A Story Of The First Christmas

THISTLES' JOURNEY

By Jim Bradshaw

The little donkey's name was Thistles and he looked like his name. He was not very big, even for a donkey, and his gray coat was bristled and wire-like from his thin days of travel in the winter winds. Patches of white on his muzzle were testament to his age-there would not be many more journeys for him.

That is why the carpenter Joseph had been able to buy him so cheaply. And this is how Thistles came to be in a little stable carved from a hillside in the town of Bethlehem. His journey had been many, many years ago, at the time of the prophecy that was when Ahaz son of Jotham was king of Judah and was beset by enemies. The prophecy was this: "Hear this, House of David...the Lord himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

Thistles did not know about this prophecy, of course, nor of the one that had caused him to trudge weary miles from the town of Nazareth with Joseph and his new wife Mary to Bethlehem. But it had also been told: "And thou Bethlehem...out of thee shall come forth one that is to be the ruler in Israel, and his going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity." (Micah 5:2)

But Thistles had known, from the beginning, with that sure instinct that animals have, that the young woman he had carried on this journey was someone special, and that this trip was far from an ordinary pilgrimage.

Mary had learned it some months before, and found the news troubling and confusing. We have heard the story:

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And when the angel had come to her, she said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." Blessed art thou among women." When she had seen him she was troubled at his word, and kept pondering what manner of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God. And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb and shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he shall be king over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end."

But Mary said to the angel, "How can this happen, since I do not know man?"

And the angel answered and said, "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee; and therefore the Holy One of God shall be called the Son of God."

(And Mary said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word." And the angel departed from her.) (Luke 1:26-38)

These things had confused and troubled Joseph, too. He was a simple man who knew and loved him-craft-the feel of his tools in his calloused, work-hardened hands; the smell of the horse's breath as he molded a piece of wood; the smoothness of a finely planed board, the satisfaction of a snugly fit joint. These things he knew.

And he loved Mary; his quiet, gentle, bride-to-be.

But these events were hard for a simple carpenter to understand, no matter how patiently Mary tried to explain them.

Joseph knew that the old peddler who'd sold Thistles had made a shrewd bargain. And so did Mary.

She wasn't sure just what to say when Joseph had led the beast home. Looking at the glittering muzzle and the ribs all-too-evident on this thin frame, she finally said, "He does have gentle eyes, like you, dear Joseph. And he appears not to need a great deal to eat."

But, even with child, Mary was not too heavy. And Thistles was a bit stronger than he looked. He, like Mary and Joseph, grew weary as they trudged the crowded roads-but Thistles took special care not to prod the young mother who gently prodded him along. And, finally reaching Bethlehem, he was rewarded with shelter in this warm cave; with fresh, sweet hay to eat; and with a place at what even he knew to be a miracle.

It came to pass while they were there that the days for her to be delivered had been fulfilled. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger. (Luke 2:6-7)

It was Thistles' manger, but he didn't mind. Joseph had made certain that the old donkey had his own pile of hay. And, Thistles thought, the baby's comfort could be his gift to his new family.

And there were shepherds in the same district living in the fields and keeping watch over their flocks by night. And behold an angel of the Lord stood by them and the glory of God shone round about them, and they feared exceedingly.

And the angel said unto them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be to all people: For there has been born to you today in the town of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And you shall be a sign to you: You will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth among men of good will."

And it came to pass, when the angels had departed from them into the heavens, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." (Luke 2:15)

It was in that gray light just before daybreak that the shepherds arrived at the little stable. Joseph opened the door to their soft knock.

"Sir," the eldest shepherd said, "we have seen and heard wonderful things this night. Would this be the place where we might find a newborn infant?"

"It is," Joseph said. "Come in, quietly.

The newcomers edging toward the manger made Thistles nervous, but the sleeping babe never stirred as the men told of their visit by the heavenly choir. Joseph became as awe-struck as the shepherds as he listened to their tale. But Mary listened contentedly.

Mary kept in mind all these words, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen. (Luke 2:19-20)

There would be other visitors: Wise Men bringing gold and other gifts—and bringing a warning that the babe was being sought by those unfriendly to him.

Joseph would use a part of the gold to buy a finer beast to carry his wife and child quickly away from the danger.

But Joseph would travel with them, too, back to Nazareth, where he sometimes carried light loads of lumber for the carpenter Joseph, and where a toddler would learn to walk by hanging onto the donkey's ears.