

Christmas 2010

### The Bethlehem Baby and The Orphan Abbas

Abbas Barabbas wrapped his thin cloak tighter around himself and tried not to shiver. The ground leached the warmth from him as he sat and held the lamb, as much for the warmth of the little body as to comfort the orphan. It was only three days since the wolf had terrified the flock and the young ewe had panicked and run off into the night, followed closely by the soft padding of the wolf's loping run. Abbas had found her lamb, pitifully bawling for her mother, and carried it to the campfire. The boy had barely enough strength to manage but was determined. His leg may be withered but his will was potent, toughened by a short lifetime of taunting from the other shepherd children and the effort not to let his lameness keep him from anything. He supposed it was the lamb's crooked leg, causing it to dip its head with every step it took, that had opened the boy's heart. That, and the fact that the lamb was now an orphan, just like Abbas himself.

The lamb slept peacefully in Abbas' arms, unaware of the shivering that the boy tried unsuccessfully to control. The hills around Bethlehem carried good forage for the flock, but it was cold during the longest nights of the year. The stars glittered unfeelingly across the heavens. Abbas did his part with his uncles to keep the flock safe, though each was contracted by the cold wind into his own little world. Nights were not easy in the Judean countryside.

Abbas hugged the lamb to his chest and gradually became aware that his shivering had stopped. The cold wind had turned to a warm breeze, and the shepherds looked around wonderingly for the cause of such mercy. They had little time to marvel at the warmth, for the night sky was suddenly brightened as if filled with many suns. In the light flickered forms of even greater brightness, and the air rustled with the whisper of a million wings. Abbas had heard of angels from his mother, but had discounted the stories as just so much wishful thinking. And then there was the music, beautiful music, almost unbearable in its loveliness. Words seemed to hover in the air, as if blessing all that heard them: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace..."

The shepherds all ran together, as if to draw courage from one another, for they were very afraid. For once, Abbas was included, just one of the crowd that trembled before the glorious heavens. Out of the brightness came a deep and comforting voice: "Don't be afraid.... A Savior has just been born in Bethlehem, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. Go and find him. This is what you are to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger." The music came to an enthralling climax and then there was silence, a deep silence just as powerful. The skies were once more empty, dark, and cold.

The shepherds whispered among themselves, as if normal speech were out of place. Eventually, they decided to obey the angelic voice and to seek a baby lying in a manger, strange as that seemed. Leaving only one guard with the flock, the group set off across the hillside toward the dark walls of the town that was never thrilled at the visitation of

shepherds. His uncles included Abbas in their group, but it was not long before his lame leg separated him from the hurrying crowd. And he was slowed even further by the lamb, who limped along after him. Abbas did not want to abandon her.

In the town, the boy struggled from one house to another, looking in all the outbuildings. Finally, near the outskirts of town and close to the inn, he saw his uncles gathered around a stable. Grabbing the little lamb by the fleece of its neck, Abbas pushed through the excited and whispering shepherds until he broke through into the stable.

Abbas saw the rough interior of a barn, lighted by the feeble glow of a single lantern, the air redolent with the rich smell of animal bodies and softly sighing with the murmur of animal breathing. Yet the small room had all the feel of the glorious vision that had sent them running from the hillside. There indeed was a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in an animal trough, a manger filled with straw, just as the angel had said. There were a roughly dressed man and woman, hovering protectively over the manger. Abbas' heart ached: a family such as he would never have. The baby was sleeping but then stirred. Abbas wondered if such little ones could dream. The baby opened its eyes and gravely regarded its humble surroundings. The woman reached down into the manger and took him into her arms and sat down on a low stool. The man laid a hand gently on her shoulder.

Abbas, as if in a trance, crept forward and reached out one grubby hand to touch the baby. The woman hesitated for a moment, then smiled at the little boy. Encouraged, Abbas knelt down on good leg and bad before the baby. Abbas felt, for once, at home, included in a warmth and love that were only a faint memory. Something inside of him went out to the little form cuddled on the woman's lap. The baby's arms were circling in the air, as babies do. Briefly, one chubby hand from the manger touched the grubby hand of the boy from the hillside. Abbas felt a warmth flow through him, as if some unknown power bathed every part of his spindly body. It was but a moment and then was gone, but the memory would last a lifetime, though the shepherd boy did not then know that.

Abbas gradually came to himself and realized that his uncles were leaving. They had had more time than he with the baby and were now anxious about the flock on the hillside. Abbas stood up straight and reached for the lamb to help her on her way. They backed out of the doorway and turned to go. Only then did the lamed boy feel a difference in the lamb's motion; she was no longer limping. Looking closely, Abbas could see that her leg was no longer crooked, but straight and strong, or at least as strong as a lamb can be. Abbas took a few wondering steps and then stopped dead. For his own walking was different, too. He no longer limped. Looking down, he saw his once-withered leg as strong and as straight as the lamb he loved. Startled, he looked back into the stable, at the baby who had briefly touched him.

For once, someone had done something good for Abbas Barabbas.\* He was to remember that kindness the rest of his life.

The angels still sang of glory in the skies, though no one on earth heard them. The light of divine love still shone through day and night, though no mortal eye could see it. God lay still in the lap of a young peasant woman, though no one would recognize him. The adventure had just begun.

\*Luke 23.18-25