

Atlanta Westside Presbyterian Church
Sunday, December 25, 2022

The First Three Days

Christmas Day 2022

Philippians 2:5-7

Introduction

Last night Pastor Joe told us about the three gifts of the wise men, and three of the gifts Jesus gave us in return. We also know about the three days when Jesus' body lay in a tomb, but what about his *first* three days, when his body lay in a manger? I have written an imaginative account of what those first three days *might* have been like. My goal is not 100% historical accuracy, but to help us feel what the Apostle Paul meant when he said that Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." (Philippians 2:7)

The First Day

Shhhhhh.

What? I'm being quiet!

You're breathing like an ox at the plow.

This is how I breathe.

Well, shhhh.

[whispering now] Fine. I think he's finally asleep.

Mary and Joseph watched the baby's eyes darting back and forth under the thin-veined skin of his eyelids. His eyelashes were still gooey from fluid that only hours before he'd been *breathing*. Now his lungs were softly pumping air, in and out, like he'd been doing it for years: ssssssss, phhhhhh.

Jesus was dreaming. But what was he dreaming *about*? Perhaps of a constellation he had once slung across a distant galaxy. Or the sprawling root system he had knit for a stand of Aspens. Maybe he was remembering the look on Moses's face in the fireglow of that bush. His parents lost track of time watching him.

You know, I kinda thought he'd be perfect, Joseph said.

He is perfect! Mary hissed. All babies are perfect. Especially this one.

But his head is all weird and cone-shaped.

Joseph. Have you ever seen an actual baby before?

Of course I have ... but, okay, well, not up close.

Right, here's the deal: Their heads are not totally hard yet. That's how God gets them through the birth canal. Our boy's head will round out over time.

Mary kissed the cowlick at the pointiest part of his crown. It was still salty from his first bath. Joseph had drawn water from the well, and together they had scrubbed him clean with salt from a leather pouch. His caramel skin was pinked.

I'll believe it when I see it, Joseph said uneasily. He's going to have a hard enough time without being all coneheaded.

What do you mean?

He doesn't even look like me.

That's not what makes you his father.

Then what does?

An angel. A terrifying angel from God. Remember him?

How could I forget? He said we have to name him Jesus, because he will save his people, our people, from their sins. But what if it was just a dream?

It was not just a dream. I have never known a man. You are his daddy.

They lay in silence for a while, and soon they were all dreaming, curled up in the straw under Joseph's cloak.

And it was evening... and when they woke up, it was still evening.

Crying he makes, said Joseph.

That's a weird way to put it.

I mean I think he's hungry.

UEHEGHEH, Mary said, as she sat up against the cold cave wall to nurse.

Joseph lit a lamp. One of the goats lifted its head in their direction and snorted.

Jesus' eyes were open now, fixed on his mother's. His pupils were dilated pools of black glass, and his irises were rimmed with deep brown like the coat of a cow.

Joseph slid next to her, and the baby studied his fuzzy form. He felt a chill at the back of his ears.

It's like he's staring into my soul.

All babies stare like that.

Eh. Maybe. This feels different. It's like he sees all the things I don't want him to see, and he's sad but he's not afraid. I don't know how much of this I can take, but I can't keep my eyes off of him. Remember what Gabriel said to you?

How could I forget? He's gonna be great. A king. The King. And "of his kingdom there will be no end."

Whoa. Hello, my son. My King.

Joseph brushed his smallest finger against the baby's cheek, and Jesus caught it. His tiny fingers gripped tight onto Joseph's hairy knuckle.

My boy is strong! Joseph said.

Stronger than we know, said his mother.

Jesus burped. Mary and Joseph kept staring. The lamp flickered out. Their eyelids fell. And it was evening, and it was morning. The first day.

The Second Day

The light was already spilling into the stable, but it was the smell that woke them. Not the smell of animals; they were used to that now. This was the smell of campsmoke in clothing, the smell of feet and sweat and scraggly beards. A forest of sandaled ankles splintered the light on their faces.

We come to see the king, said one of the shepherds. *We walked through the night. It was angels that told us,* said another.

Singing angels! cried the youngest among them, barely older than Mary. His eyes were still glazed with glory, replaying the scene in his mind. He tried to remember the angel's tune, but it was like trying to capture a flake of snow: the filigreed crystals always melted on his hand, and others kept falling.

We was worried about the manger, said a shepherd with a crooked tooth.

What? Joseph said, turning to the crude stone feed trough beside them. Mary had apparently woken again in the night and settled the baby in it.

Them angels said he'd be lying in a manger, but a manger ain't safe for a King. Hungry creatures'll eat anything.

Not on my watch, said Joseph, glaring sternly at every animal in sight.

A muddy sheep nosed between two shepherd's cloaks, took one look at Joseph and quickly ducked out, trotting back to the flock outside.

Every other eye turned to the manger. Jesus was not glowing. His swaddling cloths were not white. He was so small you could almost miss that he was in it. For a moment, no one breathed. Then... Jesus sneezed. He opened his eyes, blinking in the yellow light. His lips were wet.

Can I holds him? one of the shepherds asked. He looked old enough to have a few children of his own, and when he spoke, the other shepherds went still. Their eyes turned to the mama. Mary knelt by the manger and scooped the baby into her arms. She looked up at the lead shepherd. He knelt beside her.

Mind his little fontanelle, she whispered. He nodded deferentially, slowly sliding his calloused hand under the baby's head, and a forearm under his body. The shepherd and the baby locked eyes. Joseph gave him a look that said, *Let's see how long you can take it.* But the shepherd had already seen heaven opened once—just a few hours before, at a distance. Now in the morning, he was seeing heaven up close. Insight and ignorance collided in his mind. He couldn't stop staring—but who was seeing whom?

Other shepherds shuffled closer and craned their necks. Mary watched them warily. A sheep bleated. Jesus pooped. His eyes were watery.

A grin tugged at the corner of the shepherd's mouth, and he turned knowingly toward the mama. She took the handoff, reached for a spare cloth, and went to work. Though just a teenager, she'd already changed hundreds of diapers: younger siblings, cousins, neighbors. The shepherds discreetly stepped outside. Joseph looked over her shoulder and grimaced.

Um, that can't be good.

It's just what it looks like the first time. It'll be different after this.

Joseph accepted her expertise with silence. He was almost twice her age. How did she already know so much about everything?

Mary reswaddled the baby, pulled him to her chest, and laid down with him in the straw. Joseph went outside as they slept. Some of the shepherds had already led their flock to graze on a nearby hill. Others had wandered into the village to buy bread. The shepherd who had held Jesus was posted just outside, his arms crossed.

Why is the King in a stable? he asked, a little too boldly.

We're not from here, Joseph said. *I mean, my relatives are, but we live in Nazareth now. We had to come for the census. The whole town was packed. We just got married.*

The shepherd's eyebrows raised. *Just got married?* Then he tilted his head, raised his lower lip, and exhaled curiously.

Some honeymoon, he said.

Yeah. Freaking Romans.

The shepherd's nostrils flared at the mention of their pagan overlords.

Maybe your boy will do something about that.

Yeah. Maybe he will.

Later, the sun began to set and the shepherds reconvened at the stable. One of them laid two warm loaves, wrapped in a cloth, at Mary's feet. Another set down a bucket of fresh water from the well.

We have to get back to our fields.

Of course. Thank you for the bread.

They said he's the Savior, the Messiah. The angels said that.

Yes, they told us that, too.

The youngest shepherd's eyes went wide. He looked up at his older brothers, as if to say, *there's angels showing up all over everywhere now!*

A grayheaded shepherd spoke for the first time. *They told us this is good news of great joy for all people. They said he's been born "to us"— not just... to you.* Joseph's eyes narrowed. But Mary tucked the words into her mind, turned them over and arranged them next to other weighty words of her recent past: Gabriel's words, and her cousin Elizabeth's words, and her own Spirit-filled song. Finally Mary said, softly, *That's right. He is all of ours.* *And we are his,* said the shepherd. He bowed and stepped back softly. The others followed him out into the fading light. It was evening. And when the baby woke them, it was still evening. Eventually it was morning, the second day.

The Third Day

The sun was higher than they expected when the young family finally stirred. Joseph strapped on his sandals, grabbed the empty bucked, and headed for the well. Mary nursed the baby, burped him, and swaddled him tight. She could see his little elbows and knees squirming against the cloth. He had already scratched his face with the sharp corner of a fingernail that needed nibbling to blunt. In the crook of her arm she felt him scrunch the fabric with his toes. She smiled. Jesus smiled back at her.

When Joseph returned, he asked, *What did I miss?*

Nothing, she said. *Or maybe, everything.*

What do you mean?

I'm' just messing with you. Come on, hold your boy.

But, uh...

Joseph, if that backwoods sheep-wrangler can do it, so can a master carpenter.

I don't know...

Think about how the priest takes up the sacred scroll in the temple.

Yeah...

Well, they have to be careful with it, but they know the Torah was written to be read. Babies are like that, too: They were born to be held. You can do this.

OK. I'll try.

Joseph trembled as she set the baby in his arms. Now he looked younger than his wife: stiff, scared, awkward. Mary giggled. Jesus wriggled an arm free and flapped it around in sudden, jerky movements. His slender fingers clenched and fanned, rippling like branches in a breeze. Occasionally they snagged his ear lobe, or one of his nostrils, and his face seemed to say, *What was that?*

Can't he control his own limbs? Joseph asked.

Not yet, Mary said. *There's a lot to learn.*

Yeah, but doesn't he already know, like, everything?

I guess so. I'm not sure. Maybe it's like you, when you finish building a new chair and you sit in it for the first time. I've watched you do it. You plant your feet and lean your back against it and press the armrests with your palms, and your eyes smile. You made that chair, but sitting in it, you know it in a new way. The Torah says God fashioned us from dust and breathed the breath of life into our nostrils. Maybe now he's just getting to know his design from the inside.

Jesus yawned. He arched his back and extended an arm as far as he could, just barely reaching the top of his oblong head. Joseph shook his own head, marveling that this being who once separated light from darkness, earth from sky, and sea from dry land—had somehow accepted the inches-long reach of muscle, tendon and bone. Just then he reached toward Joseph, palm open. Joseph obeyed the summons and brought his face close. Jesus took hold of the tip of his nose and drilled his gaze even more deeply into the eyes of his adopted father. Joseph felt the breath blowing into his own mouth. It tasted sweet.

He likes you, Mary said.

How could he?

Look at those eyes. He's a people-liker.

But I'm... but we... we're not who we're supposed to be.

He knows that. I think that's why he's here. We will serve him for a few years, but then he will serve us.

I wonder how he'll do it?

I wonder, too.

They sat with the boy through the day, watching and resting and tending to what needed tending. The sun followed its path across the sky, and villagers chatted in the streets. Evening came, and when the baby woke them two more times, it was still evening. Then finally it was morning, the third day.

Conclusion

Some thirty-three years later, the Apostle Paul would write that this Jesus, "*being found in human form, humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, Paul said, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*" Amen.