

THE PROMISE OF BETHLEHEM

by Bonnie Heidenreich and Linda Chapman

Narrator I: (*music starts, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" verse only*) Bethlehem, a tiny, sleepy town nestled in the hills six miles from Jerusalem, seemed unimportant to the world in general. But there was promise lying within its walls, the promise of a savior; the promise that here would be born the son of God. (*music ends*)

Narrator II: Rich in heritage, Bethlehem was where Jacob buried his beloved Rachel; where Ruth faithfully gleaned in the fields of Boaz; and where Samuel found and anointed the young David to become King of Israel. David, too, was born in humble surroundings, a lowly shepherd boy, beloved of God. And it was promised that from his loins would come another king; one who would save his people from their sins; one who would be called "Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." (Isa.9:6)

Narrator I: All of Israel looked forward to the birth of their Messiah. From the chief priest's palatial residence to the street beggar's hovel, all knew of the prophecies of the promised king. Though the people lived in captivity, yet they waited eagerly for the freedom He would surely bring.

Narrator II: They did not wait in vain, for out of Bethlehem would come glad tidings of exceeding great joy causing wise men everywhere to rejoice.

Narrator I: Their Savior would bring them freedom, yes...not from the bands of earthly bondage, but from the spiritual bands of sin and death.

Narrator II: At last, the promise would be kept. The gates of eternal life would open, allowing righteousness to pour down from heaven, bathing the world in glory and gladdening the hearts of men. The love of God, that which was most desirable above all things, that which was most joyous to the soul, would come to dwell on earth. Surely the news of Christ's birth was not only for the people of Bethlehem, but for everyone, everywhere. All who breathed the breath of life could join together and sing out, "Joy! Joy! Joy to the World, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!"

"JOY TO THE WORLD"

(choir)

Narrator II: In Hebrew, the word Bethlehem means "house of bread." The name is particularly meaningful, for it is the birthplace of one who would later say,

Scripture: "I am the bread of life." (John 6:35)

Narrator I: Long before He came to earth, God sent manna to the children of Moses as bread from heaven to save them from starvation. Jesus Christ also was sent by God from heaven to save His people from death. Later, during His ministry, Christ explained to His followers,

Scripture: "Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead....I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." (John 6:49-51)

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Narrator II: He taught us to pray...

Scripture: "Give us this day our daily bread." (Matt 6:11)

Narrator II: Perhaps He hoped we would pray not only for daily 'physical' nourishment, but also for daily 'spiritual' nourishment; feasting on the word of God through the bread of life, the Savior.

Narrator I: It is fitting that Christ chose as the setting for His final sacrifice to the world, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which is called Passover. At this time, He instituted the Sacrament, by breaking bread saying,

Scripture: "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. This do in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19)

Narrator I: Each Sabbath day, followers around the world remember still His sacrifice...by partaking of bread.

Narrator II: (*music starts—1st 6 measures*) Bethlehem, house of bread, slumbered peacefully on that starlit night, waiting patiently for the day prophesied of centuries before. Oh, little town of Bethlehem, birthplace of the Redeemer, God's promise to the world is fulfilled in you.

"O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM"

(soloist and choir)

Narrator I: Mary and Joseph journeyed to Bethlehem from Nazareth in Galilee at the order of Caesar Augustus. They came to register for a general tax levied against the entire Roman Empire. But the governor over Judea commanded the masses to report to their ancestral home in line with Jewish tradition, rather than their place of residence. He could not have known that he, too, was fulfilling prophecy. For though Mary and Joseph were living in Nazareth, the Holy Child must be born in Bethlehem, and only an important edict would have induced Joseph to travel such a distance with Mary so close to delivery.

Narrator II: On the surface, there was nothing remarkable about two weary travelers arriving after a long journey, even though the woman was great with child. The streets were filled with visitors, and lodging was filled to capacity. Though they searched, the couple could not find a place to stay. Just as they were rejected along the streets of Bethlehem, so Jesus was later rejected by the Jews, His chosen people. He was turned away from the inn and cast out of the world by His own.

Scripture: "He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not." (John 1:10-11)

Narrator II: Centuries have passed, yet there are still those who do not receive Him; those who cannot find a place for Him in their hearts. There are still those who reject their creator. (*pause*)

Narrator I: Through angelic visitations, Mary and Joseph knew that this baby was to be the Son of God; the first begotten in the spirit, the only begotten in the flesh. And they knew the name by which He would be called; Jesus, meaning 'Savior-Deliverer.' It was thus decreed before His birth. The word 'Christ' translates to 'Messiah,' signifying the 'Anointed One.' The heavens proclaimed that He would be called King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and that of His kingdom there would be no end; but tonight, he would come into the world as a tiny baby.

Narrator II: And so on that glorious, silent night, Mary brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger.

“SILENT NIGHT”

(congregation)

Narrator I: The Babe of Bethlehem was born, and now the glorious announcement must be made to God’s mortal creations. To a small band of shepherds on the Judaeen plains, there came an angel, an holy herald from the throne of God proclaiming the joyous news to the world.

Scripture: “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11)

Narrator II: Once the joyous proclamation was made, the ecstasy of the hosts of heaven could be contained no longer and the divine doors opened wide. Throngs of celestial choirs filled the air with strains of angelic melodies. The Great God of Heaven and Earth, with all the resources of the universe available to Him, chose to announce the birth of His only begotten son with a choir of angels. “Glory to God!” they sang. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (Luke 2:14)

Narrator I: How better to glorify God than to bring peace to men on the earth? It is significant that the original Greek reads, “And on earth peace toward men of good will.” For peace on earth will come only when men show good will toward one another. And it is to men of good will that God grants the peace which fills the soul and brings the spirit of love to life.

“ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH”

(choir and congregation)

(Suggested performance of this hymn: Assign the soprano and alto parts to two violinists and the tenor and bass parts to two cellists. 1) Have the strings play it through once. 2) Add the choir to the strings-1st verse. 3) Add the organ to the strings and choir with obligato on the chorus-2nd verse. 4) Add the congregation to the strings, organ, choir and obligato-3rd verse.)

Narrator I: Bethlehem, home of shepherds past and present, became the birthplace of the “Good Shepherd”; one who loved His sheep; one who gave His life for His sheep. The psalmist sang...

Scripture: “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” (Psalms 23:1)

Narrator I: Isaiah prophesied...

Scripture: “He shall feed His flock like a shepherd.” (Isaiah 40:11)

Narrator I: And a grieved Peter heard the Lamb of God plead three times...

Scripture: “Feed my sheep.” (John 21:17)

Narrator I: It is not a mystery that at the glorious moment of the Lord’s birth, it was to shepherds that angel voices rang out with the heavenly announcement.

Narrator II: These shepherds watching in the hills surrounding Bethlehem were common, ordinary residents of Judea. Why were they the chosen ones? Their homes were humble; their clothing plain. They lacked status, wealth, and education. But perhaps it is to the poor in heart that God gives His greatest blessing. Did He not later say,

Scripture: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven....Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth.” (Matt 5:3,5)

Narrator I: Choosing the shepherds was no mistake, for if we look closer, we can find other qualities prized of God. The shepherds were watching their flocks, guarding their precious sheep in

the nighttime, in the darkness, keeping them from harm. We each have our own flocks which need shepherding. Do we keep watch with similar diligence when darkness gathers 'round and evil threatens?

Narrator II: That these shepherds were men of faith is obvious in their response to the wonderful pronouncement. They did not doubt nor question what they had heard and seen. They did not say, "Can this be true?" or "What should we do?", but instead they answered...

Scripture: "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem." (Luke 2:15)

Narrator II: Though they felt fear in the call they heard from the angels, yet they were swift to find the Holy Child. Perhaps God wants us to learn from the shepherds, and when the Master calls, in spite of fears, go with haste and find Him.

Narrator I: And after we find Him, what then? After we kneel at His feet and thrill at His presence; after we experience the sweetness of worship, what then should we do? Just as the humble shepherds did, we can return to our homes and families, glorifying and praising God. We, too, can make known abroad the marvelous things which we know. With our actions, we can show goodness; with our hands, we can touch lives; with our hearts, we can share His love.

"THE FIRST NOEL"

(choir)

Narrator II: We know little of the magi who appeared in Jerusalem searching for the infant king. We do know that they were wise.

Narrator I: True wisdom is not only knowledge, but the use of that knowledge with understanding and sound judgment. These kings were indeed wise, for they studied and searched the scriptures. Otherwise, they would not have known that a king was coming. We know that they watched and waited; earnestly looking forward to His birth, for they found the sign which others missed. And we know that when they saw the sign, they recognized it for what it was and were prepared to act. They left their own lands in search of the new king.

Narrator II: When traveling to nearby kingdoms, it was and still is the custom in many Oriental lands to offer gifts to those in higher standing. What the kings brought is not as important as the fact that they laid their gifts at the feet of a small child, one they knew to be their superior. It is noted that there is no record of any gifts being left for King Herod. They only stopped at his palace to ask directions.

Narrator I: We know something else from this story—that God prepared records in other lands which foretold the birth of His Son. The writings which prophesied of His birth, searched by the Magi, were not Jewish scripture, or the kings would not have asked where He was to be born. Holy Hebrew records made it clear that His birthplace would be Bethlehem.

Also, these kings from the Orient knew the king for whom they searched, but they did not know King Herod. His reputation for jealousy and brutality was widespread, but it obviously did not reach their lands in the East. They would never have answered his invitation to the palace, or promised to return and tell him of their find. Only through an angel did they learn of his true nature.

Narrator II: Not only were these righteous men worthy of an angelic visitation, but of divine direction from God; for after they left the palace, "the star went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was." (Matt 2:9) Mary and her son obviously lived among many who did not know who they were. But when the wise men entered the house, the spirit must have been

strong in them, for they recognized Him at once as the king for whom they searched. Their long journey finished, their goal realized....they fell down, and worshipped him.

“WITH WONDERING AWE”

(choir)

Narrator I: Come to the manger and kneel with the shepherds.

Narrator II: Sing with gladness the song of the angels, “Glory to God! Glory to God in the Highest!” Feel the joy that comes in dedication to God, and reverence Him through loving obedience.

Narrator I: Search, like the wise men, for the kingdom of heaven. It is a treasure to be prized above all others. And when it is found, give all that you have to follow Him because of the joy which fills your heart.

Narrator II: When this short mortal span of years on earth is complete, and you are called home to meet your Maker, to humbly bow at His feet in adoration and to report of mortal offerings, may you hear His gentle voice calling...

Scripture: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant....enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”
(Matthew 25:21)

Narrator I: Come all ye faithful. Come joyfully to the manger in Bethlehem. Come and adore Him, Christ, the Lord of all.

“O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL”

(congregation)

(Note: Scripture notations are for reference, not narration.)