

No Room For Him

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The next day was as the first, except that there was a brief fury of rain and wind. But when Joseph would look at her with fear, she would smile at him gently and encouragingly. The night was pure misery. It was raining again, and Joseph could not keep a fire alight on the stones of another cave.

It was the same the next day and the next night. On the last day, along the roads which the Romans had built, and which were wide and straight, they encountered hundreds of fellow travelers whose destination was theirs, Bethlehem or Jerusalem. Some were as poor as themselves; babies and children squalled restlessly. Some few were rich and rode in fine chariots, pulled by fine sleek horses, and with servants about them. The crowds jostled Mary and Joseph and their little ass on which Mary swayed with fatigue. No one noticed them or cared about them. Joseph's heart grew heavier and heavier. No room for us, anywhere, he thought. Not even the warmer countryside could lift his heart; not even the sight of large villages could encourage him. He and Mary would not enter Jerusalem; they would skirt the mighty city to reach the little town of Bethlehem, with its flat yellow roofs, its tiny, wandering streets, its mean little shops, its two or three inns. It was a poor town, and only the poor could be found there. Still, the inns would be crowded.

"Be Not Afraid"

Groaning in himself, footsore and aching and trembling with tiredness and worry, Joseph urged the little ass along as fast as he dared. They must reach Bethlehem before it was totally dark, or sleep along the road, completely without shelter.

"Do not be afraid, Joseph," said Mary. Her voice, as always, was sweet and tender, but now Joseph heard pain in it. Her words ended in a gasp.

"It is your time!" he cried.

"Yes," she said, slowly. "I think it is."

She was not afraid, but Joseph was filled with terror, a terror too strong for prayer. Roughly he pulled on the beast's halter, stumbling, sometimes falling, his ankles turning on unseen stones in the weary half-dark. He forgot his own exhaustion and misery. Somewhere, he had to find shelter for Mary in Bethlehem. His few coins jingled in his pouch. So few of them! Who would take them in? They, the refugees, the poor, the oppressed?

Gasping with relief, Joseph could finally see the feeble lights of Bethlehem just ahead now, beyond the next turn in the road. Mary was utterly silent, except for an occasional soft moan, smothered and suppressed. The little beast on which she rode struggled on, as if aware that he must hurry. Now it was very dark. But they had reached the outskirts of Bethlehem, and lanterns shone on closed doors and lamps stared at them weakly through slits of windows. Joseph caught the sleeve of one man as he passed.

"Please!" he stammered, "where is the nearest inn? My wife . . ."

"Ho!" said the man, impatiently, pulling his sleeve away. "There is no room in the inn!"

He hurried away, and Joseph stood still for a moment, drawing up his last strength. No room in the inn. He had feared that, but now the fact confronted him starkly. Then he felt Mary's hand on his shoulder, pressing it slightly, and he moved on with tears in his eyes, and with exhaustion.



When he saw the inn, he knew it was hopeless. The courtyard milled with asses and horses and an occasional camel or two. Noise poured through every window and door. "Wait," Joseph said to Mary. He pushed his way through the mobs in the small public room. Joseph blinked in the light. The room was warm, and the noise was shattering.

Desperately, at last, Joseph hurried after the host, a fat and ruddy man wearing a dirty white apron. Finally he caught him. The man turned to him angrily. "There's no room at the table!" he yelled over the clamor. "You'll have to wait!"

"No, no," said Joseph. "We have some food. It's my wife—the child—her time is on her. She is in labor . . ."

Guests were shouting at the host for more service. But he paused and looked at Joseph with pity. "There is no room in the inn," he said. "The other inn is filled, too."

"Where shall we go?" cried Joseph in his extremity. "The child cannot be born on the street or in the fields! We must have shelter!"

The host balanced his huge tray on his broad shoulder. He looked at the poor man before him. He said at last, "There's only one place, the stable, the cave at the end of the road. It is full of our cattle, but it is shelter, and it is warm. God be with you," he added hastily and raced off. Stupefied with his despair and tiredness, Joseph left the inn. The little ass was patiently standing near the door; Mary sat slumping on his back, a huddle of clothes and blankets.

"There is no room," he said to her hoarsely. "There is only a cave with cattle nearby."

Spent, she could only nod in acceptance, and Joseph took up the halter again and led the beast and his burden down the road a little distance. Yes, there was the cave with a lantern at the aperture and, within, the donkeys and oxen stood in their stalls, knee-deep in hay.

Joseph carried Mary into the cave and placed her on a heap of straw and brought the blankets and spread them for her. She looked about vaguely, her eyes wide and glazed, and again her husband remembered how young she was, how friendless and alone except for himself. There would be no mother here to comfort and help her, no sister, no midwife. There was no one to pray for her in her extremity except her husband.

She lay on the blankets, and Joseph spread another upon her. The scarves fell from her head;

her shining hair lay about her like a wide halo. Her body quivered with birth pangs. Then she opened her eyes and looked at her husband, and she smiled at him with her pure serenity and faith, and he was comforted.

A pale and silvery light mingled with the lantern light of the door. It crept into the shadowy cave. It glinted on the eyes of every beast, and each stood very still, breathing audibly. It is warm here, thought Joseph, numbly. We have a protection from the night. Then Joseph recalled something, and he stepped to the door of the cave and looked at the sky. A huge soft star, as silvery as the moon, was beginning to glow overhead; it was as if it were being born at that very moment, as Mary's child was being born. Too tired to wonder, too fearful to speak, Joseph returned to his wife.

Mary had not come unprepared, for though hardly past 14 she was prudent in the ways of women. As she lay on the blankets, she nodded toward a bundle Joseph had laid down close at hand, and he opened the bundle and found the swaddling clothes for a child in them. He put them near Mary. The beasts in the cave crept nearer, fixing their tremendous eyes on the girl at their feet. Their warm breath enfolded her. They, with Joseph, waited.

The silvery light at the door of the cave became more intense, more vivid than a full moon. And then the Child was born, crying aloud, and He was in His mother's arms, and she was wrapping Him lovingly and joyfully in the swaddling clothes. She held Him to her breast and gave Him the first kiss and laughed happily. She was a girl again, and rapturous. "My Son," she said to Joseph, and Joseph took the Child in his arms. Mary rose and lined a manger with a blanket, and Joseph laid the Child in the manger, and the girl and her husband looked at Him with a bliss that only they could know.

"All Is Calm, All Is Bright"

"Now, you must sleep, Mary," said Joseph, and he led her back to the blanket-covered heap of straw. She closed her eyes obediently, smiling, but she did not sleep. It was as if she were waiting for someone, or for some tidings. Joseph looked down at her, and his heart was full again with pain, remembering her sufferings and the journey and their homelessness.

He let her lie in quiet, and he glanced into the manger where the Child slept, as serene and still as His mother. Joseph's head dropped on his chest, and he went to the opening of the cave. The star in the sky was almost too brilliant for his weary eyes; it stood in its place, directly over the cave, not moving, but burning and turning on itself like a newborn planet. Joseph put his hands over his face and cried from his very heart, "There was no room for Him. There is no room for Him!"

The people in the inn, hearing of the star, came out to look at it and point and shout their wonderment and fear, but Joseph did not see them nor hear them. He could only repeat aloud, over and over, "There is no room for Him!"

There was no room for Him in the Roman world of nearly 2,000 years ago. Is there room for Him today in this modern world? Room in our hearts? Or shall we have to say: "No, there was never any room for Him. We took all that He gave us, but we had no room for Him?"