

CHRISTMAS PROGRAM
Hillview Church, 21 December 2002
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Silent Night

THE ANGEL

My whole being was vibrating with the heady importance of our mission. I knew my part so well as we had practiced in the heavenly courts, so that our harmonies and expression were perfection, but as we neared the focus of our song, I marvelled at God's plan of whole hearted love for this darkened planet.

There on a quiet hillside were the sheep with their shepherds. Closer, closer we flew through the cool night air, till we were above them. Right on time, according to heaven's plan, we burst into glorious praise: "Glory to God in the highest," and then God's desire for sinful humans, "Peace on earth and goodwill to all men." How honoured I felt to be part of this special announcement.

Yes, heaven and earth were irrevocably united that night when baby Jesus was born in Bethlehem's manger.

I wanted to sing the anthem again and again so that all men would be touched, changed, saved, and live forever with me in the glorious courts of heaven and worship our awesome God in His majesty.

Beautiful words – wonderful words: "Glory to God in the highest," because Jesus has come to earth. "Good will to all men," because the Son of God lies in infant innocence, ready to commence His life-giving mission right on time by God's clock, in God's plan.

And then we had to leave the skies above the Bethlehem hills to their darkness, and return to glory. Our part was done for the time being, but my heart's desire is to return with glory, majesty and trumpet blasts at the second coming of Jesus. How I long for that!

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It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

THE SHEPHERDS

(Clutching each other and shielding their faces with their hands.)

Shem: Unbelievable! Are they gone?

David: I think we can look now. The dazzling light is fading.

Shem: Hey, look! The angels are returning to heaven.

Caleb: What an amazing sight! How come we lowly shepherds were privileged to see and hear such a thing?

David: I don't know. I really don't know, but it was super, spectacular, inspiring, um...

Caleb: Okay, David, we know you like words, but I doubt if there are any suitable words to properly describe this experience.

Shem: I'll never understand why the angel chorus didn't give their thrilling announcement in Jerusalem. I mean, that's where all the heavies live and we're...we're just about the least important people in the country, way out on these uninhabited hills.

David: I can't answer that question any more than you, Shem, but I'm sure glad I came on duty tonight. I bet it will be the most remarkable experience of my life.

Caleb: The bright glory of those angels seems to be imaging on my eyes even now. Weren't they absolutely magnificent?

David: And the music! I've never imagined such harmonies.

Shem: Yes, well, I agree with you, but for me it was the words that they sang that make me feel that the Messiah has been born in Bethlehem and we must go to worship Him.

Caleb: And leave the sheep? We'll get the sack!

David: Too bad about that. The Messiah is far more important. Look...

Shem: You don't have to find lots of big words, David, to impress me. I agree with you. Surely Jehovah will care for our sheep for a couple of hours on the hills. After all, He shut the mouths of lions for David, so He can care for our flocks while we go to adore the new born Messiah.

Caleb: Yes! Let's go. This is the most eventful moment in the history of the world since it was created.

David: Okay, you've persuaded me. It's just that I'm wondering...

Shem: Oh, no! What now, you speaker of big words?

David: I don't mind your teasing, but I wonder whether Isaiah's prophecy has anything to do with us getting the honour of the angels' visit.

Caleb: We're listening, David.

David: Well, you know where the prophet talks about the Messiah being led as a lamb to the slaughter and...

Shem: Hey, that's deep – and interesting.

Caleb: And what about the sacrificial lamb in the sanctuary?

David: Hey! That's fantastic – Jesus, the Lamb. Sounds good for a new born baby with all the potential of heaven.

Shem: Now you're losing us again, David.

Caleb: Let's go, men. To the Messiah. We will find Him, bow down and worship Him this very night.

(They go off arm in arm.)

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We Three Kings of Orient Are

THE WISE MEN

Cold by night and hot by day.
A star to guide; a heart to pray.
The wise and holy books a clue
That opened a fantastic view.

If God almighty was to come
We'd have to study, think and sum
Up all the evidence at hand
Though living in a foreign land.

We wise men pondered hard and long,
From earliest bell to evening gong.
Conviction grew and grew until
We saw the shining star so still.

Then as it seemed to move so slow
We saddled up and had to go.
Packed were our gifts of precious things
To offer to the King of Kings.

We were sandblasted by the hour
As desert winds whipped up their power,
But every night the star was there
All beautiful and sparkling fair.

It was a supernatural guide
That glided on whate'er betide,
And we, excited as a child,
Eagerly followed it each mile.

We felt adventurers into space
Not knowing of the time and place
That we at last would come to rest
And view the universe's best.

But when at last we asked the way,
King Herod sought our long delay,
So we just followed that bright star
That led us safely from afar.

Imagine our delight, surprise,

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When it led us to a baby's cries.
Messiah, Saviour of all men
Lay in a crib in Bethlehem.

We knocked, and entered in, and knelt.
The awe of God we keenly felt.
How honoured were our eyes to see
In Jesus, heaven's Majesty.

We gladly offered gifts to him.
Though costly, they seemed very thin.
We marvelled at how God had led
Us to this infant's humble bed.

I've never ceased to think of this –
It's changed my mind, my life's focus.
I pray that it will change you too.
The Christ child came for me and you.

So seek Him every day and night;
Give it your energy and might;
Take gifts to thank Him, praise to say
That you accept Him every day.

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ANNA, THE PROPHETESS

Did you people in the temple just see that? I can hardly believe that I did. My eyes are old and my sight not too clear these day, but I know without a shadow of doubt that it was He!

Oh, as a prophetess in Israel in these times of indifference, pharisaic pride and pomposity when the Roman grip is strong upon our people, God has given us a great gift of hope.

This day is the Scripture fulfilled for us. “When the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son; made of a woman; made under the law.” Oh, how my old heart thrilled as I held that darling little baby boy whose parents had brought Him to be dedicated to the Lord. As I looked into His tiny face and His chubby fist held my finger, I knew I was looking into the face of the Messiah! How honoured I am, Anna, and old prophetess, to hold the God-child in my arms!

How fervently I prayed for His life on earth. I couldn't help but wonder where His feet would walk, what His hands would do and what His lips would speak. Only time will answer those questions, but I do know that He will be fulfilling the Divine plan in God's time and in God's purpose for all of us on this earth.

Doesn't that excite you? Doesn't that bring forth an automatic response from your heart? I'm sure it does. I'm very sure of mind. Now I can die in peace. My hope is confirmed and I shall praise Jehovah every moment of every day.

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Away In A Manger

MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS

From the day the angel told me I was chosen to give birth to the Saviour of the world, my life has been full of prayerful commitment to God's will. After all, I am only a peasant girl of no notable family. I have felt keenly the responsibility of my role as the mother of the Son of God and have always known that I am just heaven's handmaid.

But what a joy it has been, from the moment I first held baby Jesus in my arms and touched his soft little cheek with my finger. I have always held a special pride and joy and wonder in my heart for this unique child. His goodness and wisdom have amazed me as when he was twelve and discussing deep matters with the priests in the temple.

Having Jesus live in our humble home, has literally brought heaven down to earth for Joseph and myself. What mother hasn't longed for a son who does not need parental discipline, but who has developed strong self-discipline?

And then, after years of working in the carpenter's shop, Jesus left us to fulfil His real mission in the world. I believed in His special powers, so asked Him to provide wine for that wedding feast three years ago – and He did. It certainly boosted my faith and opened the eyes of everyone else there.

Since then, he has performed so many miracles, touched so many lives for good by His teaching, His example, and His loving care. How I have hid these many wonderful things in my heart.

Heaven has so far protected Him from His enemies, but since the palm branches were laid at His feet and He was hailed as a conquering hero, I know His enemies are out to get Him. My mother's heart quails at what is to come. The Jewish leaders will not be satisfied with anything less than His death as He is a threat to their position and pride.

As I have thought of the prophecies, it seems inevitable that He will be killed. Their scheming knows no bounds at present.

Oh, my son, God's wonderful Son, I am helpless to protect you from this evil but I am confident that your heavenly Father will be with you as His great cosmic plan unfolds.

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I Come To The Garden Alone

NICODEMUS

As a Pharisee, I had heard both the rumours and reports of Jesus' birth in the backwater of Bethlehem and then His growing up years in Nazareth. I ask you quite bluntly: What good could possibly come out of Nazareth?

Then there was that Passover season that placed a marker in my mind for I saw and heard the twelve year old Jesus discussing Scripture and theology in the temple with the priests. Even then there was something about his clear-eyed earnestness and zeal that I found drew me to Him. But of course I had to keep my distance because of my position.

Things seemed very quiet for years as Jesus worked with Joseph in the carpenter's shop building excellent furniture whose craftsmanship displayed care and precision.

Then all of a sudden, there were tales of John baptising Him, accompanied by a dove from above and apparently the voice of God proclaiming, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." That certainly caused a stir among the Jewish leaders! I held back my comments, determined to learn more. And more there was – a string of reports on miracles, kindnesses, wise words, forgiving of sins, and a bunch of disciples who were attached to Him wherever He went up and down the land.

As His popularity grew with thousands of the ordinary people, the priests and Pharisees became more agitated for they felt threatened and confronted by His gospel.

One night, determined to speak to Him alone, and hidden by darkness, I sought Him out in a quiet place. There He read my heart and mind and preached a powerful sermon of my personal need for new spiritual life and how this could happen for me. His metaphors of being born again, and the power of the Spirit of God moving to change my attitudes have filled my mind ever since. Unfortunately I was too timorous to do anything much about it publically although I did carefully raise questions about the advisability of forcefully ending Jesus' ministry when it came up in Council Meetings.

You must understand that when I saw Lazarus raised from the dead, I was certain that Jesus' supernatural power was that of the great Jehovah. At that time the priests and rulers were really divided about Jesus, with a minority secretly accepting Him and His mission.

Imagine my distress when I learned of His crucifixion and saw with horror the veil in the temple torn in two. And yet this was another irrevocable sign that the Messiah had come and died to save all mankind, I remembered His words, "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men to me." Joseph of Aramathea and I took His body for burial as Sabbath approached. As we tenderly laid Him in Joseph's private tomb, we wondered about the rumour that He would rise again in three days.

If we really believed on Him, then that was what we could expect. It was a strange Sabbath for me – waiting, anticipating, sorrowing, yet excitedly longing for the first day of the week. That had my people, the chosen people of God, done to the Son of God?

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If He rose from the dead, I would pledge myself publically to be His follower.

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My Tribute

PETER

I was just a poor fisherman when Jesus called me to be His disciple. Everyone knew me, Peter they called the petulant, who spoke his mind about everything, so it was a wonder I followed Him. But really I had no choice as His innate goodness drew me to Him. He was as refined as I was rough. He was gentle, yet firm. He spoke words that ignited fires in my soul as I yearned for more, and to be like Him.

I know you will laugh at me a bit, but I am a man who likes adventure. I'll always remember the day we saw Him walking on the water. Of course I wanted to do it too and Jesus graciously provided the power for me to do just that. It was so fantastic, that I started to look at the others, play the audience, but as soon as I took my eyes off Jesus I fell in big time. I suppose I should have learned from that experience. But Jesus knew my faults and accepted me just the same. He even worked to heal my mother-in-law, and took me with Him on the Mount of Transfiguration, and so many other times so that I could begin to understand His mission better.

I remember declaring myself as His ardent supporter one day. He actually prayed a special prayer for me when He said, "Satan has desired to have you but I have prayed for you that your faith will not fail." How well He knew me! When He was being tried before His death, I totally lost it and even swore that I did not know Him. Even so, as He was moved from one place to another, our eyes met, and His spoke such love and compassion for me that my heart broke.

Oh, yes, earlier when they came for Him in the garden, in all my bravado, I cut off the high priest's servant's ear. I'd show them! But He showed them what He was really like by healing it. I felt like a clod.

Let me skip things a bit now because I want you to know that when He rose from the dead, He especially wanted me to know. "Tell Peter," He said. What a thrill! He didn't wipe me off His list and out of His heart and plan. He still wants me to be His friend and His minister. I remember He told me to feed His sheep. I'm certainly going to do that till He comes again, for when I saw Him rise into the heavens, I seemed to have a clear insight into who I am in Him – not confidence in myself anymore.

How can I ever thank Him enough? He's done so much for me – and for you. I personally can't wait till He comes again as we saw Him go into heaven. Blessed be the name of the Lord! Amen and amen.

My Tribute

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Poem before prayer -

MY CHRISTMAS GIFT

I don't have frankincense or gold,
Or myrrh or something rich and old.
I can't be sure I have today
To work, and sing, and praise, and pray.

I know I'm not worth much at all.
No matter what I do, I fall.
My very strengths are what you give
To help me every day I live.

So what of value can I offer
When everything I am and proffer
Is nothing when compared to you,
And all you have, and are, and do?

All that I am, Lord, please accept,
For it is all that I have left;
And make my gift a glorious thing
Fit for the universes' King.

Make my life fragrant as the myrrh.
This is what I, Lord, would prefer.
Make me like frankincense and gold;
Please let your plan in me unfold.

I am your Christmas gift today.
Accept and treasure me, I pray. Amen.