

12-4-1998

In the Fullness of Time

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Recommended Citation

Granade, S. Ray, "In the Fullness of Time" (1998). *Creative Works*. 29.
https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/creative_work/29

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IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME

12/4/98

It came in the fullness of time, when everything was ready, but I can't help wondering how Mary felt about the fullness of time. She had been given a choice by God, and she had said, in words echoed years later by her Son, "Thy will be done." Nine months is a long time to be pregnant, and the newness wears off and the excitement fades. Morning sickness confirms that physical changes are taking place. Initial elation over the offer of special status, over her acceptance, and over what must have been Joseph's kind words had given way to the routine of daily life. She had spent her first trimester with her cousin, Elizabeth, before returning home to live in the small village of Nazareth with her body giving increasing evidence of her special status. Her neighbors couldn't have understood her condition or Joseph's staunch support. She couldn't have told them of her conversation with the angel; they would have stoned her for blasphemy. Imagine this child saying that God had chosen HER as His handmaiden, chosen HER to bear and mother the Messiah!

Then, in the fullness of time, Mary reached "the waddling stage" toward the end of pregnancy. The discomfort of her swollen abdomen and the pressure on stomach and bladder and ankles that made her days physically miserable had reached their height. Then came word from the government—time for a trip! Time to go south to Bethlehem, the city of bread. Time for the untraveled teenager to take the first trip of her life. Would there have been any anticipation, any excitement, in the prospect? Or would Mary have asked with dread, "How many miles to Bethlehem?"

Mary would have to journey about seventy-five miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem if they took the most direct route. That route led through Samaria, along the western slope of the mountain spine of Palestine, then up to the crest through Bethel and Ramah to Jerusalem, then over the hump to Bethlehem. The alternative would have been to descend from Nazareth south to the Plain of Esdraelon, then east to cross the Jordan and follow its eastern shore before recrossing and going up from Jericho to Bethany and Jerusalem and Bethlehem. That route, more honorable for devout Jews, added almost twenty miles—another day—to the trip in addition to the well-known danger from thieves along the steep road between Jericho and Jerusalem. Would Mary have asked Joseph to take the more direct route? Would he have taken it even without her request? Was there something of that original journey to Bethlehem through Jerusalem in Jesus's route as He went to His crucifixion?

Either way, Mary would have ridden her donkey most of the way. She would have sat upon its back as it picked its way along the track. She would have endured its plodding and its temper as the only alternative to walking the route herself. She and her unborn Child would have ridden into Jerusalem as He would ride in alone so many years later. Fully pregnant, in the fullness of time, she would have jostled along the track and through the towns and into Bethlehem.

Think of the young girl, made a woman by God and by circumstance, leaving her mother and the midwives she knew at what would ordinarily have been the time of her confinement to journey with her husband to a strange place. They would have spent several nights on the road, sleeping where kindness or money found them a place among strangers. And here she found herself, in

the City of David—a proud nickname for a small gathering of adobe buildings on the dry side of the mountain's crest, on the way from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea. Joseph probably led the donkey carrying Mary into Bethlehem as evening approached, faced with the necessity of securing lodging. Bethlehem's housing would have been strained to capacity by the influx of people whose mood would not have been improved by the knowledge that they were not there on holiday, but because a government they hated required their presence.

The donkey is tired, Joseph is tired, Mary is tired. The trip has taken its toll on all. Joseph begins the task of finding lodging. He asks, to no avail. Think how Mary must feel as she watches Joseph, her only hope, try unsuccessfully again and again to find lodging. Would she have felt abandoned by a God who allowed her to face a trip like this and an ending like this? Mary sits on the drooping donkey as Joseph approaches his last chance. The innkeeper's house is full, the day has been long, the guests are rowdy. The man who asks has nothing to recommend him, and the innkeeper says they are full. As he starts to shut the door against the gathering dark and chill, he sees the tired donkey bearing a very pregnant woman. He hesitates. "I've nothing inside," he says, "but you're welcome to stay in the cave in back with the animals. It's dry and out of the wind and the animals will make it warmer than outside." Gratefully, Joseph accepts.

Surely Mary would have been grateful for the place to rest. Surely she would have been glad that Joseph was able to find someplace out of the way. Surely she preferred the company of Joseph and the animals to the company of strangers, especially as the night wore on.

For as the night wore on, and the fullness of time arrived, she faced the unthinkable. She faced delivering her first child alone, aided not by her mother or a familiar midwife, but by Joseph—a man and a carpenter, who would not even have had the experience of helping an animal give birth. She delivered this promised Child without the privacy she had seen afforded women in Nazareth. She delivered the Child as an animal before an audience of animals. And when it was all over, when the Child had been born, He lay in a feed trough!

How different it all would have been from what Mary would have dreamt. The pregnancy, the trip, the delivery, the nursery—Mary could have imagined none of it. Nor would she have imagined that the courtiers who would visit the new King would be lowly shepherds, summoned from the adjacent hillsides by angels. None of it would have been as she had imagined, but she “treasured up all these things.” Scripture also tells us that she “pondered them in her heart.” How often through the years would she have taken out the well-worn memories? Would she have told Jesus about all that, as we repetitiously recount family stories? And when the end came, when her Son made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem shortly before His death, would she have had the sense of having seen it all before?

I can't escape Mary's haunting story. Although it took a while, I finally figured out why it haunted me so. Through everything, Mary found herself totally outside the expected. Nothing was as she would have imagined, which made it even more memorable. She could have found herself so totally put out by all the inconveniences caused by this child. She could have said “This is more than I bargained for when I agreed” and wanted out. She could have railed against it all. But when He was

born, when she held this selfish bundle of needs (without these characteristics, Jesus obviously wouldn't have been totally human), she responded with unconditional love. Mary's response was her Son's earthly introduction to God's unconditional love. And for Mary to model such love for her Son after what she had been through in the previous week embodies, in the truest senses of the phrase, the Christmas miracle.

Ray Granada