

December 24, 2017

H. Stephen Shoemaker

Journey to Bethlehem Part 4

We're coming to the end of the story of Lydia and Lucy and their new friend Gabriel. After discovering Gabriel when they found an old Advent calendar, they've been traveling through time making their way to Bethlehem. Imagine with me as Gabriel takes the girls through the doors of the calendar back into time. Today we begin in Ireland in 432.

Gabriel led them to where the man they had seen and heard was speaking. Gabriel said, "He's teaching them about the Trinity, about how God is three and one all at the same time. He's using a three-leaf clover to illustrate the Trinity. It has three leaves, but they all grew from the same stem. The Irish call the three-leaf clover a shamrock, and it became the Irish national symbol.

"My Dad's Boston Celtics' t-shirt has a shamrock on it", said Lucy.

"Yes", said Gabriel, "and Celtics was the name of the ancient Irish people."

"What's the man's name?", asked Lydia.

“Patrick”, said Gabriel. “We call him St. Patrick today.”

“Oh yeah”, said Lydia, “and on St. Patrick’s Day everyone wears green.”

“But what about the boy on the pirate’s ship we saw on Saturday?” asked Lucy.

“He’s the same one teaching the Irish about God today. When he was sixteen years old Patrick lived in England. Some pirates kidnapped him, took him to Ireland and sold him into slavery to take care of pigs for a cruel master.

“For six years he was a slave. Then one day he heard God’s voice telling him to escape, and that there was boat waiting for him at the shore. Patrick escaped and found his way to the shore where he talked the boat’s captain into taking him aboard.

“He returned to England and soon heard God calling him to be a minister. One day he received a vision. In the vision Irish people were asking him to return to Ireland and tell them about Christ. He left his safe home to return as a missionary to the land where he’d been a slave as a boy. That’s pretty amazing, isn’t it.”

Lydia and Lucy nodded their heads.

“He was ordained as a missionary Bishop to Ireland, and off he went. He was forty-seven years old at the time—which shows that God is never through with us and can use us at any age. By the time Patrick died, almost thirty years later, all of Ireland was filled with Christians.

“Patrick loved the Irish people with God’s own love. They could tell. He was among the first of all history to speak out against slavery. I bet his years as a slave had something to do with that. He and his friends—like St. Bridget—set up schools, libraries and monasteries. No country had ever become Christian as fast as Ireland, and the reason was the courage and love of Patrick and his friends.

When Lucy and Lydia returned downstairs they were wearing green articles of clothing they found in the attic: Lydia, a green scarf and Lucy a green hat.

“Why are you dressed like that?” their mother asked when she saw them.

“For St. Patrick!” they answered beaming to their puzzled mom.

The next day was December 17. When they opened the door, they saw two pictures in one. On the left was a woman on her knees praying.

They were in Carthage now, on the northern coast of Africa. Gabriel joined them and said, “The young man you see is named Augustine, and he’s on his way to Rome. The year is 382. The woman you saw in the picture is his mother Monica. She is praying that God not let her son Augustine go to Italy. He was not a Christian and had lived a wild life as a youth. She was sure that if he went to the pagan capital, Rome, he’d never become a Christian.

“But God answered her prayer in a different way than she was asking. When Augustine got to Italy he heard a man in Milan named Ambrose preach, and he became a follower of Christ. Later he would become one of the greatest Christian thinkers of his, or any, time.”

Lydia thought hard about God answering our prayers but differently than we ask.

As they headed back home through Egypt they passed the pyramids and the Sphinx—only the Sphinx still had its nose.

The next day when they returned to the attic, they opened the door to December 18 and saw the famous Parthenon in Athens, Greece. The picture grew larger, Gabriel motioned them through. “We’re taking an excursion to the first century to a town in Greece named Philippi”, he said.

“The first great missionary in Christianity was a man named Paul the Apostle”, said Gabriel. “He started a church here in Philippi, and the first person who became a Christian there was a woman named Lydia.”

Lydia’s eyes opened wide as she heard the woman’s name.

“She was a wealthy business woman who sold expensive purple cloth. When she became a follower of Jesus she offered her home to be the first church in Philippi.”

Lydia and Lucy pondered this as they returned home

The next day, December 19, the new picture was of a Roman general beside a bridge, kneeling before a bright cross up in the sky. When they entered the picture, Gabriel said, “That’s the Emperor of the Roman Empire, Constantine. The date is 312 C.E., the sign in the sky will lead to his conversion, and he will make Christianity a legal religion. Christians will no longer be persecuted. Soon Christianity will be the official religion of the Roman Empire. His mother Helena will build a church on the spot where Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

“Wow, then Constantine was a hero for Christianity”, said Lydia.

“Yes”, answered Gabriel, “but there was a down side too. When Christianity becomes the official religion of a nation, then the church is expected to support everything a nation does. This can lead to trouble. Christianity must be our highest loyalty, greater even than the nation.

The next day was December 20. It was the last day of school before the holidays. They grabbed some warm cookies in the kitchen and ran upstairs to the attic. They opened the door in December 20. Behind it was a man in a big red robe and a pointy red hat. He had a white beard. Around his neck was a large cross and he had a bag in his hand.

This picture looked *real* interesting to Lucy and Lydia. As it grew large they ran through the door. They found themselves racing with Gabriel across Asia Minor—what is called Turkey today—for a seaside town called Myra.

“Who’s the guy in the red clothes?” asked Lucy, almost afraid to ask.

“His name is Nicolas and he’s the bishop of Myra. His red hat is a bishop’s hat.” It was night time, and they followed Nicolas at a distance ‘til they came to a small house. They saw Nicolas throw a bag of something through an open window and run away fast, or at least as fast as a large man in a big robe can run.

“What’s going on?” asked Lydia.

“The house belongs to a poor man with three daughters. The oldest is ready to be married, but she cannot because her father couldn’t afford a dowry.”

“What’s a dowry?” asked Lydia.

“The father of the bride had to be able to give the prospective husband a large amount of money in order for his daughter to be married—it was called a dowry.”

“This father is so poor he could not supply a dowry, and so his daughters will never be able to marry. Nicolas has heard of their plight, and he’s just thrown a bag of gold through the window. Tomorrow, when they wake up, everybody will be so happy.

“Nicolas had so much fun doing this that he began helping others in a similar ways. He discovered what Christ and Christmas were all about—giving gifts to others, especially those who could never repay you.

“Later the church made Bishop Nicolas, Saint Nicolas. “

Lydia looked at Lucy who looked back at Lydia. They knew what each other was thinking, but didn't say a word.

Lydia and Lucy grew more and more excited as they returned home. Christmas and Bethlehem were getting closer and closer.

The next day was Saturday December 21 and they went to the mall to shop. Lucy wanted to buy her mom some sweet smelling bath powder, but it cost \$19.95, and all she had left in her allowance was nine dollars. Her lip began to quiver; she was about to cry.

Lydia said, “I have some extra money. Let's buy it together for Mom.”

It was maybe the nicest thing her sister had ever done for her, and now her teary eyes brightened with a smile.

They then went back to the attic and opened the door to December 21. They saw a man on his knees, covering his eyes, and a bright light was shining from heaven.

When they entered the picture, Gabriel said, “We're in Syria now, outside a city named Damascus. It's now about 35 years after Jesus was born.

“The man’s name is Saul. He has been persecuting and killing followers of Jesus. But now Jesus is speaking to him from heaven, forgiving him and calling him to be his apostle. He now will be called Paul, Paul the Apostle.

“That’s amazing”, said Lydia, “That Jesus would call him to be an apostle after all he’d done.”

“It’s what Christians call *grace*”, said Gabriel. It means that God loves us no matter what. When we’ve done our worst, God does his best, which is love us and give us a new chance at life.

“From that day on Paul knew that Jesus had risen from the dead, and he discovered that Jesus lives not only in heaven, but lives also in *us*, if we let him. The first great miracle of Christmas is that Jesus was born into the world. The second great miracle is that Jesus can be born in us. Paul said so”, Gabriel said, his eyes so happy and sparkly.

The next day was Sunday. Lucy and Lydia got up early, went to the attic and opened the door to December 22. It was a picture of a man leading a donkey, and on the donkey was a woman who was very, very pregnant.

“It’s Mary!” exclaimed Lydia.

“And Joseph!” chimed in Lucy.

They entered the picture running. Gabriel could hardly keep up with them.

They followed Mary and Joseph to an inn and saw the innkeeper pointing to the shelter behind the inn where shepherds would keep their animals at night.

Lucy and Lydia's hearts began to race. They knew what was happening.

Gabriel said, "Let's get you back home so you won't miss church. He almost had to drag them.

When they got to church they saw that the fourth candle of Advent to be lit was the Love candle, and they heard again Luke's story about Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. Lydia knew almost every word by heart.

The next day was Monday. No school! Lydia and Lucy slept late, ate a quick breakfast then went up to the attic. They opened the door to December 23 and saw a picture of shepherds.

Lydia and Lucy followed Gabriel into the night. They heard an angel in the sky telling the shepherds about the good news coming to them that night, a savior who was a baby lying in a manger, in a shepherd's stable of all places.

They ran with the shepherds to find the child. The whole night sky suddenly vibrated with light—and with the sound of angels singing:

Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace
goodwill to all.

Lucy and Lydia wanted to keep going but Gabriel said, “You’ve got one more day.” So he led them back to the attic.

The next day was Christmas Eve. They went to church for the Christmas Eve service. The preacher spoke on the verse of scripture that said, “See what love the Father has given us—love as if from another country—that we should be called children of God; and indeed we are.” They sang Christmas carols, had communion, lit candles and sang Silent Night. It was all so beautiful.

When they got home they went to the attic and opened the door for December 24. The picture was of Mary, Joseph and the new baby. They entered the door. “Silent Night, Holy Night” Lydia thought to herself.

Then came the shepherds galumping in with their animals. So much for silence! But holiness was all around, and soon silence happened again as the shepherds bowed and kneeled before the child.

“This is the most beautiful night in the history of the world”, said Gabriel, and even he looked a little choked up.

“Let’s go”, whispered Gabriel, and back home they went. When they got home their Mom was hanging stockings of goodies on the mantel. Hot chocolate was warming on the stove. They went to Lucy’s room. They wrapped a present marked “To Jesus”. It was a pack of warm socks they had bought for people in the homeless shelter at Fifth Street. Then they went downstairs and put it under the tree. On this journey they had learned that to do things for others in need was to do things for Christ.

They could hardly get to sleep, their minds full of expectation about the next morning and all the presents—and with one more, last door to open in the Advent calendar.

The next morning they woke up early and went to awaken their parents.

When they all sat around the tree, they saw two presents which were not there the night before.

One was a present for their dad. “You go first, Dad”, said Lydia. When he opened the box he pulled out a pair of cowboy boots. They looked just like Gabriel’s. The note said, “Merry Christmas, from Gabby.”

“Who’s Gabby?” asked their dad. He tried them on, and they fit perfectly. He stood up and danced a little jig. They’d never seen him dance before, he being choreographically challenged.

There was a second package with their mom's name on it. When she opened it, inside was a beautiful purple scarf. When she tried it on Lydia thought her mom never looked so beautiful.

The note said, "From Lydia, across many miles and years."

"I wonder what that means", her mom said, looking at Lucy and Lydia. They just smiled big smiles.

When all the presents were opened, Lydia and Lucy returned to the attic.

Lucy said, "I love Dad's cowboy boots. They're just like Gabby's!"

"And Mom's scarf looks so beautiful on her. How did the Lydia of long ago get it to her?"

Lucy then saw another wrapped present. She said, "Where did this present come from? The card says to Lydia and Lucy. Let's open it."

When they did, they saw the Advent Calendar with the words, "To Lydia and Lucy for your memories forever", signed "G".

Lucy said, "Do you think it is from Gabby?" then looked around to see if he was around.

There was one more door to open, December 25. They opened it and looked at the picture for the day, but it was not a picture, it was a *mirror*.

Under the mirror was an inscription: Galatians 4:19. It was a Bible verse from Paul's letter to the Galatians.

“What does the verse say?” asked Lydia.

Gabriel appeared and read the verse “I am in travail, like a woman in childbirth until Christ is formed in you.”

Lydia repeated, “Till Christ is formed in you”, and looked at herself in the mirror.

“Till Christ is formed in you”, Lucy repeated, looking at herself in the mirror.

Gabriel said, “The first great miracle of Christmas is that Christ is born into the world. The second is that Christ is born in you.”

Lydia and Lucy looked at each other. “Let's go to Fifth Street and help with Christmas lunch”, said Lydia.

Lucy said, “Then we can go and visit our friends at the Gardens.”

Lydia then said, “What a journey!” And I think it is just the beginning.

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How Far is it to Bethlehem?

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When Mary and Joseph took for Bethlehem from Nazareth it was a three day journey on foot. Mary rode a donkey, but given her condition—great with child—it could not have been an easy trip.

How far had the three wise men traveled? From Persia, today's Iran, a three week journey on camels across desert sands.

If we travel to Bethlehem today we'll take a plane to Tel Aviv, 6,000 miles, then a car to Jerusalem, then four miles to Bethlehem across barbed wire walls, through the gates with armed soldiers, into the West Bank governed by the Palestinian Authority. No wonder churches around the world pray for the peace of Jerusalem at Christmas.

When you get to the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, built on the site where tradition says Jesus was born, you have to stoop to enter the front door; only children can enter upright. It seems right, doesn't it, that we must bow to enter? That we must become as a child.

You go downstairs under the chancel to a room 13x33 feet. On the floor there is a silver star marking the spot. Who would not want to kneel and touch it, even place your lips on it. The world needs a place to kneel. Here is one.

What is the meaning of this holy night and this holy place called Bethlehem?

In Phillips Brooks' famous carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" we hear words: "The hope and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

What is the hope of all the years? That we are not alone in the universe, that there is a God who knows us and cares. That such a God visits us, that we all will see God's human face and that it is the face of love.

Ancient myths hoped for a visitation of the gods or God, and now this myth-like hope has become real in the birth of Christ. C.S. Lewis calls the Jesus Story a "*true myth*". Answering the hope of people through all time, but now true, real, historically so.

W.H. Auden, in his Christmas Oratorio, "For the Time Being" has the chorus say:

We who must die demand a miracle.

How could the Eternal do a temporal act,

The Infinite become a finite fact?

Nothing can save us that is possible:

We who must die demand a miracle.

Tonight we witness *the* miracle, the Incarnation, God made flesh, the hope of all the years.

What about the *fears*? They are too many to name, but they are there in the dark streets of our minds, a wrecking ball to our peace of mind.

Anne Lamott says that some days our minds are like bad neighborhoods you don't want to enter alone. But we are not alone. God is with us. And as the carol sings:

But in the dark streets shineth an everlasting light.

In a children's book by the famous novelist Reynolds Price, *A Perfect Friend*, the elephant says to his friend Ben's mind:

Behind you is safe. All around you is safe. Be fearless now.

Do you know the most oft-repeated command in scripture? It's the angel's word to the shepherds: "Fear not."

The prophet says that God goes before us and is our "rear guard". Be fearless now.

Fear can dominate our lives, our communities, our politics, but the hope and fears of all the years are met in him tonight.

Here is another place of wonder for me tonight: That on this night God became small enough for us to love. Small enough for us to hold, to rock, to feel his tiny hand suddenly grip ours.

Perhaps this is where we begin to follow the Greatest Commandment: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy mind, heart, soul and strength.” There, with this child.

How far is it to Bethlehem? Six thousand miles by airplane and car, a week’s journey across the sands as the wise men, a three day’s journey as Mary and Joseph, across the hills, as the shepherds?

How about 16 inches? The distance between your head and your heart, sometimes the longest journey of all. But one you can travel in an instant, as the mind descends into the heart.

The carol sings these words:

How far is it to Bethlehem?

Not very far.

Shall we find a stable room

Lit by a star?

Can we see the little child

Is he within?

If we lift the wooden latch

May we go in?

If we touch his tiny hand

Will he awake?

Will he know we've come this far

Just for his sake?

His sake, and our own, and the world's where the hope and fears of all the years are met in
him tonight.