

JOE'S CHRISTMAS STORY

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I want to tell you a story about a man named Joe. I like to call this Joe's Christmas Story, because it happens at the same time as the first Christmas, a story we already know, about when Jesus was born. Joe was an older man, who had been married to the mother of his six children. Joe's wife had died, and now he was left with little James, his youngest son. Joe needed someone to take care of James because his daughters were grown up with children of their own.

Now Joe worked as a carpenter because he was really good with his hands. He could make just about anything out of wood. He made practical things like yokes and plows, and he made fun things like toys. If you gave Joe a long branch from a tree, he could make you the coolest staff out of it. He'd just whip out his knife and start whittling away until he had a nice firm staff, straight as could be.

Oh, you don't know what yokes are? Well, a yoke is what an ox wears over its shoulders. It is attached to the plow and so it can pull the plow through the fields.

Joe was a Jewish, like all the people in Nazareth where he lived. Joe was a good man and did his best to follow the rules of their faith, to pray when he was supposed to, to give money to the synagogue for care of the widows and orphans, and to follow the special diet their culture considered important.

After Joe's wife died, he enlisted the help of 12-year-old Mary, the daughter of Anna, to come take care of James. A couple of years later, when James was old enough to spend the summer with his sister's family, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. When Mary came back at the end of the summer, it was becoming obvious that she was going to have a baby of her own. Joe had been planning to take Mary as his wife as soon as she was old enough, which in their culture was 14½. And according to other rules of their faith, Mary was not supposed to have a baby until after they were married. So now Joe wasn't sure what to do. The religious law said he could break up with Mary, but Joe really did care for her and he didn't want to make her life miserable. When he went to sleep that night, Joe had a lot on his mind!

And wouldn't you know, as soon as Joe went to sleep, he was visited by an Angel. The Angel came by to tell Joe about God's big plan, because Joe had to play a really important part in the plan, and if Joe didn't do his part, the plan was not going to work out.

The angel said, "That baby Mary is going to have is God's baby, and God wants you to raise the child for Him. He wants you to be the flesh-and-blood dad of this really special kid

Mary is going to have. So go ahead and marry her!”

The angel took off, and Joe woke up and said, “Wow, that was a weird dream!”

Then Mary came to see Joe and told him an angel had visited her and said she was pregnant with God’s child. Like it was no big deal. And together they decided it wasn’t going to be a big deal. They would do whatever God needed them to do. They got married and set up housekeeping together in Joe’s house. His workshop was right there next to the kitchen, and he whittled away while Mary cooked and cleaned and spun and sewed, getting ready for the new baby who would be joining them soon.

And then, disaster! Word came that every man had to go back to the town where he had born, so that all the people could be counted. That was a lot of people. There were more than 400 right there Nazareth where they lived. Since Joe’s kids they had been born there, they got to stay and be counted at home. Joe, on the other hand, had to go back to Bethlehem, and Mary was going to have to go with him. It was 90 miles away and the baby was due any day.

It was a long hard walk that would take most people 4 days. But with Mary being so close to having the baby, Joe knew she was going to need to ride. Normally he would rent a donkey to carry their belongings so they could camp along the way, but Joe realized he was going to have to do the carrying so Mary could ride. And if Mary had the baby while they were gone, they would not be back to Nazareth for a while. That’s what happened, and then later they had to flee, so it was a good thing Joe bought a donkey.

Do you know what flee means? It means to run away from someone who is chasing you, but that’s later in the story, so you have to wait for that part.

Joe loaded up the donkey with their bedding and then set his wife on top. In his own pack he carried his tools and some food and the clothes Mary had made for the baby. Off they went. Joe kept their money safe in a pouch under his clothes, and they stopped every couple of miles so Mary could get down from the donkey and walk around. It was a long, slow journey that took them seven whole days.

They were both exhausted when they got there, and of course everyone else heading to Bethlehem had gotten there before them. By the time Joe and Mary showed up, there was no place to stay. Joe went from one house to the next looking for a room, but there was nothing. Finally, at the far end of town, an innkeeper saw that Mary was already in labor, and he felt sorry for them.

“Listen,” said the man. “I have no rooms, but out back in the barn there is an empty stall where the straw is clean, and at least you’ll be out of the wind and rain. Take your wife back there, and I’ll send my wife out to help her.”

So that’s what happened. Joe and Mary went into the barn and found the stall with clean straw, and they laid down their belongs. Joe spread out their bed, and Mary lay down and had

the baby. Her baby. Their baby. God's baby. And just like the angel had told him, Joe named the baby Jesus, and Mary wrapped him up in the clothes she had made and laid him down in the straw of the manger, the place where the sheep eat.

Then all kinds of crazy things began to happen. First a bunch of shepherds came to see the new baby. Joe thought that was kind of strange, but one of the shepherds said they'd been told by some angels that they should come. Well Joe and Mary had both been visited by angels, so they knew it was part of God's plan.

They stayed in that barn with their new baby for eight days, because their religion said they had to wait that long. Then they could take their son to the temple to be blessed by the priests. When they came back from the temple, three kings from foreign countries came to see the baby. They had followed a star to find the place where Jesus could be found. Each King brought an expensive gift. One king brought gold (which is a symbol of kingship on earth), another king brought frankincense (a kind of incense which symbolized that Jesus was from God), and one king brought myrrh (an embalming oil, which is a symbol of death). These gifts were important, because, like I told you earlier, Joe and his family were going to have to flee. He had to spend some of the gold and probably sold the other gifts.

You see, right after the kings left, Joe had another dream. That same angel came back and told Joe to hightail it out of there, to take his wife and son down to Egypt where they would be safe from Herod, the crazy king of Israel who wanted to kill Jesus. Herod thought Jesus was going to steal his throne. In fact, Herod was so crazy, he made his soldiers kill all the boy children they could find who were under 2 years old. So it was a good thing Joe took Mary and Jesus and got away.

Joe did everything he could to protect that baby boy. He was a good dad, and one of the things Joe did was to become homeless at the worst possible time. Joe became homeless while his wife was having a baby, and while their country was having a crazy war against boy babies. Joe and Mary and Jesus became refugees in Egypt. They lived in a country that was not their own, experiencing a different culture, eating unfamiliar food, needing to find people who spoke the Hebrew language so they could learn Egyptian and speak with their neighbors.

We don't know exactly how long Joe and his family lived in Egypt, but when the mean king Herod died, Joe had a third dream. This time the angel told Joe to take his family back to Israel. They headed back to where they had lived before, where Joe's older kids were living, but then came a fourth dream and the angel told Joe to go to a different part of Nazareth. The angel didn't want the new king to find them either, since it turned out that Herod's son wanted to kill Jesus too.

So did you know that Jesus and his parents were homeless? Did you know that they were refugees when Jesus was a little boy? That's pretty interesting, isn't it? It's almost as interesting

as Joe's four dreams. It's really amazing that Joe saw the angel four different times. Most people don't see angels at all. I imagine Joe got to know that Angel pretty well. And he trusted the angel to guide him along the way, first to Bethlehem to take part in the first Christmas, and then to Egypt where they lived for a few years. And finally he trusted the angel when it was time to go home.

Joe's first Christmas was the very first Christmas we know about. I wonder what Joe was thinking about every Christmas after that, when it was time to celebrate his little boy's birthday. Every year he would watch Jesus grow bigger and stronger and learn new things. Joe already had six other kids, but he knew Jesus was special, and kept his promise to God to be a good dad.

You know, there are a lot of people like Joe and Mary and Jesus in the world today, people fleeing from wars in their home countries. They go to other countries to be safe, and they often become homeless refugees. When we celebrate Jesus' birthday at Christmas, let's remember that when Jesus was born, his parents were homeless too. While we are opening our presents and eating special meals at Christmas, let's remember the people who are homeless or refugees in our own town.

Not everyone is as lucky as we are, but we pray everyone who needs help will find it. Not everyone will be like Joe and get help from an Angel who brings messages, or from Kings who brings gifts, but when we pray for them and share our food with them, we are doing our part.

By living our own faith, we help other people know the God who brought Jesus into the world for us all.