

The Angel's Tale

A dramatic reading

I have watched him since his birth.
Oh, I wasn't the one to tell Mary of his coming—
 that was a job for one more important than I.
But I was there, with the shepherds, singing "Gloria."
Our job is to be messengers,
 to deliver words from the Most High One, the Heavenly Father,
 especially when no mortal can hear them in any other way.
At such times we break through into their dimension,
 where we can be seen and heard, appearing much like one of them.
But such missions are rare,
 for the Heavenly Father prefers them to listen to his voice without our aid.
So in the meantime, we look and listen in on what is going on on earth,
 invisible and silent.

After his birth I continued to watch over him,
 ready to deliver God's messages at a moment's call.
We were not needed often, for those who raised him had done their job well.
Once, when he had gone out to the desert to fast and pray,
 we went and strengthened him.
We rejoiced when he was baptized and when he fed the multitudes,
and when the sick leapt up for joy at his merest touch.
We were glad that others heeded him,
for we knew he, too, had important messages from God.
Other angels who had watched him with me went on to other things.
But I stayed with the One I had known so long.

But then, after a few years in his public ministry,
 he began to talk strangely.
He spoke of being "handed over," of being put to death.
His disciples seemed not to notice what he said, or understand.
 I noticed important people who were troubled by his popularity.
Sometimes he mentioned "suffering" or even "being crucified."
 I had already watched over several crucifixions,
 mopping aching brows of the tortured victims, or moistening parched lips,
 for these are the sorts of things the Holy One wanted us to do, unknown.
 But the cross was a cruel punishment for thieves and insurrectionists,
 not mere prophets, and only the Romans could condemn them to it.
Still, the priests had their own ways of punishing those of whom they did not approve—
 public censures, barring from the synagogues,
 even dark cells where they kept those
 who had not yet seen things in their way.
A knot of anxiety began to form inside me whenever I heard them murmur
behind his back, or when he mentioned that he must "suffer" or "die."

My worry eased a bit when I saw how joyfully he was welcomed into Jerusalem.
But then I saw Judas go to the priests.
He offered to tell them where they could find Jesus alone,
and I saw them hand him thirty silver coins.
Fear knotted in my stomach.
I wanted to warn Jesus. He must escape this danger.
I listened hard to see how God would direct us to tell Jesus, to save him.
But no message came. And so I watched, and waited.

I watched him eat the Passover meal with his disciples.
Watched Judas slip away quietly.
Watched them rise and walk to the Garden of Gethsemane.
Listened as they began to sing a hymn.
But then, in the distance, I heard them.
The footsteps, the voice of Judas, the tromp of many sandals.
And then I heard another sound among them, more terrifying than them all—
the clank of Roman scabbards on Roman swords!

“GET OUT!” I wanted to scream at Jesus.
“RUN—run back to Galilee where they cannot find you.
Get away—and make off with your life!”
But the words froze in my throat,
for we can only speak those things that come from God.

And so I watched,
as they sat down on the stones in the garden, in its peaceful evening quiet.
I heard Jesus say, “Sit here a while and pray. I will go on a little farther.”
Somehow they seemed to sense his need to be alone, and he went on.
He found a stone, a largish one, and knelt down before it,
throwing his arms across it as if to rest, but then to pray.
He was there a long time, silent, eyes closed.
I saw his brow begin to sweat,
and he clasped and unclasped his hands as he began to softly moan.
And I heard him pray, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me . . .”

Then I heard again in the distance the sound of footsteps and Roman gear,
and suddenly I understood: HE KNEW . . .
He knew about the Romans, and the swords.
The trial he prayed would not come to them was his trial,
one he would face himself, alone.
He knew what they could do to him, what they had done to so many others.
He knew, and still he came, came here alone.

As he knelt there, sweat rolling down his forehead,
eyes closed, then open to heaven,
I scanned the heavens for some word from the Holy One . . .
surely there must be some message, some advice, something . . .
Then I heard it, clear and strong, the voice of the Father:
“Give him comfort, give him strength.”
I looked around, thinking there must be some messenger
more worthy than I to deliver it, but there was none.

With a single beat like a bird in flight, I was there,
there upon the stone next to him.
I circled an arm around his shoulder,
and when he stirred I cradled his aching, weeping head upon my lap.
There were no words.
But he knew my presence, and knew from whence I had come.

“Comfort,” I whispered.
“Peace,” I crooned as I stroked his sweating brow and matted hair.
Who would have thought that someday I would comfort him.
Perhaps I reminded him of the peaceful place from which we both had come,
And to which he would someday return.
For he seemed to find calm again.
He prayed again out loud, “Father, thy will be done.”
Then he rose and went to join the disciples.

By that time all could hear the cries of the crowd approaching,
and, well, you know what happened next.
They took him, ran him through some trumped up trial,
and took him out to nail him to the cross.
I had no duties there, for there were others to comfort him—
his mother, the women who followed him,
even a thief upon another cross.
I watched as they nailed him, as they strung him high,
and then, many painful hours later, as he called out and breathed his last.

When he was gone, there was a great quiet in the heavenly places,
a vast emptiness, a cavernous silence.
We knew he had come from us, and thought he would return to us.
But all there was was emptiness, as if all the lights in the world had gone out.

Gently they lifted his body down from the cross—Joseph, followed by the women.
They laid it in a nearby tomb, a chasm cut into the rock not as tall as you or I,
and rolled closed the stone disc that was its door.
All through the night and the next day, I watched them.
Dispirited, they lit the sabbath candles in their rented rooms.
The men, at loss for what to do, were yet cautious to venture out into the streets.
There were long minutes of silence.
And in between they replayed the events of the week over and over,
each wondering if they might have done something different
that somehow would have led to a different end.
No matter how many times they told the story, Jesus was still dead.
I wished I had something that would comfort them,
but I too could find no words to say.
The other angels
who had gathered round quietly as the whole horrid drama unfolded,
watched with me, equally mute in their grief.

Then, as the morning began to break for the coming day,
we began to feel a Presence around us.
The pall that had fallen over heaven began to lighten,
and we sensed a new life.
We stirred our sleepy wings.
And as the birds began to chirrup
and sleepy heads stirred on pillows below . . .
we slowly became sure.
“He’s alive!” we shouted one to another.
“He’s alive!”

At first we thought the Presence was among us,
but then we realized it was coming from the tomb below.
It began to glow, as with a golden light (for we can see things no mortal can),
until the light enveloped the stone, and the garden, and even us in all of heaven.
Just then we saw the women setting out with spices in the early morning mists.
Their eyes still bore the puffiness of many tears,
and we knew they came to anoint his body for its final burial.
“We must tell them!” I said to the others.
For a moment I was afraid they would bury him all over again.
“We must let them know!”
All about me nodded, but looked about—which one of us would go?

Suddenly, we all heard the voice, or rather felt it, loud and clear.
“Go. Tell them he is alive.”
And faces were pointed toward me as I felt the voice again.
“You go. You are the one.”

I needed no second clue.
In a burst of light, I broke through into their dimension—
and with a single push unlike any other, I rolled the massive stone away.
The women thought I was lightning, so brilliant was my shining.
But I was only concerned to look inside the tomb,
to free the one whose shining had given us such light.
To my great surprise, he was not there.
The tomb was empty—his body, dead or living, was not there.
Only the burial cloths, left folded so neatly in a pile—
the way I’d seen his mother fold his swaddling clothes
so long ago in Galilee.

I turned to see the women, timidly venturing nearer the tomb,
their grief and sadness now turned to shock and fear.
“He is not here!” I shouted. “He is alive!”

The women looked at me dumbfounded. I went on urgently,
“We felt his presence just this morning. He is alive. He is not here!”
The look on the women’s faces asked me blankly, “If not here, where?”
Then I looked at the clothes so neatly folded like in Galilee, and I knew.
“He has gone on to Galilee. Go, and tell the others who follow him.
Go and meet him in Galilee.”

With that I was gone, lifting high above their heads.
“Go,” I urged gently. “Go.”

In the next few weeks, we saw him many times.
At a meal. By the lakeshore. On the road to Emmaus.
I watched the shock and disbelief on his loved ones’ faces.
And how they slowly turned to joy.

Finally, a few weeks later, they all gathered on a mountain.
We watched silently, hidden in the grasses, as they made their last good-byes.
Jesus told them to go and make disciples,
to teach others what he had taught to them.
He promised that he would always be with them,
and would send them power from above.
Then, with one last round of hugs and handshakes,
he rose above them, or rather faded, into the sky.

In the distance, I could hear the heavenly beings cheering
as they welcomed him.
But I, I chose to stay and watch.
I wanted to see how THEY will become the messengers now.
How they will love and teach and feed and heal.
How they will use his power.
How they will tell others of all he has said.

I have watched them now for many generations, those that follow him.
Am watching still today.
I do not get called on often now to deliver messages,
for they have the message inside them.
But only now and again, when there is no other way.

Copyright © 2004 by Melanie Jones, pastor of Carlisle Church of the Brethren in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.