

The Birth of Jesus

Dan Evans, December 2000

Have you ever considered the contrasts between the birth of children today and the birth of Christ? One of our secretaries, Claudia, brought her new son Sebastian into the office last week. He rode into town in a classy four-wheeled stroller with all the options: leaf springs, convertible top, padded dash and cup holders. Accessories, mostly acquired through baby showers, included pretty blankets, clothing, toys and Tupperware filled with food and drink.

Mary, Jesus' mother, was an unwed teenager perhaps about 14 years of age. It is doubtful that in the prevailing culture and religious climate of Israel at the time, that anyone hosted a baby shower for her. A pregnant, unmarried teenage girl was more apt to be stoned than honored. Mary would have been subject to condemning jeers on the street. She wasn't provided with prenatal care in a sterile clinic or exciting ultrasound images to share with friends and family. It's even possible that midwives in Mary's hometown would have refused to assist with the birth – had Mary been in town when it occurred.

When Jesus was born, Mary was out of town because a law compelled her and her fiancé Joe to make a 75 mile trip to the county seat to register for the census and pay taxes. The timing couldn't have been worse; a big camel convention was in town and Joe neglected to call ahead for reservations. At their destination the couple found every bed occupied and people sleeping in shifts. Joe was a successful carpenter, so he probably had a few extra coins in his pocket to lubricate the palms of local hotel managers, but it didn't matter. No amount of bribery can unlight the "no" in front of a neon "vacancy" sign.

Joe did, however, find one enterprising fellow who offered a bed of straw out back with his cattle and probably for half the price of a regular room. What a guy! And, no sheets to wash in the morning. It probably hadn't occurred to the owner to offer the stable as a room before. You can bet that after Joe and Mary departed expressing their gratefulness, the fellow made the stable a regular annex to his suite of rooms, promoting its rustic appeal and built-in nursery.

Shortly after they unpacked, Mary went into labor. All Joe knew about having babies was what he'd heard from storytellers: "boil water." A barn isn't the safest place to build a fire and if Joe forgot to make lodging reservations, he probably also forgot the Revereware. Joe knew nothing about breathing exercises or contractions. It's probable that young Mary hadn't witnessed a delivery, so how much did she understand? There wasn't even a cab driver to get help from.

The absence of training, coaching, video tapes, medical professionals, HMOs and open-backed hospital gowns didn't make any difference. Babies don't bother to ring the doorbell and wait for someone to greet them, they just kick the door open. The couple's son saw his first daylight in that musty stable. The first face Jesus saw could have been a cud-chewing milk cow; his first smells, the manure and dirt of the ground on which his mother gave birth. His first sounds may have been the bleating of a hungry goat, the hooting of an owl or the collapse of his fainting father. The bewildered and exhausted mother had no baby wipes for Jesus' first wipe-down and no fuzzy acrylic blanket to lay him on. All she had was a healthy supply of fear, an endless

supply of hope and the promise of an angel that there was, indeed, a rational purpose for this ordeal.

In the subsequent days, Joe regained his composure and Mary settled into a routine of feeding, cleaning and showing off her child to anyone Joe could drag down to the stable. The hotel manager probably gave them the stable's weekly rate, making an extended stay affordable. Local shepherds dropped by on the way to town to cash their paychecks. Joe probably did some odd carpentry jobs in the community to pay the rent and buy diapers and a toy rattle from a yard sale.

Do you wonder on occasion if your life has a rational purpose. Sometimes God allows me to be a craftsman, other times a tool and, most often, just one of the materials for a project He's making. When I'm cast in the role of craftsman, I find my efforts influenced by God. As a tool, I must often be sharpened and adjusted. When I'm one of the materials, I simply have to be compatible. I'm best used by God when I'm obedient, but He can manage around even that.