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December 3, 2017

Journey to Bethlehem, Part One

Each Sunday in Advent we will be following the story of Lydia and her younger sister Lucy and their new friend, the angel Gabriel. Imagine with me as Gabriel takes the girls through each door of the Advent calendar to make their way back to Bethlehem. Now they don't go straight to Bethlehem. They have some stops along the way through time. Here is the first part of their journey...

Lydia and Lucy nodded cautiously. "Then let's go," said Gabriel. They all went through the door in the calendar. In a flash they traveled thirty miles from Ft. Worth Texas, where they lived, to Dallas, where sometimes they went ice-skating at the big mall. On the way they passed by the old Dallas Cowboy's Stadium where the Dallas Cowboys were playing. But the quarterback was Troy Aikman not Dak Prescott. "Who's that quarterback?" Lydia asked, for she was a big Cowboys fan. Gabriel said, "He was their quarterback in the 1990's." Lydia and Lucy looked at each other. Their eyes grew big.

As they got to Dallas, they saw the headlines of the Dallas Morning News, huge headlines: President Kennedy Assassinated. They looked at the dates, and it said, Saturday, November 23, 1963. The people on the street looked shocked, some were

crying. Their clothes looked different, and the cars looked old and new all at the same time. Lydia and Lucy looked at each other, bewildered.

“What’s going on?” Lucy asked.

“The journey to Bethlehem is not only thousands of miles east from here to the Holy Land, it is also two thousand years back in time”, said Gabriel. “The closer we get to Bethlehem in miles, the farther back we go in time.”

“It’s like a time machine?” Lucy said excitedly.

“Yes, it’s kind of like that”, answered Gabriel, “but for us angels who live with God in eternity, there is no time, and from the eternity of heaven we can show up anytime, anyplace on earth. You can too if you stay with me.” He pointed to his feet: “I picked up these boots from a gunslinger named Billy the Kid on the way here.”

Lydia and Lucy looked at the angel’s feet and noticed the boots were on the wrong feet! But what’s right and left feet for an angel?

They moved across Texas and came to Little Rock, Arkansas. The streets were filled with soldiers, and people were very angry.

“What’s going on?” Lydia asked.

Gabriel answered, “The courts have just ruled that black children must be allowed to go to the same schools as white students. It’s 1957, and this is the first day black students

have gone to the high school with white students. White people are very upset, and President Eisenhower has called in army troops to make sure there is no violence.”

Lydia and Lucy did not understand. They went to school every day with black, Hispanic and Asian students. Why would people be so upset?

“Times have changed”, said Gabriel, reading their minds. “God is always working to change things for the better, changing things through people like you. Let’s go to New Orleans, Louisiana.” They did. It was 1960 and they saw a 6 year old black girl going to her first day in elementary school. As she goes there are two National Guardsmen by her side because she is surrounded by people full of hate saying terrible things to her and doing hateful things. The girl’s lips were moving as she walked through the crowd.

“What is she saying?” asked Lucy.

“Her name is Ruby Bridges. She is whispering a prayer, Jesus’ prayer on the cross when he was being executed: ‘Father forgive them for they know not what they do.’ Jesus taught us to love our enemies. That’s one way we change the world.”

Lydia then said, “We’d better get back home. Mom and Dad will be worried.”

The angel nodded, and before they knew it they were back in the attic holding the Advent calendar in their hands. Gabriel was just a picture behind the door marked December 1. When they scurried downstairs, they looked at the clock and discovered they had been gone just a few minutes. They were relieved.

“Did you find the Christmas boxes?” their Mother asked.

“Yes!” they answered, but didn’t tell her about the Advent Calendar.

The next morning was the first Sunday of Advent, the four week-long season of the church year which prepares us for the coming of Jesus Christ into the world as a baby in Bethlehem.

As Lydia and Lucy rode to church with their parents they were quieter than usual. They couldn’t stop thinking about their adventure with Gabriel the night before. Lucy began drawing a picture of Gabby on a piece of paper stuck in her Bible.

“Don’t forget the cowboy boots”, whispered Lydia as she looked at what Lucy was drawing.

In the worship service at church someone lit the first candle of Advent. It was called the Candle of Hope. It was purple to stand for *preparation*, turning your life around to welcome Jesus into the world.

They heard someone read from a prophet named Isaiah about a time when the wolf would lie down with the lamb. Cows and bears would feed together, and no one would be afraid. Then someone read from the gospels where Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news”. The minister spoke about prophets as people

who give us hope, hope for a better day when people will not kill or hate other people.

“That’s how God wants us to live today”, the preacher said, “as people of hope not hate.”

Lydia thought about yesterday’s journey and the assassination of President Kennedy and the time black and white children couldn’t go to school together.

“I went to be a prophet of hope”, she said to herself.

After church they went out to play. About 4 p.m. their mother called them to get ready for church. It was the annual Festival of the Greens Service. “Aw, do we have to?”, said Lucy, covered with mud from playing. “Yes”, said her mother, “but you will like it. There’s no sermon.”

When they got home Lydia and Lucy ran up to the attic and took one more look at the Advent calendar. They peeked again behind the door of December 1 and saw Gabriel, with his bright wings and cowboy boots. They wanted to open the door to December 2, but Gabriel had told them to open one door per day and tomorrow was December 2. They tucked it back into the chest and went downstairs. As they got ready for bed they could hardly wait until the next day’s journey to Bethlehem.

All day long at school Lydia and Lucy were thinking about the calendar. When school was out they raced home and up the stairs into the attic. They didn’t even stop for cookies, which mystified their mother. She had never seen them pass up a snack, or for that matter, seem so happy to be together.

They took the calendar out of the chest, put it between them and opened the door to December 2. Behind it they saw a small African American boy running down the aisle of a church.

Suddenly the picture grew larger. Gabriel appeared and motioned for them to enter it. They did and found themselves sitting in a big old church with Gabby beside them. It was the end of a revival service. The boy's sister had just started to go down the aisle to take the pastor's hand and tell the church she had decided to follow Jesus and wanted to be baptized. Her brother loved Jesus too, and he didn't want to get beat by his sister, so he ran down the aisle to get there first.

“Where are we?” asked Lucy.

“And *when* are we?” asked Lydia.

Gabriel said, “It's 1934. We're in Atlanta, Georgia, at a church called Ebenezer Baptist Church.” (The only “Ebenezer” Lydia knew about was Ebenezer Scrooge.) “The little boy's name is M.L.. He's only five years old, but one day he will become a great preacher and a great leader in America.”

“Come follow me, and you'll see”, said Gabriel. They came to a bus station in a place called Montgomery Alabama. A newspaper said it was December 1, 1955. A black woman was being arrested.

“Her name is Rosa Parks”, said Gabriel. “At that time black people had to sit at the back of bus, so that white people could sit up front. Rosa was asked to give up her seat in the middle of the bus and move to the back. She refused, and now they are taking her to jail.” Gabriel went on, “This is an important moment in history. Rosa Parks’ courage to say ‘no’ would begin a bus boycott where many black people in town refused to ride in public buses. Martin Luther King, Jr., who is the same person as the young boy, M.L., you saw in Atlanta, will be drafted into leadership. He will go on to be the great leader of the Civil Rights Movement in America. The movement helped change more laws which hurt black people. He will keep on until 1968 when he will be assassinated by a man who hated him. Prophets are often in danger because people don’t want to change”

Lydia said, “We study about him every year.”

“Yes”, said Gabriel. “God uses people like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks to shake thing up so that they can be more like what God wants. We call them prophets because they speak forth God’s truth. Prophets help God establish peace, and they know true peace cannot come unless things change for the better.”

“Let’s head back home” Gabriel said, and soon Lydia and Lucy were climbing back down the attic stairs.

“It’s almost time for supper!” their mother called. When they all sat down to eat, it was hard not to tell their mother and father about their adventure, but they decided to keep it a secret at least for awhile longer.

Later that night as they headed to bed they heard their dad watching Monday Night Football. His Dallas Cowboys were beating the Washington Redskins, and he looked very happy.

As they went into their bedrooms they almost wanted to spend the night in the same room so they could talk about all that was happening.

Lydia fell asleep wondering what was behind the next door. Lucy fell asleep wondering whether the angel with the cowboy boots had an old six-shooter under his robe.

Tuesday morning came bringing cold blustery weather. With their mother’s insistence, Lydia and Lucy put on their winter coats and hats and went off to school. After school they ran up the attic stairs, took out the calendar and opened the door to December 3. They saw a picture of a young woman packing her suitcase.

The door grew larger, Gabriel waved to them to follow, and in they went. They found themselves traveling north, through a town named Charlotte, then to a smaller town named Statesville. He sees a farmhouse.

It is March 28, 1970. The people are coming to the first service of new church called Grace Baptist Church. “New churches are always exciting”, Gabby said.

They passed on north to Virginia where they found themselves in the bedroom of the young woman they saw in the picture. She was packing her clothes in a suitcase with the initials C.D.M.

Gabriel whispered to them, “The initials stand for Charlotte Digs Moon. We know her as Lottie Moon. We’ve made it to Virginia, and it’s 1873. She’s on her way to China to be a missionary. She has a master’s degree in classics, very unusual for a woman of that time, and she’s turned down a marriage proposal from a famous theologian. China is where God is calling her and China comes first.”

Lucy looked at her. “Boy, she’s short”, she said.

“Four feet three inches tall”, answered Gabriel, “but God packed a lot of power into that small body. She spent the rest of her life among the Chinese people. She loved them, adopted Chinese dress and customs, learned their language and told them about the love of God and Jesus.

“When a famine struck P’ingtu, where she lived, she gave away her food to help others and she herself died of starvation. She could not bear being well fed when her people were starving. She died on Christmas Eve, 1912. She loved Jesus and loved them so much she was willing to give everything for them.”

Those words made Lucy and Lydia very still as they returned to their home. They had heard of missionaries and their church took a Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for missionaries, but they did not know missionaries could be heroes like that.

Lydia wondered about what God might call her to do and where God might call her to go.

What a journey they were on! As Lucy pulled her pajamas on, she put her next day's clothes next to her bed so it wouldn't take so long to get dressed in the morning. "Where would the next door lead them?" she wondered as she went to sleep.

To be continued...