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# Toward the light...

The moonless night sky was sprinkled with silver stars. On the dark hillside a group of men were camped, circled around a cooking fire.

“How will we know?” Philip asked, fervently leaning forward, placing his hands on Jesus’ arm. The disciples were enthralled as Jesus continued to tell them about their coming redemption. Like a prophet, he was revealing a vision of the future—a privileged glimpse at their own destiny.

Jesus’ eyes reflected orange from the flickering campfire. His tolerant smile was filled with love for these followers who shared the moment with him. The words rushed to his lips.

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish, distraught at the roaring of the sea and the waves. Men will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the earth. The powers in the heavens will be shaken.” Jesus paused letting the images fill their minds.

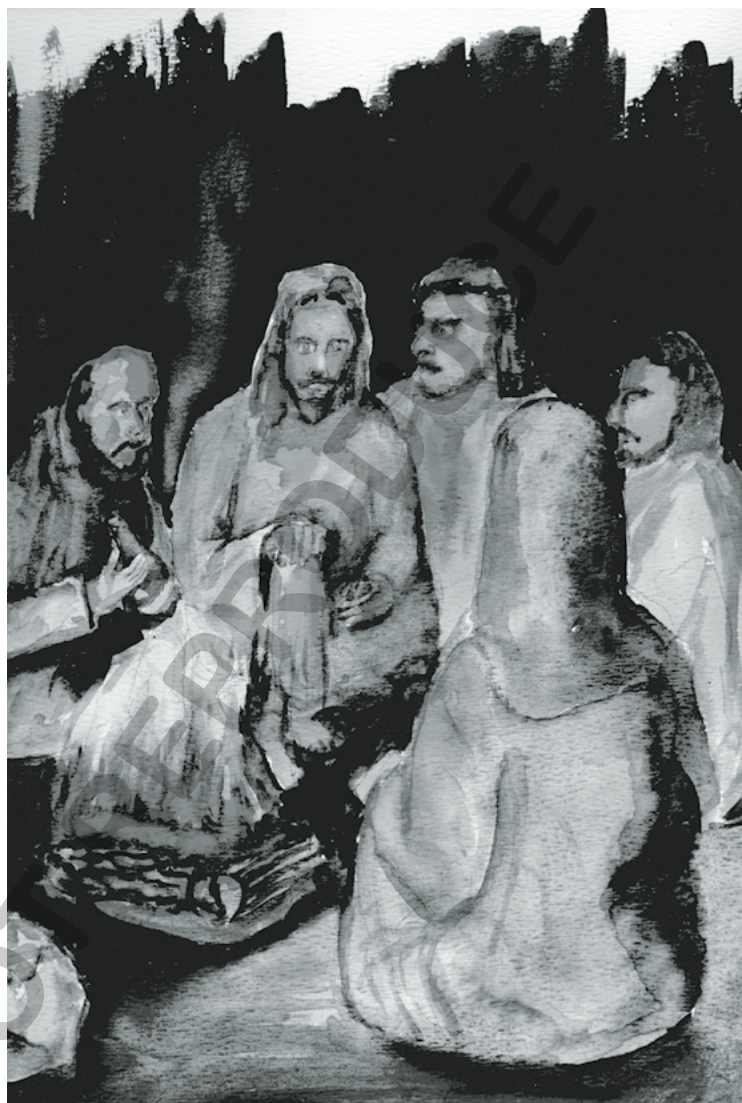
No-one spoke as Jesus continued: “After that, men will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud with great power and glory. When these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, for your ransom is near at hand.”

Philip did not even blink as the answer to his question came so clearly. In his mind the sky was already ablaze with God’s glory.

Peter unstopped the wineskin and felt the good burn as he swallowed some wine. Jesus noted this and continued, eyeing Peter as he spoke.

“Be on guard lest your spirits become bloated with indulgence and drunkenness and worldly cares. The great day will suddenly close in on you like a trap. The day I speak of will come upon all who dwell on the face of the earth, so be on the watch. Pray constantly for the strength to escape whatever is in prospect, and to stand secure before the Son of Man.”

The last flames of the campfire collapsed and only



the glow of embers remained. They all sat there together in the darkness. Philip was still fearfully clutching Jesus’ arm. They sat in the silent starlight, dreaming the visions Jesus had revealed.



The vision of Jesus, coming in a cloud of power and glory as the Son of Man, has always seemed like an event that the world would watch simultaneously. But it could just as well be an individual vision that each of us will truly see on that day which will suddenly close in on us like a trap. Those who have claimed near-death experience have universally spoken about moving toward the friendly light. As we begin a new church year on this first Sunday of Advent, let us pray constantly for the strength to escape whatever is in prospect so that we can stand secure before the Son of Man.



# **‘Make ready the way of the Lord...’**

The air was cold and John was glad to see the red rim of the sun erupt over the dark hills beyond the Jordan. The slate gray waters of the river began to sparkle with brush strokes of color reflected from the morning sky.

From a Roman encampment higher up, near the road to Jericho, a lone sentinel looked out across the wilderness. Squinting into the golden light and long shadows, he did not see the tiny figure of John at the edge of the river. He could not know that the world was changing before his eyes. He could not see the presence of God pouring his Word into the heart of the lone man in the desert.

In distant Capri, sunrise was still an hour away. The semi-retired emperor of Rome, Tiberius Caesar, snored alone in his bed, freed from the worries of office. In Rome the unscrupulous Sejanus had everything under control. In Judea the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate was in charge and he in turn watched Herod Antipas and his half-brother Philip who ruled the local lands and territories along the Jordan where John was to begin his preaching.

Even among the Jews there was control and order. The High Priest Caiaphas and his father Annas were beginning their new day, unaware that their world was soon to be shaken by the fulfillment of the great prophesy of Isaiah.

Drenched in a sunlight made brighter by God’s presence within him, John the Baptist began to walk along the river’s edge. He had become the herald’s voice in the desert. He was filled to overflowing with enthusiasm and joy. John could not contain himself. He shouted into the empty sky: “Make ready the way of the Lord...”



The world was busy with its own affairs, taking little note of the lone voice of John in the desert. The mighty emperor of Rome and the powerful rulers seemed to be safe and secure. But God took one small man wandering in the wilderness and gave him the voice to proclaim the coming of the Lord.

There’s a message there for our time. Like the world, we may be too busy to hear the voices which proclaim the coming of Jesus into our lives. We may also be too busy to realize that we are sometimes called to be the voice which cries out in the wilderness. Unless we choose to do so, we cannot realize those words of Isaiah: that “all mankind shall see the salvation of God.”



3rd Sunday of Advent - Luke 3: 10-18

## “...with the Holy Spirit and fire!”

John plunged the young soldier down into the water. Falling backwards, the soldier's arms shot outward as he splashed down, disappearing in a foam of bubbles. John's strong biceps bulged as he supported the young man's weight, lifting him back to his feet. Water streamed down from both of them as they stood in the waist-deep river.

The crowd around them pressed closer to the bank. John waded toward them, already preaching again with fearsome authority and power. One frightened woman in the crowd backed away as he came toward her, his black hair and beard whipped in wild tangles. John's camel hair clothes made him seem like a wild animal as he stalked up the bank.

After John warned them about the fires of judgment they asked him what they should do.

“Whoever has two shirts must give one to the man who has none,” John roared. “Whoever has food must share it!”

Some of the despised tax collectors and their bodyguards were watching the Baptist. “What should we do?” they called out. John turned to face them, the extra coins they had collected for themselves still heavy in their purses. “Don't collect more than is legal,” John said flatly.

John walked up to the friends of the newly-baptized soldier and said to them: “Don't take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely. Be content with your pay.”

The crowd began to bow to John as he walked past them. Refusing their deference, he explained: “I baptize you with water, but someone is coming who is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire!”

They stood in silence, mystified and wondering who it was that John was announcing.



John's words still sting today. Many may not have offered their extra shirt to someone in need. Many may not have shared their extra food with those who have nothing to eat. These commandments from John are an initiation into Christianity. To prepare the way for the Lord, John exhorts God's people to sacrifice their own comfort in order to help someone else. It is the first requirement of Christian love. It is also the true Spirit of Christmas.



# The Visitation

The caravan began to move out, following the South Road, heading for Jerusalem and the other cities in the region of Judea. It was a small caravan of pack animals, but with plenty of armed men they would be safe from any robbers that might overtake them in the hills of Samaria. Mary walked close behind the guard who had been paid to protect her.

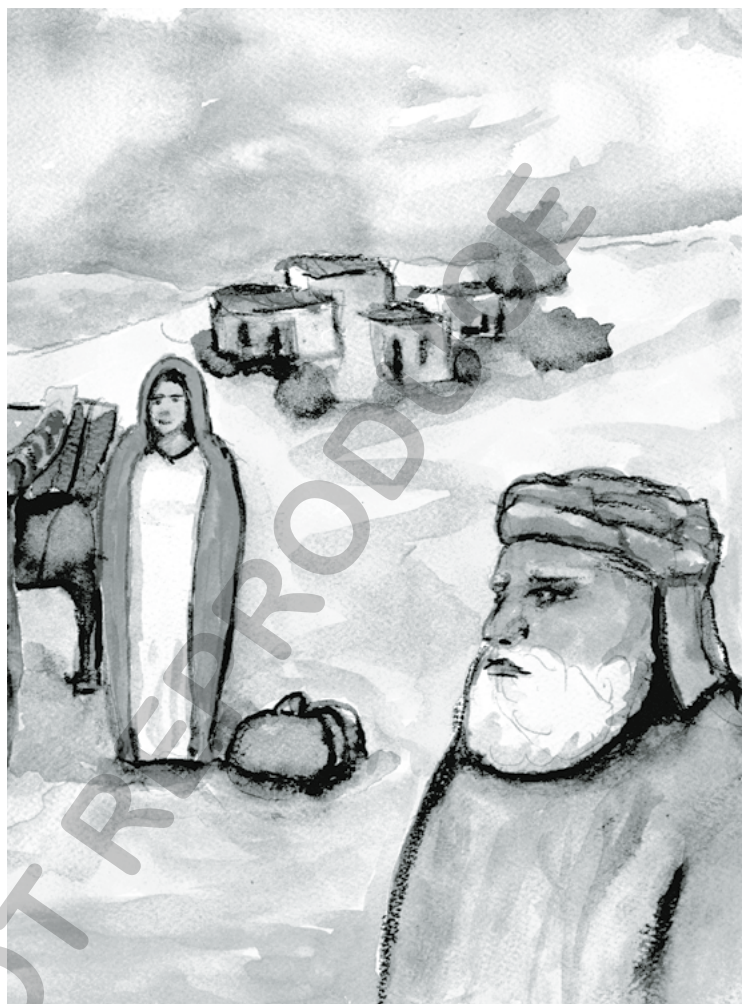
From the top of the first hill Mary looked back, tears forming in her eyes. Her parents, Anne and Joachim were still waving from down below. Joseph, standing nearby was looking down and did not see her final wave.

As Anne watched her daughter Mary wave down to her, she was filled with the memory of her promise to the angel. After years of childlessness, the vision had come to Anne and told her that she would have a child. In joy, Anne promised to dedicate the child to God.

Now the same thing had happened to Anne's older sister Elizabeth. Her husband Zechariah had received a vision announcing the birth of a son. Elizabeth became pregnant at her advanced age and now, in her sixth month, needed help. Anne knew that she had to send Mary.

The slow caravan would take four days and three nights to reach the hill country near Jerusalem. There Mary would find the house of Zechariah and her cousin Elizabeth. Zechariah was a priest in the temple at Jerusalem and Mary looked forward to the visit. At night, camped along the road, she stared up at the stars and dreamed of the adventure she was living.

It was late afternoon when the caravan came into the village of Zechariah. Mary gathered her belongings and rushed off to find the house. Elizabeth was seated at a table, preparing the evening meal. Looking up from her peeling, she heard her young cousin, Mary calling hello from the open doorway. At that moment the child in Elizabeth's womb gave a mighty kick. With her heart overflowing with a rush of love, Elizabeth got to her feet and moved toward Mary, praising in a loud voice: "You are the most blessed of all women and blessed is the child you will bear."



If we were to gather all of the characters of this drama together, it would include the four angels who appeared in turn to Zechariah, Anne, Joachim, and then to Mary. It would include all the parents. And finally it would include the two babes yet to be born: John and Jesus. But the most amazing of all these miracles is the unfathomable reality that within Jesus there is the person of God himself. The mighty creator of the universe and the master of all time has placed himself within an unborn child.

These events are like a mystery box. When you open one you discover that it contains another box. Inside that smaller box is another, and then another. And finally, the smallest of these boxes is the mystery of Jesus. And within Him is the greatest mystery of all.

# And the Word became Flesh.

John's white beard bobbed up and down as he chewed on his bread. The years had claimed most of his teeth and chewing was a chore. Still, his eyes looked merry as he enjoyed the food and the company around him. He washed his breakfast down with a cup of cool water. "Let's get started," he said.

Several scribes sitting at the table with him were there for a day of dictating and writing. John struggled to his feet and hobbled over to his seat by the window. The morning air was cool and scented with Spring blossoms. The harbor of Ephesus was in view from his hillside home. The scribes set up their writing materials and waited.

John gazed out the window and let his memory cross the decades to the years in Galilee when he walked with Jesus. He remembered it all except for the beginning. His piles of writings had accumulated. There were many books but he needed to find a place to begin and tie it all together into one life's work.

Papias, one of the scribes, encouraged John to start, "Tell us about the beginning?"

John remembered that first day as he and his brother James were packing up the fishing nets and Jesus had called from the shore, inviting them to follow him. But before that there were the stories of John the Baptist announcing the coming of Jesus. Before that there were the stories of Bethlehem and Magi from the East. But the Gospel began before those things. John began to speak and the scribes began to write down the words he spoke.

"In the beginning was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the word was God." John waited while they wrote. Through the morning John continued as the inspired words flowed from his lips. Then John came to the culmination of his realization as he said to the scribes:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory; the glory of an only Son coming from the Father, filled with enduring love."



The celebration of Jesus birth is the celebration of his principal teaching, love. Christmas fills us with that love as we gather as families, as we exchange tokens of our love with each other, but mostly as we feel the joy of God's love for us in all of that.



## Didn't you know?

The families who traveled down from Nazareth to attend the eight-day Passover feast in Jerusalem had already been gone from home for two weeks. Joseph was eager to get back to his unfinished work at the shop in Nazareth. He was also eager to end the first day of the long walk home.

"Only two more days, Joseph," one of his friends cracked as he watched the tired carpenter inspect his sore feet.

"If these feet last that long," Joseph replied, thinking this would be the last year that he would do this big trip to Jerusalem.

"Joseph!" Mary interrupted, her face filled with fear.

"What?"

"Jesus has disappeared," she said. "He's not with the caravan, I've looked everywhere."

"How can that be, I thought I saw him walking ahead with the other boys!" Joseph asked.

"He's gone," Mary declared.

After a moment Joseph rubbed his sore foot and sighed: "We'll have to go back. We'll return to Jerusalem in the morning."

This disaster was going cost them another three days; two walking and one trying to find their son. Twelve year old Jesus was in big trouble!

They worried, sleepless, through the long night imagining all the things that might have happened to Jesus. At first light they parted with the caravan. At the end of a long day they had covered the 30-mile distance. They spent that night with Mary's cousin Elizabeth, who was also dismayed to learn that Jesus was missing. The next morning they entered the city in search of their son. Joseph and Mary were both physically and emotionally drained when they finally discovered Jesus sitting happily in the Temple talking with the elders.

Mary's eyes searched Jesus' face. "Son, why have you done this to us. Your father and I have been terribly worried about you," she asked, her voice edged with disappointment and relief.

With his innocent eyes wide with surprise, Jesus answered his mom: "Why did you have to look for me? Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?"

In a flash of light, Mary recalled it all: the night that



the angel had spoken to her; her own words of submission and later the words of Elizabeth. Mary's memory filled with her child's miraculous birth—the shepherds, the star and the stable.

A shiver of fear crossed her face as she struggled to comprehend that this child before her was somehow God.

Joseph was about to scold Jesus, but he felt Mary's hand press against his, so he calmed himself and said: "Come, son, it's time to go home."



Living every day with Jesus must have made it nearly impossible for Mary and Joseph to realize his divinity. The routine of their daily life smoothed off the edges of the reality that Jesus was the Promised One. Their memory was gradually buried under the softly falling snowflakes of time. The dream angel's announcements and the miraculous birth lay hidden under the quiet years. And now, suddenly, all was revealed again!

Today's Gospel reminds us that our faith may be softened by the routine years that have passed. The edges of our understanding may also have been rounded off. Today's Gospel gives us a reminder that Jesus is the Promised One. As God's children we are called to say to the world around us: "Don't you know that we must also be in our Father's house?"