerged from his house. His large head was fringed with a few straggly gray hairs. His robe hung slackly on what had once been a robust body. He had been the rabbi in the town for almost all of his adult life and he looked as though he carried decades of pains and worries on his slumping shoulders. He had known this Joseph since he was a four-year old boy playing in the street. Joseph leapt up as soon as Rabbi Matthias stepped out through the doorway, but the rabbi motioned him to sit back down and with a heavy sigh lowered himself down on the bench beside the young carpenter.

"So, Joseph ben Adam, what's this urgent matter that you spoke of yesterday after Sabbath prayers? I can't imagine anything that would drag you away from your workbench to speak to your old rabbi."

"Rabbi, I " His knee was still now, as he looked into the dim eyes of the rabbi. He dropped his head for a moment and then stared up fiercely at the old man, "Mary, my betrothed.. she's with child."

The old rabbi smiled. He was relieved and amused, "Ahhh.... Well, such things happen. Patience and self control are virtues not often given to the young. You are not the first couple who..."

"No, rabbi. I did not,....we did not--"

Rabbi Matthias laid his hand on the carpenter's solid shoulder, "Joseph, my boy, no need to be so beset. By the laws of God you are already wed. As the Torah clearly says, 'Once you have lain with her....'"

"Rabbi stop!" Though Joseph's words were only a bit above a whisper, they struck with the intensity of a shout. He jerked to his feet as though stung and he stood looking down at the old man who looked up at him through rheumy eyes..

"The child is not mine, it cannot be mine. I swear by the name of my father and grandfather I haven't touched the girl."

"But, but... Whose then can it be? I know this girl, I knew her parents, even her grandparents I knew. This Mary, this young girl...she is so reticent, so modest,...so, so...timid. I can't believe she would.. Joseph are you sure?"

"Rabbi, I'm a plain man. I work with my hands. I measure and cut and shape. I understand things that I can hold on to. Rabbi, there is something here that a carpenter can't grasp."

He then told Rabbi Matthias about his encounter with Mary two days ago. Joseph had been walking slowly holding onto the hand of Andrew, his three year old nephew. They and his brother James and his wife and children were going toward their home. Mary was walking with her parents and younger sister and brother. Joseph smiled and nodded as she and her family passed. Mary usually smiled demurely and then dropped her veil over her face. But now she stared intently at him and even swung her head back gazing at him as they passed. She held it until she and her family rounded the corner.

He had never seen that look on her face. Was it fear? Longing? Desire? Anger? He was still puzzling what it meant when suddenly she was at his side, clutching his wrist as tightly as one of his wood clamps. "Come, please, I must tell you." Her hoarse whisper was urgent but not frantic or panicked. She pulled on his arm with a strength and a self confidence that stunned him.

She tugged him into the shade of a narrow alleyway, then dropped his arm, and bowed her head. His eyes slowly adjusted to the shadows as he gazed at this slim bowed figure before him. But her head was bowed only for an instant. She quickly raised her eyes to his, as though she had suddenly remembered she was no longer the modest maiden, and was now...What was she? The strong, stolid carpenter stood rooted and wordless.

She spoke, and her voice was clear and direct. "I must tell you. Something has happened. I can't expect you to understand this or even to believe me." Her gaze was so charged, he took a step back. Against all custom, all tradition, she stepped forward and seized both his hands, "I've been visited by a messenger from the Lord. He told me I was to have a child by the Spirit." Her eyes pleaded with his, and he thought maybe there was a sob hidden in her resolve. "Did you hear, not by the flesh but by the Spirit."

Joseph looked down at this girl, this girl who was to be his bride. Dusky eyes brimming with tears and fervor, cheeks flushed, full lips shiny with saliva, slender hands kneading his calloused paws. He lost most of her words in the thunder of his confusion. *"This girl is a stranger to me. She has been my neighbor for years, she has played with my sisters, she has been formally betrothed to me, yet in this moment she is as alien to me as an Egyptian princess."*

The girl released his hands and half turned toward the street. She spoke quietly, "Joseph, I know what the Torah says about your rights, about what you can do if you find me pregnant."

He ran his rough hands through his hair, shook his head and finally managed to speak, "Mary, I'm lost. I'm not even sure what you are telling me. But I do know I'd never harm you."

The girl turned back to him, bowed her head, "Thank you. If I had thought you would I'd never have come to you today." Now she took his arm again and led him out of the alley. He followed mutely, struck dumb by her boldness. "I am leaving tomorrow to visit my cousin in Ein Kareem. The messenger told me she too is pregnant." As they reached the street, she dropped his arm, and looked up at him with a smile playing across her young face, "I will travel alone. When I get back, we'll have to talk."

Joseph finished his story and sat down quietly beside the rabbi who continued to silently contemplate the ravens as they flew in and out of the date palm tree next to the synagogue.

"Well?" Joseph was trying to be patient but...he had work to do! "Well, what?" the rabbi replied.

"Well---well,... What do you think? What does this mean? What should I do?" His burly hands were raised up as if he was speaking more to heaven than to the old man beside him.

"Three questions, son, you want me to answer three questions? What do I think? I am an old man and thinking is hard these days. What does it matter what I think? What does it mean? That is a better question. What does it mean to you, to her, to our Lord? Yes, a better question, but who can answer that now, at the beginning of the story? What should you do? That's the best question. That's the question that pulled you away from your work this morning isn't it? Yes, a good faithful son of Israel should always ask that question, 'what should I do?' So, what do you think you should do?"

"Rabbi, she is gone visiting her cousin but when she comes back, if she comes back, everyone will see and the talk will begin, like it always does." Joseph jumped to his feet and started pacing in front of the bench.

"If my family doesn't take her in, sooner or later her family will put her out. Maybe the elders won't stone her, but no one will help her. If I don't step forward, no one will."

He stopped and watched the morning mist melting in the valley. Now he spoke more to himself than the rabbi, "And what if what she says is somehow true? What does any of this have to do with me?"

The rabbi stood up slowly and it was possible to imagine that once, before the years had eroded his frame, he'd been as robust and strapping as Joseph. He put his arm around the young man.

"Young man, you're asking the right questions. That's more important than having the right answers. Go home, get back to work, keep asking the questions. When the right time comes the answers will come too."

Joseph had taken the rabbi's advice. Mary had come back some months later. A few weeks after her return, one morning he looked up from the board he was shaping and there she was, standing in the doorway, holding her belongings in a bundle upon her bulging belly. He took her home to his family. He explained nothing to them—what could he say? Surely silence was better than a story they would sneer at.

He kept at his work, Mary slipped into the routine of the household. Joseph felt things returning to normalcy, felt the gnarl of emotions in his chest begin to unwind. Then came the emperor's census decree, the demand to travel to the clan's origin, pregnancy or no pregnancy. Then came tedious travel, anxious fretting about having to deliver a baby on the road, cold desert nights, hot thirsty days. But through all of these, at least he'd been active. He'd had responsibilities, duties, things to attend to.

But this waiting! This was eroding him, this slumping in the dust outside the barn, while inside the cries grew sharper, the voices louder...this was excruciating. Then, abruptly, came a shrill, almost animal shriek that jerked him to his feet. He put his hand to the door just as he heard a tiny wail.

He pulled his hand away from the handle, let it drop at his side. What now? What did this all mean? Was he now a father? If not, then what was he? Was the Lord expecting something of him? If so, what? He stood in the moonlight, heard a whimper from within the shed and finally something within him surrendered. Control? Understanding? He unclenched his hands, stepped back and decided to wait, to wait and see if she would invite him in. To Joseph, that seemed like the right thing to do.