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Journey to Bethlehem, Part Two

We continue the story of Lydia and Lucy and their new friend, the Angel Gabriel. The sisters discovered Gabriel when they opened an old chest in the attic and found an old Advent calendar. They opened the door to December 1 and out he came. Gabriel, or Gabby as his friends call him, had invited them to join him on a trip to Bethlehem, but they are making stops along the way. They have traveled from Ft. Worth, Texas to Virginia and from 2017 to Civil War times and have seen along the way people like Ruby Bridges, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Lottie Moon and Harriet Tubman. Imagine with me as Gabriel takes the girls through the doors of the magic Advent calendar back in time and closer to Bethlehem. Today we travel back to the 1700's.

Gabriel led them a few hundred miles north and a hundred years earlier to New Jersey where they see a man in a funny looking white suit.

“Who’s that?”, asked Lucy.

“His name is John Woolman. He’s a ‘Quaker.’”

“What’s a Quaker?” asked Lydia.

“A Quaker is a follower of God who loves peace and justice. Quakers believe that everybody has the light of God in them. Everybody. Quakers were the first religious group in America to oppose slavery and say it is morally wrong to own slaves.

“Why the funny looking suit?” asked Lydia, for she was beginning to be fashion conscious.

“John Woolman refused to wear clothes that were dyed with indigo dye because this dye was produced by slave labor. So he wore only clothes made of undyed cloth as a witness against slavery.

I think he looks really weird”, said Lucy. Lydia punched her in the ribs.

Gabriel said, “Woolman traveled to homes where Quakers lived all over the country. He convinced them that it was wrong to own slaves. Many Quakers released their slaves before laws were passed abolishing slavery. Some even paid “back pay” to slaves for the years of work they had done without pay. There were Quakers who even sold their homes to get the money to pay their slaves for all the years of unpaid labor. Sometimes God moves us to do very difficult and unpopular things because they are the right things to do”, said Gabriel.

The next day was Thursday, and when they opened the door to December 5, they saw a picture of an old ship. “Let’s go!” said Lucy. Soon Gabriel was leading

them to Boston Harbor where they saw people throwing big bundles off the ship into the water.

“It’s the Boston Tea Party”, said Gabriel.

“It doesn’t look like a tea party to me”, said Lucy.

“I’ve heard of that in school”, said Lydia.

“It’s now December 16, 1773, and those people are throwing all their cargo of tea overboard into the sea to protest the British tax on tea. Their slogan was ‘No Taxation without Representation’” said Gabriel.

“It’s the beginning of the Revolutionary War, where American will fight for their liberty. God made all people to be free. You can’t have peace without freedom.”

As they watched the tea go overboard Lucy yelled, “This is my kind of tea party!”, and she ran to board the ship, her pigtails flying in the air.

“Not so fast”, called Gabriel to her, “Let’s go back before I get you in trouble.”

When they got back home, Lucy asked her mother for a tea bag. She wondered about this strange request. When Lucy went to bed that night she imagined that her bed was the ship in Boston Harbor, and she threw the tea bag

over board into the water below. “No Taxation without Representation”, she exclaimed, then settled down to sleep.

The next day was Friday, December 6. Lucy went ahead of her sister who was in her bedroom talking to one of her girl friends on her cell phone. “She’s always talking on her phone”, Lucy muttered to herself, then wondered how old she would have to be to get her own cell phone. When she got to the attic she placed the Advent calendar in front of her, and opened the door to December 6. There was a picture of two men. One was dressed like the pictures she’d seen of Puritans at the first Thanksgiving. The other was an American Indian in full Indian dress.

They were not fighting, as Lucy expected, but signing some document on a desk.

The door grew larger, Gabriel motioned for her to come in, and in she went. Alone! She was so excited about the new adventure she forgot about her sister.

Lydia finally got off the phone with her friends and went up to the attic. She saw the Advent calendar, but no Lucy. Had Lucy gone on without her? Would she be scared? Lydia suddenly felt very protective of her little sister.

She then saw the picture of the two men behind the door to December 6. She then saw the door to December 7 partly opened. It was a picture of a woman

arguing with a preacher standing in the pulpit. This looked very interesting to her. She opened it all the way. Suddenly the picture grew larger and larger and she entered it all alone. For the first time Lucy and she were not together on the journey.

Meanwhile Gabriel was trying to figure out how to be with both Lucy and Lydia. He couldn't be two places at once—that was impossible even for an angel—but from eternity he could get from one place to another in an instant. He'd do his best to keep up with them both.

When Lucy entered the picture behind the December 6 door, she found herself in what is now Providence, Rhode Island. The year was 1636.

Gabriel ran to catch up with Lucy. The cowboy boots were beginning to hurt his feet. "Maybe they're on the wrong feet", he thought to himself.

"The man in the Puritan clothes is named Roger Williams", said Gabriel, catching his breath. "He's often called the first Baptist in America and the father of religious liberty. He is signing a contract with the Narragansett Indians to buy a piece of land. Most Puritans just took the land. He had been kicked out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, for his irregular preaching, and now he is starting a new colony where people will be free to worship God any way they wish, or free not to go to church at all."

“I like the sound of that”, said Lucy to herself, who did not always want to go to church and wondered what it would be like to be able to play all day long on Sunday.

Gabriel said, “Roger Williams believed that no one should be forced to go to church, or support any religion. He got in trouble preaching that message. He also got in trouble because he befriended the American Indians and protested the way they were being exploited by the English.”

Lucy listened. “Rhode Island, the colony he founded, became a place where people came who were being persecuted for religious reasons. There they would be safe. Jewish people came, and Quakers and Protestants and Catholics and Muslims. The first Baptist church in America was established there in Providence, Rhode Island, and the first Jewish synagogue in America. Roger Williams wanted to establish a place for what he called “soul liberty”. He named the colony he founded *Providence* and called it a shelter for persons ‘distressed of conscience’, people who had been persecuted for their beliefs. From that time Baptists became leaders in religious liberty. Later, the U.S. Constitution would provide for religious freedom.”

Soon they heard a stirring and saw Lydia following a group of people led by a strong determined looking woman.

“That woman is Anne Hutchinson”, said Gabriel to Lucy. “She is a lay-theologian and prophetess who has been banished like Roger Williams from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. She got in trouble for arguing with famous preachers and saying they were not preaching the truth from scripture. Roger Williams is going to help her set up her own community in Rhode Island.”

Anne Hutchinson was the woman Lydia had seen in the picture for December 7, and that’s where Lydia had gone: To follow her.

Lucy ran to join Lydia. She was so glad to see her, and Lydia was relieved to be back with her sister again. Gabriel was glad he didn’t have to keep up with them in two places at once.

When Lucy and Lydia returned home to the attic, they took a peep at the picture for December 8. They saw a skinny, wild looking man with a scraggly beard, and wearing animal skins.

“Tarzan!”, Lucy exclaimed.

“No”, said Lydia, “he’s too skinny”, then quickly shut the door before it began to grow. “We’ve got to wait until Sunday”, said Lydia.

When Sunday came, Lydia and Lucy woke up early before their parents and scampered up the stairs to the attic. They opened the door to December 8 and saw the wild looking man again. As the picture grew large, they stepped into it.

Gabriel joined them. They looked at the picture of the man. “That’s John the Baptist”, he said. Since today is Sunday, I’m giving you a peek ahead to the world when Jesus lived. John’s the one who baptized Jesus. He preached a message that people needed to repent, turn around, and be ready to meet the Messiah who was to come and in fact was here. Let’s listen to him.”

As they moved closer to him in the crowd, they heard John say

Prepare the way for the Lord

Repent and bear fruit

that befits repentance!

Someone in the crowd yelled out: “What then shall we do?” and John said,

If you have two coats and you see someone who has no coat, give him your coat. And if you have food and see someone who is hungry, give them some of your food.

Lydia punched Lucy in the ribs. “That’s why we sometimes bring food and clothes to church to give to the homeless. And that’s why we give extra money for

missions at Christmas. This year we're giving money to help hurricane victims in Puerto Rico."

Later in the service the minister prayed for the peace of Jerusalem and in the Middle East, and all over the world.

As Gabriel led them back home, Lydia asked, "What happened to John the Baptist?" Gabriel said, "John's preaching made the King mad and he chopped off his head.

Lucy's eyes grew large. "Boy, God's prophets sure have it rough" she said, and she remembered Martin Luther King's assassination.

"Yes", said Gabriel, "but if you love people, you are willing to do anything to help them. Jesus said 'Greater love has no one that this—to give their lives for a friend'"

Lydia thought about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King and Lottie Moon and Harriet Tubman. Lucy thought about John the Baptist's head rolling on the ground, blood squirting everywhere.

When they came down from the attic, their mom and dad were just getting up. They all got dressed, had breakfast and headed to church.

In the car Lydia saw her mom reading the Bible. “What are you reading, Mom?”

“About John the Baptist. Today we light the candle of Peace, and John is the one we are studying about in Sunday School this morning.

“Yea!” said Lucy, “prepare the way of the Lord!”

“Yes”, said Lydia. “If you have two coats and someone had no coat, give him one of yours.”

Their mom looked at their dad, surprised. He looked back. “Where did they learn that?!” he said to her.

Lydia and Lucy smiled. At church they saw someone light the second candle of Advent. It was the candle of Peace. They heard the words of the prophet Isaiah announcing a time when swords could be beat into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Lucy thought about Roger Williams signing the agreement with the Indians.

When the preacher preached on John the Baptist they knew whom he was talking about. They had seen him. The preacher said that the road to peace is love, helping others who have less than we do. The road to peace, he said, is doing away with unjust conditions like slavery and inequality.

When the time came for the offering Lydia and Lucy put some coins in to help the homeless in their community.

When they got home from church, their mother asked them how they knew so much about John the Baptist. Lydia answered, “Aw, Mom, we’re not *stupid*.” She did not tell her about the magic Advent calendar.

After lunch, Lucy scooted out to play. She invited Lydia to join him down at the creek. “Let’s baptize each other like John baptized Jesus!” Lydia looked horrified.

“Go baptize *yourself!*” she said.

When they got back to the house, they passed by the T.V. room. Their dad did not look peaceful at all. The Carolina Panthers were beating the Cowboys.

That night they participated in the Children’s Christmas pageant. Lydia was an angel, and Lucy was a sheep. Lucy was glad she would promote to being an angel in next year’s pageant. Later when they went to bed, they wondered where the next day’s door would take them. How close would they get to Bethlehem? When would they get to cross the Ocean?

To be continued...