

3AD

## MARY'S STORY

A Novel

Copyright © 2003 by Billie Matejka

The members of MOBS (Midnight Oil Burners), helped tremendously, reading this manuscript numerous times, giving advice.

I'd especially like to thank Jane Osinski, who never stopped encouraging and pushing me to finish. To Deanna Durbin, my thanks for asking questions so I'd have to do additional research. To Peggy Weagraff who never seemed to tire of reading and editing.

To Mary Shaw, whom I met at MOBS, and who later began The Christian Writers' Club. So many people from this club helped tremendously by encouraging every step of the way. Mary Beasley, who edited the book. Barbara Pugh, who has read and reread the completed work, keeping errors to a minimum.

To Liesl Hynes, who spent so much time, talent and energy into making the cover a work of art.

To Tom Hendricks, a friend who never gave up on me.

forward

This is a FICTIONAL account of events that could have happened some 2000 years ago.

Since there is no actual diary of Mary's life nor the lives of people she touched, I knew the story must conform with the one related in the Bible as closely as possible.

Research let me in on a few secrets...not nearly as many as I would have liked. My imagination led the rest of the way.

I pray this book offends no one...only that it will show people how Mary and her family lived in those days. I also wished to show her as an ordinary person given an extraordinary job to accomplish.

introduction

Through Mary's eyes, this well-researched novel immerses the reader into the everyday life in Bible times. The author's holy imagination, engaging style and gifted writing present an intimate and enthralling story of the Holy Family. She has created a glorious "what if?" which leaves the reader only wishing it was fact.

Barbara Pugh, Author

I was privileged to see the story unfolding as the author prayerfully and thoughtfully developed it. She truly entered into the personage of Mary to capture the attitude and feelings of this special handmaiden of God. A remarkable and enjoyable work!"

Emogene Marshall

Church Secretary

prologue

As I looked upward, the sun blurred my vision, blotting the terrible sight silhouetted against a cloudless sky. My sister squeezed my shoulders tightly as I wiped dust and tears with a cloth that hadn't been clean since...who could say when?

The sun radiated across the area, baking the earth, though hordes of people appeared to ignore the heat. Leaves on trees shriveled as weeds on the ground became brown and broke into crumbs when walked upon.

From the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of brilliant red poppies and gnarled limbs of ancient olive trees growing on the hillside of Golgotha. The scent of cedars nearby made me long for the cleanliness of home. I wished desperately to escape the horror that engulfed me and my loved ones.

But I couldn't escape...neither the sun, the hoards, the noise nor my Beloved Son who now hung on the cross.

Sweat dribbled down my face, mingling with tears. If I had my mirror, I'd see a barely five-foot tall woman with hair beginning to grey. At the moment, I knew dark eyes revealed the anger, pain and exhaustion I could no longer hide. Running my hand toward my hair, I felt pronounced wrinkles on my forehead. They were embedded with dirt, then dampened with sweat which reminded me of the mud cakes Jesus made as a child. I knew with certainty my skin was seared a deep copper.

Rocks tumbled restlessly beneath the feet of people hurrying to get a closer look at the spectacle. As they pushed closer, I smelled the odor of unwashed bodies, as well as the scent of blood oozing from wounds of men hanging on a cross.

Suddenly, taunting screams of the restless crowd penetrated my consciousness. Leah released me as I raised my arm and screamed at the rabble, "You're killing your Savior!"

No one heard me over the clamor of the riff-raff shuffling feet and their incessant shouts.

As I looked over the crowd, I saw people whom my Son had healed. They were saying and doing nothing to help the Man on the cross. At that moment I almost hated them. Then partial sanity returned and I asked God for forgiveness. Maybe their apprehension was too great. I knew many were too frightened to help others who had fallen from political favor.

"If you can save others, call upon the Angels to save you," I heard one man roar in derision. Others took up his call. The jeers were magnified, filling the air above Golgotha with hate. Soldiers stood with impassive faces as the mob's raucous screams became ever louder. Others cast lots for His robe. Maybe, being seamless, it was worth a little more than robes men generally wore, but it was worth almost nothing in monetary value.

I know. I made it, never dreaming my Son would wear it on the last day of His life. I wove it without seams so it would be more comfortable. Now, soldiers were...I refused to think of it. The men who hung my Son on the cross between two thieves now hid themselves. I saw one of them slinking through the horde, attempting to run from his murderous acts. I clenched my fists and trembled with fury.

Looking upward, my anger died as my arms encircled the tree which held the most precious person in existence. Trembling legs now barely held me upright. I stood at the foot of the cross and looked up at Him attempting to smile, trying to give Him some of my strength.

Jesus, my beloved first Son. Pain was etched on His face, yet total love shone from His eyes. His grimy body was a mass of criss-cross marks from the beatings he endured. Blood oozed down his face from the crown of thorns. His feet, where nail heads were visible, bled from the rocks he had been forced to walk over, as well as the nails.

Blood pooled at the foot of the cross and I bumped into Leah as I lurched to one side, attempting to side-step the precious fluid.

Earlier, when a hammer hit the nails which tore through Jesus' hands I felt each blow, yearning to be on that cross to take His pain. I'd kissed His bruises and put balm on His scraped knees when He was little. Later, I'd attempted to heal the wounds of the soul when He was unaccepted, even by His family and friends.

My anguish was so excruciating I expected to see blood oozing from my hands and feet. But as I looked at them, not a drop appeared around the nails I felt entering my hands.

How could this happen? I wondered. How could pain be so intense, yet my skin remain intact? From the anguish I felt, the crown of thorns on my Son's head should have drawn blood on my own brow. The taste of vinegar my Son drank had turned my mouth sour with bitterness.

As I watched my Child slowly die, I felt a hundred years old, instead of forty-nine.

Glancing down, fresh blisters on sand-encrusted feet caught my eye. As I moved from one foot to the other attempting to alleviate pain, the blisters broke and a few drops of liquid oozed. It reminded me of the many times Jesus and I bathed our feet with fresh water from the well in Nazareth. Forgetting where I was, I could almost feel that cool, clean water. For a moment, the water of my imagination relieved the soreness in my feet.

A drop of Jesus' blood fell onto my hand. I glanced up. It reminded me of the night He was born. Abruptly, I felt as though I were back in a more lighthearted time . . . the night I first met Gabriel.

That night...ah, that night...the night I learned I was to become the mother of the Son of God beamed in my thoughts as brightly now as the morning sun had that day in Nazareth.

## Chapter One

Dawn of that fateful day began as most mornings did for our small town of Nazareth.

I woke, stretched and rose silently. The lowered lamp on the tall stand flickered, relieving shadows along the walls. Smoke rose to the ceiling as a slight breeze from my movements fanned it.

I straightened the short sleep wear and looked at my family. As in most homes, Father's bed stood nearest the door, Daniel and Leah next, mine, then mother's. Our beds had metal frames held together with iron rods. Before I was born, Father bored holes into the bed frames. Mother wove cords which were then threaded through the holes producing a place on which to place our pallets.

I smiled as I looked at twelve year old Daniel sprawled in abandon. His thin arms and legs were thrown from wrinkled bed clothing and his cape was wrapped lightly about his middle. His eyelids fluttered as he dreamed and his nose wrinkled like an animal who has smelled a feast.

Diminutive ten-year-old Leah slept with the trust of a baby. Her mouth curved into a sleep-ridden smile, and dark hair framed a tiny face. Father slept soundly, his head cradled by his muscular arms. As he snored softly, Mother rolled over, knowing instinctively one of her children was moving about.

I yawned, then stretched my arms toward the ceiling. From a nearby table I lifted a robe, slipped it over my arms and walked through the door leading to our largest room. Passing by, I barely noticed the table Joseph had fashioned for my parents. I remembered how, in sunlight, it glistened brightly from my Mother's scrubbing and polishing.

I slipped on sandals and tied thongs around my ankles.

Near the door was a large basket, or bushel, as we sometimes called it, turned up-side-down. A basin of water sat atop the bushel. I washed and dried my hands and face, wiped drops of water from the bushel top, then picked up the water jug. Opening the door to the outside, I stepped onto stones that bordered our home, then softly closed the door.

Looking around, I saw none of our neighbors who normally gathered for a walk to the well. It was a little earlier than usual, I thought, because lately I was too excited to sleep. The days were passing so rapidly I wondered if I'd have time to complete all my chores before the wedding date.

This early in the morning the sun's rays were merely a hint in the heavens as I hurried toward the well. The silhouetted trees looked stark, yet majestic against a grey sky.

Passing by honeysuckle vines, the odor wafted under my nose as I plucked a recently-opened bloom. I sucked the liquid, savoring the nectar. I almost felt like a thief, robbing nectar the bees were, even now, removing. Juice from the flower was sweet and the taste lingered.

Happiness invaded my entire being. My jug swung back and forth as I danced toward the well, smiling at nothing and pirouetting in abandonment.

“What makes you so happy this morning?” A girlish voice interrupted my dance.

“Hello, Sarah.” I greeted my best friend and Joseph’s sister. “How did you ever get here so early?”

She apparently couldn’t contain her happiness either because, like me, she was swinging her jug. “Couldn’t sleep. Much too near our wedding days.”

“Me too.” I grinned back at her.

As close friends, we saw each other daily...not only at the well, but community ovens where women baked bread. Since the announcement in the synagogue of our marriages, Sarah and I seemed to grow even closer.

We smiled and giggled at each other as we made our way to the well. The only site to collect water for our homes was on the outskirts of Nazareth. Leaving the city gates, we strode over rocks smoothed by millions of footsteps. Women had made this journey collecting water for their families and animals for hundreds of years. Although it could be slippery at times, the path was easy to walk on now.

Our journey was usually cool because the limbs of trees formed a canopy over our heads. A slight breeze ruffled the leaves, kissing our cheeks and blowing our hair.

Reaching our destination, I saw that other women had arrived. Maybe I wasn’t as early as I had thought. By now, the sun was peeking over the horizon. Orange streaks exploded across the sky, blending with the grey of night to turn the overhead expanse into mauve, pink and silver streaks.

“Good morning, Rebecca,” I called to a friend. “I thought we were early.”

Rebecca’s plump little arm lifted her jug of water from the well. “Actually, you’re late.” She smiled and shook her head. “Too busy planning your wedding, I suppose,” she teased. Although only a few months older than Sarah and me, she had been married for a year and felt superior to us, because she was expecting her first baby.

The well was about three or four feet high and built of sturdy stones set together with clay. We were told this well had cooled many ancient peoples, quenching the thirst of prophets, their families and animals.

Watching Rebecca plunge her second jug into the well, I could almost taste the purity of the colorless liquid. After bringing her filled container up, she placed it on the rim alongside her other one.

Rebecca picked up both jugs, nodded farewell and was gone.

Sarah and I gossiped with our friends and neighbors as we waited our turn to lower our jugs into the water. “When Aaron dropped by last night, we were talking about how happy we are that you and I were betrothed about the same time.”

“Oh?” I stooped down to write the name of “Joseph” in the sand at our feet. I found myself doing that quite frequently since our betrothal.

“Aaron said now he and Joseph could have families that would grow up together, just as they had played together all their lives.” A smile danced around her generous mouth.

A happy individual, she showed a lightness of spirit that always amazed me. Sandaled feet peeked from beneath a robe dyed light blue. Her large brown eyes crinkled as she rearranged a lock of black hair. Girls our age normally wore hair pinned closely to the head. We either fastened it on top or plaited,

then wound the long rope around our head. Sarah’s, however, always fell out of the pins. The tendrils curled around her doll-like face. Her nose was smaller than mine. I often teased her about having a Roman, not a Jewish nose.

The last woman in line moved from the well, her jug firmly placed on her shoulder. “See you in the morning.” She waved, then went on her way.

I glanced at her, smiled and picked up my jug.

I lowered my jug into the water and began to pull it up. As I looked down into the deep well I suddenly shivered. It was so dark I couldn't actually see the water. But as I raised my pail over the rim of the well, the sun's vivid rays turned the water in my pail blood red.

"Oh!" I said in horror, spilling some of the water.

"What's wrong?" Sarah looked closely at me, then took my jug and placed it on the side of the well.

"I don't know." A feeling of dread I'd never known seemed to infuse my body. "Suddenly, I had the strangest feeling the water had turned into blood."

Sarah grabbed my hand and held to it tightly. "It's all right, Mary. Just anxiety. Everything is going to be all right."

She lowered my jug back into the well and refilled it. As she gave it to me, the liquid dribbled onto my hand and I saw it was the same water we collected each morning. I licked the liquid from my hand. I lifted my filled jug, placed it on my shoulder and waited for Sarah. The feeling of fear dissipated like sun melting a soft mist.

When her jug was filled, we walked toward our homes, talking of future plans. At the crossroads we parted, knowing we would meet later in the day at the ovens.

Returning home over the beaten, rocky path I noted the early morning sun in the nearly cloudless sky beaming down on poppies and carnations. No longer did it give me a feeling of dread. I gloried in the brightness. On each side of the path, numerous plants, shrubs and trees grew close together. Cedar trees spewed freshness into the air.

Dew sparkled on the honeysuckle vines which produced the liquid I'd tasted earlier. Spider webs glistened like tiny beams of light. As I moved toward home, the sun rapidly rose but the heat had not as yet begun to parch the land.

"Good morning, Mother," I smiled as I walked into our home. She sat at the table, head resting on her hands. Glancing at me, her mouth almost curved into a smile. Mornings were not the best time of her day. I placed the jug on one of the upturned bushels.

"I'm glad we have these large baskets." I remarked, not expecting an answer. "It certainly gives us more space in which to store things."

Pouring water into a small container, I sat it in front of her, kissed her forehead, then sat down beside her. Grasping the mug with both hands, she sipped. "Ummm. Nothing like a cool drink of water." She wiped her hands on the side of her robe and peered at me, her smile growing. She looked more like a young girl than the mother of three children.

We measured about the same height; barely five feet. Her round face, skin darkened by the sun, held liquid brown eyes always filled with love and laughter. Almost without wrinkles, her face was, to me, the picture of pure love.

My mother was a quiet, humble woman. She believed in God and loved her husband and children to distraction. An educated woman, her family had believed girls should be taught the Talmud just as boys were. Mother told me once, the neighbors and relatives looked askance at teaching girls to read, but my Grandparents persisted.

"And I'm so glad they did." She said. "I love being able to write letters and read them when they arrive."

She encouraged all of us to love reading and all written words, especially scrolls of the prophets.

"I don't know how you do it," she remarked, pushing a tendril from my forehead.

"Do what?" I asked, then took a sip of water.

"How can you possibly look so fresh and wide awake at this time of the morning?" Her eyes were dewy and sleepy.

“I like the mornings,” I laughed. Mother worked hard at getting her eyes open. Only after Father, Daniel and Leah appeared, could she wake enough to look outdoors at the world.

Usually Daniel and Leah, along with Father, arose early, soon after I left to fetch the water. Father and Daniel strapped their phylacteries on and said their morning prayers. Leah dressed and hurried to greet the animals she loved. Each morning, she milked the goat and brought the milk inside, along with the eggs she gathered. Daniel fed the animals as soon as he finished prayers.

I now twirled as Father’s footsteps sounded behind me. His long cotton shirt was spotless and the sleeveless cloak fitted his muscular body. Sandals he had made gleamed in the morning light as his feet moved across the room.

When he neared, I noticed the crooked prayer shawl where a few inches of his skull cap showed. I stood, reached up and straightened the shawl, then kissed his burnished face. He brushed my forehead with his lips. “How’s my Mary this morning?” he asked, cupping my chin in his large, strong, leathery hands.

“Just fine.” I patted the girdle worn over his shirt and closed the cloak. “Only twenty-five more days.”

His eyes took on the look of sadness I noticed when my marriage was mentioned.

“Oh Father, don’t be so sad.” I tickled him under his beard and he grabbed my hands in his, as a laugh started deep in his throat.

“You love to tickle me,” he accused. His smile broke his almost square face into laugh-wrinkle lines, “don’t you?”

“And you always enjoy it.” I retorted, moving to begin the morning meal.

“Yes, I do,” he acknowledged. “I shall miss you, even though you’ll still be living here in our village.”

“Oh, Father, I shall see you every day of my life...or nearly every day.”

Suddenly I didn’t want our few minutes to end. I looked up into his large, brown eyes and saw tears just below the surface. Thick eyebrows were almost a continuous line from one side of his face to the other. He could look very fierce when he frowned as he did now, but this happened so seldom it was always a surprise. Finishing their chores, Daniel and Leah bolted into the room, shoving each other as usual. “Don’t be sad, Father.” Daniel laughed, hearing the end of our conversation. “She’ll just be down the road. You’ll never get rid of her.”

He reached for a couple of strands of my hair and shoved it toward the top. I grabbed his hand before he could pull. “Stop that, you beast!” I scolded, but one could never be angry with Daniel for long.

He looked a great deal like father and was dressed almost identically. Already taller than mother or me, he towered over Leah, who grinned at her twelve-year-old brother as he teased me. She thought he was perfect.

As the talk with Father and the teasing of Daniel progressed, I saw Mother placing food on the table.

Daniel lowered his hand just as Mother invited, “Come now, the food is ready.”

The morning ritual began. We sat and clasped hands. Father prayed to our God as we felt the closeness that began our days.

After a morning meal of goat’s milk and honey cake, Mother and I stood at the door. We watched Daniel and Leah as they left for school at the synagogue. Daniel complained about the Rabbi and the lessons he gave as they walked out the door. Leah happily skipped beside him, smiling at everyone.

We were rather fortunate in our village. Girls were allowed to go to school at the synagogue, though separated from the boys.

Ten year old Leah was the love of the entire family. Diminutive and dark like Mother and me, mischief danced in her eyes. She and Daniel played together more like brothers than a brother and sister. Never averse to joining him in any adventure, she often thought up pranks of her own.

Father left for his fields to check on progress of the crops. Later, he would visit the fig and olive trees which gave us fruit to eat and oil for cooking. The grape vines that provided our juice and wine were flowering. If the weather continued to cooperate with our vines, grapes would soon appear, grow larger, then turn purple for the harvest.

Mother and I went outside to grind wheat for bread. Some days, locust insects, dried in the sun, were ground into a powder which gave our bread a slightly bitter taste. A plant called locust, as well as honey, was sometimes used for sweetness. We mixed, shaped the loaves, then placed them in the hot oven.

We were luckier than most. There was a shelf built inside our oven, where we could place our loaves. In most towns, women made their bread and placed it on the outside of the oven, where it baked. It had to be watched closely, because when it was completely baked, it fell from the side of the oven into the dirt if not caught before that happened.

Baking odors permeated our nostrils, making us anxious to take the first bite. The weather cooperated today. Sweat only popped out on our faces, but didn't dribble down as it normally did when we gathered around the ovens.

As the bread baked, we gossiped with our neighbors and sang psalms King David wrote many years earlier. Resting from our labors, I saw Joseph's mother coming in our direction. She smiled and kissed me on the cheek. I offered her a drink of our water and she accepted gratefully.

"Where's Sarah?" I asked.

"She's busy with the wash. She said she'd see you later."

Joseph and Sarah's mother was such a merry individual. When she smiled, dark brown eyes glittered in happiness above plump cheeks. Those cheeks were pink from the sun and her dark brown hair fell on each side of that lovely round face.

When she laughed, her entire body shook with the happiness that followed wherever she went.

Joseph and I were promised to each other by our parents when we were quite young. Joseph was four years older than I. He told me the first time he saw me in my swaddling clothes, he knew I was the only one for him.

Living nearby as we grew older, we always cared for each other. Then caring grew ever deeper. Joseph brought gifts almost from the time I could remember anything.

First, it was a flower from the roadside, then sweet, juicy figs. Later, as he learned his carpentry trade, he made small trinkets. There was a box to hold pins for my hair and a looking glass he inserted in a small piece of wood so I could see myself. Each gift was precious. I still kept a flax blossom he gave me. I hung it upside down in the air until dried, then placed it on a shelf so I could look at it. The blue color faded, but the blossom was still almost intact.

My Joseph. He was a tall man; my head only reached to his shoulders. But my heart expanded with joy when he came into view. Like his mother, his love of life filled a room when he entered. His face resembled hers; however, he was tall and thin. I knew he would care for me the rest of my life.

"Mary." I turned, a little embarrassed at being caught day dreaming.

"Yes, Mother." I turned to see her smiling at Joseph's mother and me.

She placed her hand on my shoulder. "We must start on the vegetables, or the evening meal will not be ready before the sun sets."

While I was daydreaming, the loaves had baked to a golden hue and Mother removed them from the oven. I smiled at her sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Mother."

I kissed Joseph's mother. "I'll see you later."

We carried the loaves home in a large basket covered with a shiny, clean napkin from our home.

Sitting under the tree, Mother and I prepared vegetables for the evening meal. The sun threaded its way through the leaves of the tree and dappled the stones as a slight breeze chased some of the heat from our shade.

Sometimes Mother became quite philosophical as we sat and talked.

“I like shelling beans,” She smiled and opened the pods. The beans fell into a bowl sounding like light rain drops falling on a soft surface. “It’s so amazing.”

“What’s so amazing?” I asked, as I picked up another squash, sliced it, then began on the potatoes.

“If I take just one of the these beans.” She held it up toward the sunlight. “And plant it in the earth, it will reproduce many times over.” She shook her head with wonder as she completed her task.

“The meat for the stew is already on the brazier,” I said, laying the vegetables alongside the container of beans. “I’ll put the vegetables in later.”

“Since it doesn’t look like rain, we can cook everything outside.” Mother looked at the sky. “I do so hate to cook indoors, don’t you?”

“Yes. Takes us a long time to get all the odors out, especially if we have onions in the stew.”

“I agree.” Mother laughed, then asked, “Do you think we should have boiled eggs with them?”

“Yes. Father’s been working hard in the fields all day. He’ll be very hungry.”

“So will your brother,” she remarked dryly.

“He’s always hungry.” I smiled at her. “Maybe we should have cheese, bread, butter and wine, as well.”

“I think so.” She started toward the door.

She returned with bread, cheese and fruit, and we spread food for our midday meal on a small table under the tree. After eating, we rested a while.

Our life was simple, but our hands were usually busy in some fashion. We used the distaff and spindle to make yarn or thread from raw wool or flax. We then wove the yarn or thread into cloth. On laundry days, I made many trips to the well so we could have clean clothing.

The roof provided the best place for drying our clothes as well as a number of activities. We often held dances, met friends for gossiping, dried our clothing and ate on the roof of our home.

That afternoon we sat on a bench under the tree.

I worked on kitchen cloths for the new home Joseph was building as Mother continued my education, begun in the Synagogue school.

She and I had been studying David’s Psalms but lately, for some reason or other, she wished to talk about the coming Savior.

“Do you remember any of the passages about the Messiah?” she asked now, as she leaned her head against the tree and closed her eyes.

“I think so. The first time He was mentioned, if I remember correctly, was in the beginning of Genesis. Moses told of God talking to the serpent after Eve was enticed to eat the forbidden fruit.” I pushed thread in and out, hemming the cloth.

“Do you remember what God told the serpent?” Mother wiped the sweat from her brow with a damp cloth, then placed the damp cloth over her eyes.

I looked at her and felt such a welling up of love I could barely breathe. I spoke to her softly. “He said the woman’s seed would kill the serpent, or sin, by bruising or crushing him on the head. The serpent could only bruise Him on the heel.”

“Very good, Mary.” She opened her eyes, removed the cloth and smiled at me. Holding the cloth, she patted my knee, then closed her eyes again.



“Do you understand what that means?” Her voice was low, insistent, somehow.

I laid the linen I was working on in my lap. “It means God will send His son to be born of a woman. His son will crush the evil in this world, but the evil could only bruise His son.”

“I think you have interpreted that correctly.” She opened her eyes and her entire face became one big smile. She nodded. “You are such a pleasure to be with.”

I picked up my sewing and awaited her next statement. An insect buzzed near us as we talked, and the odors from the honeysuckle vine wafted around us.

“You know the Son of God will be born from the lineage of David,” she remarked, again closing her eyes.

“Those are both yours and Father’s ancestors, aren’t they?” I clasped my sewing as I held my breath. Though I knew the answer, I felt I was awaiting more than just the usual answer.

“Yes.” Her sigh was audible and I had no idea what might follow. “We are both from the house of David.” I heard a deep sigh as she continued. “You know Mary, each generation of Jewish mothers watch their growing daughters carefully. We wonder if our child will be the Chosen One.”

“Really?” I asked, in awe. I placed the sewing in my lap. I had noticed Mother watching me since I became a woman, but had thought little of it.

“Yes.” She still leaned against the tree, eyes closed, so that I couldn’t discern her thoughts. “If any woman is better suited for the job than you, I don’t know who it could be.”

I was stunned. “Me, Mother?” I stood, dropping the cloth into the sand. Elation flooded my thoughts. What an honor for my mother to think so highly of me. I looked down at the cloth, picked it up and shook the sand from it.

“Yes, Mary, you.” She opened her eyes and looked at me with an expression I didn’t understand. “My darling.” I had never heard such sadness in her voice. Suddenly, her voice hardened. “I pray it is not you who is chosen.”

She must have seen the look of wonder on my face at the thought that I might be the mother of God’s Son. “But what an honor that would be.” I’m not sure I spoke aloud.

“God forgive me, but I am so selfish,” she mourned, realizing what she said and the manner in which it was related. “I want my children near me and I wish to watch my grandchildren grow up around me.” She swallowed a sob. “Who knows what would happen if you should be chosen?”

She realized what she was saying. “Oh, God! I am a selfish woman.” She clasped her hands in front of her and looked to the sky, as she cried aloud. “Forgive me.”

I gathered her small body in my arms. “You could never be selfish, Mother. You are the kindest, gentlest woman in the world.” I felt as though I were the mother and she the child.

“Come, lie down inside.” We stood and went inside. I felt her trembling as I held her tightly. “Maybe it will be a little cooler and you can sleep for a while.”

Inside, I unrolled her pallet and spread it on the bed. While she slept, I went outside and sat on a bench under the tree. Picking up the cloth I continued hemming it.

The thought of what she said kept running through my mind. The idea was staggering! Would I want that task? But then what about Joseph? He and I were already betrothed. And the Child of God was to be born to a virgin.

Since it was only a few weeks until our marriage, thoughts of being the Chosen One slipped from my mind as plans for the wedding filled my heart. I completed the cloth, bit the thread and picked up another cloth, dreaming of Joseph and my wedding date.

Later in the afternoon I stood outside waiting for Father, Daniel and Leah’s return home. Odors from the stew permeated the air as I glanced at our home.

Like many others, Father made our dwelling with a floor of lime mixed with crushed stone. The floor was trampled smooth, then covered with straw mats. My eyes passed over the one-story building with two small windows in the main room, to give light.

Unlike most homes, Father had erected one room just for sleeping. An adjoining room was used for the storage of extra bowls, jugs and jars, as well as other household goods. I went inside and picked up the eating utensils, which were carved from limestone.

As I turned to leave the house I noticed the small, partially enclosed courtyard built for the animals.

Stirring the stew, I glanced up and saw the late sun twinkling through the leaves of a tree, making lattice patterns on the ground. Bees buzzed around flowers that grew nearby and birds chirruped, flitting amongst the leaves.

The roof only sloped enough so rain ran off easily. Made of brushwood branches woven together, it was laid on rafters then covered with a thick layer of clay. When it hardened, it became as smooth as polished stones. A bird lit on the roof. He slipped, then flew away.

I smiled as I remembered seeing people dancing or gossiping, moving or calling to each other from one roof to the other. People sometimes used the roof for meditation. On hot nights most of the people of our village slept on them. Visitors were invited to sleep there, as well.

Looking at our home, I thought some of our customs about visitors were quite amusing.

Mother told me about one of those customs after we happily saw our visitors of five days on their way. She said, "According to custom, if a visitor stays more than three days, he becomes a member of the household. He is given a broom to start sweeping." Her face lit up with a big smile. "That usually hurries them to their own homes."

We normally ate our meals outside in the courtyard with just our family. However, another custom included sharing meals with passers-by, even strangers. We often did.

The night of my visit from Gabriel was no different.

The sun slipped over the horizon as we completed our evening meal. Although there was still a little light, the end of the day lazily wrapped its arms around us. We chatted about the events of the day, said our prayers and sang psalms to God. Mother and I cleaned food containers, Daniel and Leah tended animals as Father said his prayers.

We settled down for the night. Soon, Leah and Mother's soft breathing sounds wafted toward my bed. Father's snores were barely heard, and Daniel's bed rustled as he moved about.

As in all homes, a fire burned throughout the night. In this manner we kept a fire going without having to borrow a spark from a neighbor. Lying in my bed I watched as a lamp softened the darkness. A whisper of wind caught the light, throwing shadows around the bedroom.

Tonight, I couldn't fall asleep. I felt strange, restless, unsettled. Maybe it was because of the conversation Mother and I had about the coming Savior.

I arose and sat on a bench at the table, my thoughts flitting from Joseph to what my mother said. When I heard the rest of my family breathing quietly in sleep, I listened for sounds from neighbors. None penetrated the thick walls of our home.

Suddenly I felt hemmed in. I wanted to be alone, outside, with the sky as my roof.

As I walked outside, a couple of animals housed in the courtyard lifted their heads to stare at me. They soon settled down as I slowly carried my pallet to the roof. There were few people outside that night. In fact, I only heard voices of one couple. Soon these voices faded as their footsteps led down from the roof.

It was a little cooler than normal. Maybe that was the reason no one was sleeping outside. As I looked around, I saw lights turned low in most houses. It was so quiet, I felt I could hear the stars playing tag in the sky.

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

