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Journey to Bethlehem, Part Three

We continue the story of Lydia and Lucy as they follow Gabriel through time back to Bethlehem. They found a magic Advent calendar in the attic. As they open each day's door, the door grows larger. They slip through the door and join Gabriel on their journey. Today they begin in England on a ship with William Tyndale on its way to Germany in the 1500's. Here we go.

Lucy, Lydia and Gabriel boarded the ship and set sail for Germany. They passed through a town called Cologne—where Tyndale's first translation of the Bible into English was printed. They saw a huge cathedral. Gabriel said to them: "It took over two hundred years to build that cathedral. The town wanted to build the most beautiful building they could imagine for God."

As they passed the massive front door of the cathedral Gabriel said, "If you look inside you can see a shrine holding the remains of the Three Wise Men who came to visit the Christ Child."

"What are *remains*?" asked Lucy.

"Their bones", said Gabriel. Lucy shuddered.

“You remember”, Gabriel went on,” they bought Jesus his first Christmas gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.”

“I know what gold is”, said Lydia, “but what are frankincense and myrrh?”

“They were expensive sweet smelling gifts like perfume and incense”, answered Gabriel.

Lucy thought, “What dumb gifts for a baby boy!” But then, she’d never changed a diaper. Lydia announced that it was time to return home, and soon Lydia and Lucy were sitting around the dinner table with their mom and dad.

“ I bet you don’t know where the Three Wise Men are buried”, Lydia announced. Her parents were stumped. “They are in a cathedral in a town called Cologne. It’s in Germany.

“I wonder if they buried some gold, frankincense and myrrh along with them?” Their mother wondered aloud.

“Of course”, their dad answered, “that’s why they named the town *Cologne!*” The rest of the family moaned and rolled their eyes. Their dad was always telling bad jokes.

The next day they opened the door to December 10 and saw a man nailing a large piece of paper to the door of a church. When they stepped inside they found themselves in a town named Wittenberg. It was now October 31, 1517.

Gabriel whispered to them, “The man’s name is Martin Luther, and the paper he is nailing to the door is called the Ninety-Five Theses. The document protested abuses in the church including the selling of forgiveness for money. This day marks the start of what will become the Protestant Reformation.

“A motto of the Reformation was *the church reformed and always being reformed*. The church in every age needs reformation as they recover what Jesus wants them to be and do. Sometimes the church loses sight of Jesus.

“Martin Luther also translated the Bible into the German language so that people could read the Bible for themselves. He also wrote a hymn named “*A Mighty Fortress is Our God*.”

“We sing that in church sometimes”, said Lydia.

“Yes”, answered Gabriel, “we learn a lot of our theology from hymns. Let’s head south; I want you to hear something.”

As they passed through a town named Leipzig they heard music coming from a church.

“That’s St. Thomas church, and inside playing some of his music is Johann Sebastian Bach, one of the world’s greatest composers. He wrote his music to God, the church and the world. At the top of every piece of music Bach wrote the initials SDG, which stood for Soli Deo Gloria, to God alone the glory. We still hear his music today.”

As they heard him play Lydia asked, “Why does music make me feel so happy?”

Gabriel replied, “One of God’s greatest gifts to us is joy, and one of the ways God helps us feel joy is through music. That’s why we sing ‘Joy to the World’ at Christmas.”

Lydia and Lucy thought of all the Christmas carols that brought them joy.

“What is joy?” asked Lydia.

“Joy”, said Gabriel “is a deep kind of happiness that is there no matter what *happens*, not just on birthdays and Christmas. It runs like an underground stream within us.”

“Joy”, said the angel “has produced many songs in Christianity. That’s why we have hymnbooks in church, not just Bibles. St. Augustine said that when we sing hymns we ‘pray twice’—with the words and with the music.”

When they returned home Lydia put on a CD of Christmas carols and sang along. They felt the joy Gabriel was talking about

The next day they opened the door to December 11 and saw a dark-featured woman dancing with castanets in her hands. She was wearing a nun’s clothes.

“That’s strange”, thought Lydia, “a dancing nun”. The picture grew larger and larger. Lydia and Lucy stepped through and found themselves in Spain, in a town called Avila.

Gabriel joined them and told them that her name was Teresa. She lived in the same century as Martin Luther, though a few years later.

Teresa also felt the church needed reform, and she began her reform with other nuns and monks. “Sometimes we forget what being a Christian is all about”, said Gabriel, “and one of the first things to go is joy.

“Teresa wanted to restore joy to God’s people. Once she prayed, ‘God, save us from sullen saints.’ She taught the nuns to dance with castanets on special holy days. Joy, she said, is as essential to holiness as faith and good works. Holiness and hilarity go together.

“Ole”, said Gabriel, and he began to dance round and round. Soon he was twirling so fast his bright wings were a blur. When he stopped Lydia looked at his cowboy boots, and now they were on the *right* feet. “Did he go so fast his boots changed feet?” Lydia wondered.

“Christianity is much too serious to be solemn” said Gabriel as he twirled one more time.

Lucy was getting bored with all the music and dancing business. She wanted some *action*, and told Gabriel so.

Gabriel said, “Wait ‘til tomorrow”, and he had a twinkle in his eye. Everything about Gabriel seemed to twinkle.

The next day was December 12, and when they opened the door they saw a soldier with gleaming white armor on a horse and carrying a banner.

Lucy could hardly wait for the picture to grow large enough to enter. When they did they found themselves in France. The year was 1429.

The soldier on the horse was leading some troops back from a successful battle. He got off his horse, took off his helmet, and when he did, Lydia and Lucy saw that he was a *she*! Lucy looked with amazement. A girl?!

Gabriel said, “Her name is Joan of Arc. She is seventeen years old. Since she was a little girl, God had spoken to her. Her people were being threatened by an enemy. She heard a Voice, God’s voice, telling her to lead their people to victory, and she did.”

“But there were some who said she was acting too much like a boy, and others said that God would never speak directly to a woman, only to a man.” Lydia’s eyes rolled. “So they said the voices she heard were from the devil, not God.”

“They put her on trial for being a heretic, a false believer, and a witch. They forced her to say that God had not spoken to her.

“Then the next day God gave her courage and she went back to the authorities and said, ‘I take back the statement I signed yesterday.’ Here is what she said:

It is I who have failed, not my voices. They have never deceived me. I signed that form because I was afraid... I have indeed perjured myself when I said God did not send me, for in truth, God did send me.

“Hurray for Joan”, said Lydia, and Lucy nodded her head.

“The next day she put her soldier’s clothes back on and the authorities convicted her of being a heretic and witch. They put her to death by burning on a stake.”

Then Lydia asked, “Are there any stories with *happy* endings?”

“Yes, said Gabriel, thousands and thousands. But in fact for Christians every story ends happily because our stories end in heaven which is the happiest place of all. A famous Christian, C.S. Lewis, said ‘Joy is the serious business of heaven.’ That’s the truth”, said Gabriel, who knew about heaven first hand, “Joy is our main job in heaven, and from heaven we try to spread it all over the earth.

“Tomorrow I’ll introduce you to one of the happiest persons who ever lived, and we’ll be all the way to Italy.”

The next day was December 13. When they opened the door in the Advent calendar, they saw a picture of a man in a plain brown robe, and there were animals all

around. Suddenly the picture grew larger and just as suddenly Lucy grabbed Lydia by the hand and pulled her through the door. Gabriel joined them outside of a town called Assisi. “We’re in Italy now”, said Gabriel “And the year is 1213. That man with all the animals is named Francis. He befriended all the animals and said God created us to be their friends. He protested cruelty to animals and told farmers to be kind to their animals and to give them extra treats on Christmas.”

Lydia began to think about what treats she would get her dog Harvey on Christmas.

“One day Francis preached a sermon to the birds, and they all listened. Often today we see statues of St. Francis with a bird on the shoulder. That’s why.”

“Tell me more”, said Lydia, who loved animals almost more than people.

Gabriel said, “Francis grew up in a wealthy home. He had everything he needed, clothes, money, everything.”

“One day he went off to fight in a war and was taken prisoner. While in prison he got sick, and when he got sick God began to change his life.”

“He saw some poor people and was struck by their poverty. Then he saw a leper and kissed his hand and his lips and felt the leper was Christ himself.”



“He put on a brown robe and began a ministry to the poor. Others followed him. He gave away all his wealth so he could help others. He heard Jesus say: ‘Rebuild my church’, and he and his followers have helped reform the church. Francis learned the truth of Christ and Christmas: You find your life by giving it away. True happiness is not in receiving but in giving.

“Francis loved Christmas. One Christmas Eve he went to a mountain and set up a life-sized manger scene with live animals and everything. At night people began to come from all over to see it. Through the forest, up the mountain with torches in their hands. It was so beautiful. Joy was everywhere. It was the first manger scene in history. People came and worshipped. It’s like our Christmas Eve services”, Gabriel said.

“Near the end of his life when he was very ill he wrote one of the most joyous songs of praise ever written: “All Creatures of our God and King”. In it he praised Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brother Wind and Sister Water. He even praised Sister Death, for he knew beyond death lay the joy of heaven.”

“Creation is filled with praise”, said Gabriel, “If we only open our eyes and ears”.

“Wow”, said Lydia, if Francis could write that when he was so sick, then joy can be with us always.”

“Yes”, said Gabriel. Jesus taught us to beware of sour-faced Christians. He promised to bring us joy that would be full”. Gabriel then quoted one of his favorite

poets: “Joy is not meant to be a crumb”, he said. “Whenever joy comes *give in to it*, for it is a gift.”

Lucy and Lydia returned home, and the next day was Saturday. They had Christmas gifts to buy, and they had so much fun buying presents for their mom and dad. Lucy took some of her allowance money so she could buy the presents she wanted for her dad: some golf balls and tees to put them on.

On Saturday they opened up December 14 and saw another picture: of a teenaged boy on a pirate ship—and standing next to him was Gabriel! Lucy’s eyes widened. The picture grew. Gabriel stepped through the picture into the attic.

“His name is Patrick, and he’s been taken by pirates from England to Ireland. I’ve got to go now and look out for him. I’ll tell you more about him next week.” And gone he was.

This was the shortest visit Gabriel had ever made with them, but they knew he had more to do than just be with them.

The next day was Sunday, December 15. They got up early and opened the picture. It was Gabriel again and he was talking to a young teenaged woman. The picture grew larger, and they saw Gabriel motioning them to come in, and they did.

When they drew near, they heard Gabriel saying to her, “Greetings O favored one of God. The Lord is with you, do not be afraid.” He turned and smiled at them.

Lydia whispered to Lucy, “I bet that’s Mary!”

Gabriel then said to the girl, “You have found favor with God, and you will conceive in your womb a child and will call him Jesus.”

“How can this be?” asked Mary, “Since I have no husband?”

“The Holy Spirit will cause it to be”, said Gabriel. “With God nothing is impossible.”

Then Lucy and Lydia heard Mary say, “Here I am, a servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.” And her face glowed with joy.

Gabriel whisked Lydia and Lucy away, back to the attic so they could start getting ready for church.

When they got to church, they discovered the candle to be lit was pink, and it was called the Joy candle.

“Why is it pink?” Lydia whispered to Lucy.

Lucy whispered back, “Because she hopes Jesus will be a girl!”

Lydia thought, “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

But Lucy thought, “Why couldn’t God come as a girl? Nothing is impossible with God.” The thought made her grin. “Is this what joy feels like?” she said to herself.

During the service, they heard the scripture read about Gabriel announcing the news to Mary. The minister talked about the courage of Mary to accept this astounding call from God. And they sang many Christmas carols and felt joy all over.

Lydia and Lucy looked at each other. They really did feel joy. Christmas was getting close—in more ways than one.

To be continued....