

BETHLEHEM

A play for vocal performance

By Stephen Pelzer

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Dedication

With love and gratitude I dedicate this work to the learning communities of Saint Jerome Catholic School and Monsignor Edward Pace High School and especially to Sister Vivian Gomez and Ana Garcia, MS. I was a student who felt the Catholic learning system had “no place at the inn” for a mind like mine, and you made room for me. It changed my life. It gave me a vocation. It affirmed my faith. And all of you continue to inspire me and to light my way. I will never forget you.

Bethlehem

*A radio play written by Stephen Pelzer based on a concept by Stephen and Michele Miles Pelzer.
Additional lyrics to "Mary, Did You Know?" by Michele Miles Pelzer**

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CHARACTERS

NARRATOR

ROMAN SOLDIER

MARY

JOSEPH

REBECCA, a child

SETH, REBECCA'S twin (who does not speak)

SAUL, her uncle

LEAH, SAUL's daughter

PERESH, SAUL's son

LUCAS, shepherd boy

MIRIAM, LUCAS' brother

ELI, shepherd boy

ANGEL

RUTH, LUCAS' mother

JOSHUA, LUCAS' father, a shepherd

NERI, a shepherdess

MARKET WOMAN

MILLER

WEAVER

ELI, village boy

CASPAR, BALTHAZAR, MELCHIOR, Wise Men

CHORUS

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We hear crowd noises in the background; many people are entering the city

NARRATOR

During the time Caesar Augustus was emperor of the Roman Empire, nearly 45 million people were under the control of Rome. The Empire stretched from Britannia in the North to Egypt in the Southeast. In the 27th year of his reign, Augustus decreed that the whole empire should be counted. So each man, with their families, set out to the city of his ancestors to enroll.

ROMAN SOLDIER

Citizens of Bethlehem here for the market – line to the right. Travelers here for the census – line to the left.

JOSEPH

I am Joseph of Nazareth – my wife is Mary. I am the son of Jacob and I am a carpenter. We are of the house of David. *[his voice shows concern now]* Mary, are you well?

MARY

Fine. It's just been a long day and my backache is still there. I'm more worried that our poor donkey needs to stop, Joseph. Will it be much longer until we find somewhere he can have a rest?

REBECCA

A small donkey to be carrying such a heavy load. We have just been to the well for my mother, and I have a cup here. May Seth give him a drink please?

MARY

Yes, and thank you. We've only had Tsuar [*"tsoo AHR*] since the wedding – he was a gift from my parents. We became friends on the journey.

REBECCA

You named him Tsuar – "Little One." Perfect name for him.

SETH claps to agree

REBECCA

Seth is my brother – we are twins. He doesn't talk but we can tell what he says because he claps.

Have you been married very long?

JOSEPH

Not very long. Mary and I knew each other a little from living in the same village, but did not know each other well before our marriage. The two of us became friends on the journey too, as well as husband and wife. *[he says the next sentence as though he is telling REBECCA and SETH a secret]* Don't try to talk to her before breakfast.

MARY

[she isn't going to miss the chance to tease him right back]

And try to get to sleep before he does or you'll be up all night listening to the snoring!

MARY and JOSEPH both laugh. The donkey snorts.

JOSEPH

Both Tsuar and Mary need a rest. The city is more crowded than we thought it would be. What part of the city would have an inn for us?

MARY

Hopefully a not too expensive place?

REBECCA

My uncle Saul has an inn on the outskirts of town – the inns are less expensive there because it is farther to the marketplace. But it is quieter and you would be closer to Tsuar's sleeping place in the stables. If you want to follow us we can take you there – Mama says we may sleep outside tonight with the shepherds. Our friend Lucas is already there. We will drop off the water at home and pick up sleeping rolls, then we go right past the inn.

SETH claps – asking a question

JOSEPH

That's very kind, Seth yes, the bag was getting heavy – lead on.

We hear the crowd again and the footsteps of the travelers

REBECCA

Here we are. *[calling]* Leah, where's Uncle Saul? These friends need a room with a good bed – Mary's quite tired and her baby will be here soon.

LEAH

Papa is upstairs putting another mattress in the hallway – there isn't an inch that isn't used for sleeping tonight. I gave up our room too, so Peresh and I are going out to sleep with the shepherds too. *[she calls]* Papa, can we find room for a lady who is going to have a baby? Is there somewhere she can sleep?

SAUL *[a bit breathless from the hauling]*

Rebecca! Seth! How good to see you – Leah and Peresh will be ready to go with you in a minute or two.

[to JOSEPH] I'm sorry but we haven't got an inch of floor to offer you. All of the inns are full to the thatch with the census travelers.

REBECCA

Uncle Saul, isn't there any place? Not even a place for the donkey? This is Tsuar, and he has carried Mary all the way from Nazareth.

SAUL

I can find a place for Tsuar. I wish I had room for his owners! The stable is a roofed area which includes a natural cave. The walls hold the days' heat well so the animals have shelter and protection from the worst of the cold. I wouldn't feel right taking money for it, but if you want to sleep there you'll find fresh hay and you'll have the stars for company.

MARY

I came to love the stars when we camped on our way here. I'd be grateful for a place to sleep where the stars will shine down on us. Have you seen the new star in the East? It seemed to lead us right to Bethlehem.

Footsteps of 4 people and 1 donkey go up a gravel path to the stable

SAUL

It is out of the wind. A good stream is just up the path a ways.

REBECCA

Is it all right? Can you stay here?

MARY *[cutting off JOSEPH, who might have been ready to protest]*

It looks just fine. Tsuar, here's a good place for you and another donkey for conversation.

REBECCA laughs. SETH claps his approval

REBECCA

Tsuar, Seth and I can come tomorrow to brush the burrs off you. Now we have to go help with the flocks. Goodnight!

SETH claps in farewell

SAUL

Please - if you need anything -

JOSEPH

Thank you for your kindness.

SAUL

I must get back. The children want to get to the flocks to help – lambing is an exciting time.

We hear REBECCA, SETH and SAUL go down the gravel path

A donkey brays; a cow answers back.

JOSEPH

I know Rebecca wanted us to be close to Tsuar’s sleeping place, but I’m not sure this is what she had in mind!

You deserve better than this - having this Baby in stable. God’s Son born with the animals watching and no place to sleep but the box that holds the hay. Back home I had almost finished the cradle.

MARY

Joseph, I am tired enough to sleep on rocks and love each stone. God made the animals and loves them; His Son will love them too. This place is dry and clean. The hay will make a soft bed for the baby. The animals are close enough to help keep us warm, and their sounds will help the Baby sleep – *[teasingly]* better than your snoring.

[gentle laughter from both]

Take a walk to the stream and fill the bucket, won’t you? We will want fresh water in the night.

JOSEPH

I won’t be long.

we hear his footsteps and the scrape of the bucket

MARY

Take your time – I’ll be busy for a while *[we hear her panting and one stifled groan]*

Song “Mary did you know?” sung by soft voices

CHORUS

Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?
Mary did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?
When you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God?
Mary, did you know?

a baby cries, then coos

MARY [softly, lovingly]

Hello there, my Lord and Savior. Aren't you beautiful!

JOSEPH comes in – we hear his footsteps

JOSEPH

I wish I was a poet so I could say everything I feel – Mary, just look at Him. The light of all Creation is in His eyes. Look – His hand is already stretched out in blessing. *[JOSEPH prays softly]* Heavenly Father, give me the strength to protect Your Son.

CHORUS (softly) *to the tune of "Mary, did you know?" or similar meter*

Joseph, did you know, that your foster Son was born to be the Savior?
Joseph did you know, that this baby boy was One with the Creator?
Did you know, when you promised God to protect the newborn King
That the babe you'd raise to manhood would then change everything?
Joseph, did you know?

NARRATOR

It was lambing time when the sheep were in the most danger. A sheep might need help delivering lambs, especially if there were twins or triplets. Wolves, wild dogs, foxes and even hawks could carry

away the lambs. Families and friends would help guard the sheep and help with lambing – sleeping outdoors and taking turns to watch over the flocks.

sounds of sheep softly bleating; a dog barks to gather the sheep; parents singing children to sleep

PERESH

With the new star right over us it is so bright. The sheep are easy to see and the wolves are too scared to come close. It's even light enough to play ball – Lucas, catch!

LUCAS [*panting after a run*]

We should ask Leah and Rebecca and Miriam to play too – that way it won't matter so much that you throw like a girl!

all laugh

LEAH

I don't know why, but everything feels good tonight – like it should always be this way.

a chime announces the arrival of the ANGEL

ANGEL [*musically laughing*]

Right you are, wise one. Everything is good tonight. For tonight in Bethlehem, David's city, the Savior is born. He is Christ the Lord.

MIRIAM

Is it Mary's baby? May we go see?

ANGEL

Yes – this is the sign God has sent to all of you. You will find the infant Savior well wrapped in swaddling and lying in a manger.

SETH claps happily

REBECCA

Come on – I know the way. It's Uncle's stable up in the caves.

LEAH

What did they call the baby?

ANGEL

He is called Wonder-Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

LUCAS

Begging your pardon, but that's a really long name. However will he fit it on the school tablet?

ANGEL *[laughing again]*

We call him Emmanuel, which means "God with us." His friends will call him Jesus.

LUCAS

That's better – we can **spell** Jesus!

CHORUS *[with joy] to the tune of "Mary, did You know?" or similar meter*

Angels, fill the sky with your song of joy - Hosannah in the highest

Star show us the way, to the baby Boy who will be the best and brightest

It begins! On this holy night we worship and adore

The life of this Infant Savior will conquer death forever more

Angels sing for joy!

RUTH

Don't everyone go at once, now. We have to leave some of us to watch the sheep, and His mother needs to rest after the birth. Lucas, you can go with your friends. Papa will go with you and take a few others with lanterns – yes, I know the star is bright but the lanterns will help if there are wolves.

a rustling

Here SETH, take this with you. Lamb skin will keep the straw from poking through the swaddling. You give it to the parents – with my love.

SETH claps in assent

ANGEL

What a beautiful gift – for the Lamb of God! Come, now – to the stable.

the footsteps of a group of 8 or so approach the stable; we know they are close when the animals can be heard lowing. A baby is cooing and JOSEPH is murmuring a lullaby

JOSEPH (very quietly) *to the tune of "Mary, Did You Know?" or similar meter*

Precious little boy, fruit of Jesse's tree and the house of David

God keeps his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob

Now, with your birth and life the promise is fulfilled

Sleep, now baby Savior – born to save the world

Sleep and dream sweet Lord ...

MARY

Rebecca, Seth – come, come! Come and see the Baby. Everyone, please come.

murmuring as they come close

JOSHUA

My wife sent you a lamb skin for Him to sleep on. It's soft and warm. *[he gasps]* And the Child is reaching up His hand to offer a blessing. I'll never be able to describe this to Ruth.

MARY *[soft chuckle]*

I would say you get used to it, but somehow I doubt it. And don't worry about describing it to your wife – tell her to come and see when she can. This is my baby, but we know He belongs to the world too.

PERESH

Even to us? We're pretty poor and we sit way in the back of the Temple.

JOSEPH

Especially to the people who sit in the back.

NERI *[obviously wonderstruck]*

How do you know you can do this? Where do you even start – you are raising the Messiah! For centuries we've prayed for this, and now here you are with a Baby in a stable and there's angels and He is born to save the world and it's all up to the two of you and pardon me but you are a young mother far from home and – *[she would obviously go on for a while if allowed]*

MARY *[who would like to agree but doesn't]*

Pray for us.

JOSEPH

At some point we just decided we were going to trust the plan – even though it's a plan we cannot see. It helps that we have each other.

LEAH

May I bring my father tomorrow? I know he would want *[she gives a big yawn]*

JOSEPH *[chuckling softly]*

Yes, bring him – we want to thank him for this place to rest. But for now it seems like you should go to bed. Get to sleep before the sun comes up!

murmured “good nights” as the visitors leave

REBECCA

I wish I could bring a present for the baby, too – that lamb skin was beautiful. I don’t have anything so nice to give.

LUCAS

They don’t need a lot. Where would they put it? When they leave here they have to carry everything back to their village.

LEAH

When a baby is born you give something. And for *this* Baby – well, He is special. God gave Him his own star.

PERESH

And you think you can do better than that? Girls fuss too much.

NERI

And you have used every present you’ve ever gotten, even if it was from a fussy girl.

[to the girls]

It’s a generous spirit who wants to share. I’m sure you will think of something.

They continue to walk back to the flocks. We know they are getting closer because we hear the sounds of the sheep and the shepherds calling to one another

REBECCA

A generous spirit... Leah, put your sleeping roll next to mine. I want to talk about an idea.

It is the next morning; LEAH is addressing a group of young people

LEAH

... so Becca and I thought if everyone asked for just a little bit, we could put everything together and then we would have nice things to bring to the Baby.

REBECCA

Seth made a list of the things you could ask for – here in the dirt. Write your name next to what you want to try to bring.

Young people scatter, talking to one another about the plan; SETH joins in with clapping

We hear a medley of voices knocking on doors and their voices

LEAH

... can you give us one olive? If 20 people give me one olive each I can have a whole jar to give to the Baby in the stable. I already have an empty jar.

MARKET WOMAN

Here you are dear. And I have another empty jar if you get more than 20.

PERESH

Do you have an extra dried fig or date please? I only need one because I am asking a lot of people. There is a new Baby and His family are ...

REBECCA

... Is there a spoonful of oil you don't need?

MIRIAM

... I am collecting small bits of wool. My mother showed me and Seth how to make felt for baby shoes. We want to make a present for a Baby. We don't need anything you have already dyed or anything.

WEAVER

If you want to sweep in the corners you can have all the wool that is stuck there.

SETH claps

LUCAS

... Has the fishing been good and is there a dried fish you...

ELI

... can I crawl under your floor to see if there is any grain, please? I know a donkey who brought a woman a long way and the lady was heavy because she was going to have a Baby and I want to do something nice for the donkey. I will give you half of what I find if I can keep the other half.

MILLER [*indulgently chuckling*]

You can keep it all, boy. Put it in this bag. If you will sift the bugs from these sacks against the wall I will give you a measure of flour for your trouble.

[the children speaking with overlapping voices]

Thank you/thanks for your help/yes, the Baby is in the stable in the cave by Saul's inn/thank you so much/the star will lead you if you want to see Him/yes I know they would like it if you came to see the Baby/thank you again...

NARRATOR

While the young people of the town scattered through Bethlehem to put their plan into action, the stable remained warm and quiet, the Baby sleeping to the peaceful sounds of the animals. The star softly shone overhead and angels kept watch over their infant King.

JOSEPH and MARY lovingly sing – taking turns until the final line; the animals low in the background

to the tune of "Mary, did you know?" or similar meter

On the day we wed, not long ago, we scarcely knew each other
Barely Man and Wife, soon our roles changed to Father and to Mother
What is to come, how we must help, we can't begin to know
We walk in faith and constant love as down this road we go ...

[footsteps on the gravel path, coming closer]

JOSEPH

More visitors are coming. You must be tired – I can ask them to come another time ...

MARY *[interrupting]*

No, let them come. He doesn't belong to just us, you know that.

JOSEPH *[oking!]*

Are you sure you are as young as your parents told me? You seem very wise for your age ...

MARY *[in teasing reprimand]*

I get very good advice from a high Authority. I know when my parents bought Tsaur my father checked his teeth to make sure his age was what they were told. Would you like to check my teeth?

JOSEPH *[laughs]*

That's fine. I just mean that you are no ordinary woman.

MARY

But I AM. Just as people who don't get to know you think you seem ordinary. That's the point. We were chosen because we **are** ordinary. I can't explain it well, but for the Messiah to be one of us, born this way – it shows the wonder and His love. And I am just as frightened as you are, but I believe just as much as you do that we are guided in all of this.

JOSEPH

You do not show you are afraid.

MARY *[explaining as if to a child]*

Husband, I am a Jewish woman and a new wife. I was not raised to show emotions. I was raised to keep my eyes lowered and be obedient and humble.

JOSEPH *[teasing again]*

How do you feel about that?

MARY *[realizing he will not understand for years]*

I was never asked. How did your sisters feel about all of it?

JOSEPH

I am sorry to say I never thought to ask them.

MARY *[with no trace of sarcasm, but wiser beyond her years]*

I know.

JOSEPH

Maybe we can teach Him a different way.

MARY *[dreamily]*

I wonder what He will be teaching us.

the children arrive, breathless and excited

REBECCA

Mary, Joseph – we have brought some things for Baby Jesus – and for you. So much that our parents came to help us carry ...

murmured introductions from the adults

ELI

I have grain for your donkey and flour for your bread ...

LEAH

Four jars of olives ...

PERESH

Figs and dates ...

REBECCA

Oil for cooking ...

LUCAS

Dried fish ...

MIRIAM

I collected wool and Seth made felt socks for His feet ...

SETH claps softly, approaching the Baby

JOSEPH

We are overwhelmed by your kindness. However can you afford to do so much? And at tax season too?

SAUL

Our young people did it all – they gathered little bits from everyone in the town – and put it together to share with you.

ELI

The miller said I may come back every week and take the grain that falls through the floor. There is a lady I know – her husband died – and I can bring it to her to help out.

RUTH

We couldn't be more proud of our them..

JOSEPH

You taught them well, to care so much for strangers.

REBECCA

You are not strangers – you are right here. And it was your Baby, Jesus – we wanted to do something because there was Jesus.

SETH again claps as though he is crooning to the Baby

JOSEPH *[repeating with wonder]*

“Because there was Jesus.” Yes, many things will be done because there was Jesus.

MARY

But so much! We could never use it all. May we share some of your gifts with people who come to see Him?

PERESH

These are yours, you can do whatever you want. I would like to know that other people can have things because we had a good idea.

SAUL

I am sorry to say that I have seen travelers pass through here and when I told them the price of the inn they kept on going. When you have traveled back to your home I want to keep the stable as a place where there is food and extras to share. It will be a reminder that we saw your Son in this place. *[he pauses]* ... is He smiling at me?

RUTH

Saul, a newborn baby doesn't smile yet.

JOSEPH

This one does.

JOSHUA

We have left others to watch the sheep, and must get back. May we come again?

MARY

Please come, and please bring others – especially now that we have so much to share.

JOSEPH

The star will light you home.

LEAH

His star.

murmured goodbyes as they leave; SETH still softly clapping

CHORUS (the children) to the tune of "Mary, did you know?" or similar meter – SETH's clapping now keeps the rhythm

Sharing what we can, we celebrate the newborn baby Savior

Little gifts of love and good news shared with family and our neighbor,

We are young, and don't understand all the things Your birth will mean
But we promise to remember all we have heard and seen

their voices fade

NARRATOR

And that was how the stable in the hillside became a place where love was shared. The small gifts the young brought were so much more than was needed that when the poor came to marvel at the baby, they came away with more than they could have imagined. The hungry came away with flour and oil and olives, with dates and figs and dried fish. And they came away with something they never had before – hope.

Seth rarely left the stable. Rushing through his chores he would sit at the entrance, fetching water and wood and softly clapping the Baby to sleep until darkness called him to his home.

A few weeks after the birth of the baby in the stable, three more travelers came to Bethlehem. Some said they were kings, some said they could read the stars. Seth met them on the path and led them, with much excitement, to where the Child lay.

BALTHAZAR

We thank you, young man.

MELCHIOR

My lady and sir, we have come from separate corners of the land, each guided by the light of the star which shines above this place.

BALTHAZAR

We have brought gold to name him a King;

CASPAR

Frankincense to proclaim him our Heavenly Lord;

MELCHIOR

And Myrrh for the price he will pay for us all.

a pause – we hear them kneel and murmur a prayer

CASPAR

I admit we debated if you would appreciate some practical gifts as well, food or something to keep the Child warm. But it seems these things have been given before our coming.

JOSEPH

Our friend Seth is one of many young people here who have shared with us and brought their families as well.

MARY

Thanks to them, we have so much that others have been able to share in our happiness – not just in the things we can give to eat or to wear –

SETH interrupts – saying with his clapping that there is more here than meets the eye

JOSEPH

But in the beginning of our Son's work and his journey.

Now Seth is our steward of hospitality! He welcomes those who come and seems to know what they need.

SETH claps with pride

BALTHAZAR

We came thinking there were lessons we should teach here. Instead we see we have much which the wise young ones of Bethlehem can teach.

SETH [softly, as a prayer]

Jesus.

JOSEPH and MARY gasp

MARY

My lords, you do not understand –

JOSEPH

The boy is mute –

SETH [*crooning to the Child*]

Jesus.

MELCHIOR

The first miracle. And His gift to us is that we were here to witness.

SETH [*obviously in conversation with the Child*]

Jesus.

NARRATOR

The three wise men departed, to consider whether they knew anything at all.

When the great accounting declared by Caesar was completed, Joseph and Mary departed – not to return to Nazareth for years, but to Egypt for the safety of the Child. With their blessing, Seth made it his life's work to care for the hillside stable, continuing to organize the shared gifts which came there, because the young people of Bethlehem never forgot what they had seen. Even as adults they collected the small leavings which were combined by Seth into blessings for those who came to the hills having heard the story of the Birth. The shepherds also shared what they could, and Seth passed on the craft of turning bits of fleece into felt for blankets, socks and warm cloaks.

He continued to speak in his soft voice, but the only word he ever said was "Jesus." It was the name he spoke when he offered the gifts; it was his song.

It was everything.

last musical phrase, 5 notes, of "Mary, did you know?" softly plays