

## Prologue

The priest had been a long time inside – longer than you expected. Tho the people were used to waiting, they were beginning to get impatient, muttering and asking why it took so long. Why did he keep them standing out here? And anyway, how could it be safe for him to stay in that holy place where the Lord Almighty is present, and mortal flesh – if it were not the flesh of a consecrated priest, washed with sacred water and marked with the blood of sacrifices – would die of joy or fear?

The people were waiting in their proper court, and further in, the Levites, the temple attendants, were gathered in their place. But even the priests, who may stand before the altars of God and shed the blood of sacrifice, did not dare to enter where Zechariah was now overstaying his time. Zechariah, the chosen priest for this day, had entered to offer sacrifice and the prayers of all the people, but he had not come out again to speak to them. What had gone wrong?

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In a town in Galilee a girl was thinking about her wedding, planning, because a girl always plans when her wedding approaches, even when there are her mother, her father and a hundred other relatives to do the planning for her. When she's going to be married a girl has her whole life to plan, and Miriam, who would soon be married to Joseph, was looking forward to her life.

In a new home and a new family she would have new ways to learn, new people to please and new relationships in which to love and be loved, a new place to belong. She would have a husband, a man she deeply respects, a body to be dedicated to hers in love's pleasure and triumph, seeds of the future in his loins. His children would be hers. A girl about to be married is a girl about to live, about to take her triumphant place as a woman among her people, and Miriam was ready to be a woman among her people.

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In the temple, the people were still waiting. The priest still lingered within the veil where no eyes might follow him. The crowd that had come to put their supplications before God - their small but enormous hopes and fears and regrets and thanks – must wait for the man who had carried them into the holiest place. Until he came out and spoke, they would not know what had happened in there and what it meant for their prayers. What was the Lord saying to him in the heart of that deep silence? How was the incense burning and what way did the smoke go up? Were their prayers and the priest's acceptable to God? Was this day an auspicious one, and would God bless them now?

Surely the delay must be a good sign. Surely, after this, the priest will come out with a word from God of power and hope, signalling the end of oppression and humiliation, a day of rescue, triumph and freedom for his people. Surely, if the priest delayed so long inside, God was giving him a burden: a pregnant message that might even be – Pray God it might be! – word of the coming Messiah and the end of Israel's shame!

They shuffled a little and whispered a little, and some of them prayed, murmuring verses of the psalms or precious sentences of the Law, and each of them wondered about their great or little hopes that hung on God and the present offering of his priest.

“When God keeps us waiting like this it’s always for something good. He hears the prayer of his people, even the unimportant ones like me. Surely, after this, the priest will come out and say something hopeful – something even I can understand. It will be a sign, I know it will. This year will be prosperous. God will give me good lambing and I will pay off my debts. This year I will be able to marry our Ruth to the husband she wants.”

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In Nazareth, Miriam was wondering about children. Would she have many sons? Would they be builders like their father, working in wood to shape and mend the structures and the useful bits and pieces that make a house, a table, a bed, a yoke for an ox, or a donkey’s manger? Would they work with the grain and cut across it as their father does? Would they know how to put stone to stone to build a palace, or a barracks, or a house for the synagogue? And daughters – would she have daughters, and how many and what kind? Would they be beautiful? Would they be skilful? Miriam wondered if they would be quiet, good creatures, mild, gentle and well-behaved, meek and obedient girls so that none of her new relations would find anything to criticise in them.

Or – and she wondered how she would cope with this – would they be more like her? Would they have something of her own outrageous fire, bold to speak up about rights and wrongs as if they were men, daring to dream and dance like the great Miriam of old, who danced over God’s defeated enemies and Israel’s oppressors. Would they grow up to think like their mother does - behind that thoughtful quietness of hers - to recognise the weakness in the strength of men, and the pride, greed and luxury in the strength of peoples, to burn at the injustice and evil worked by wealth and to imagine that even a girl can speak out against authorities and powers, when they oppress the poor of God?

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Consternation in the temple! No one knew what had happened, but everyone was guessing out loud. Their waiting was over and Zechariah had come out at last from the inner courtyard. But he stood full before them and said nothing. They had waited to hear from him. They had counted on an answer brought from the throne of God, but there was no word, no explanation. Zechariah was dumb.

He made signs but he could not speak, and they knew that something terrible or wonderful had happened. As the crowd broke into exclamations, the noise brought others crowding around and noisily asking what was going on. Even the temple traders were leaving their stalls, buzzing with curiosity and calling for friends and passing pilgrims to come and see. It was getting out of hand. But before the dignity of the temple turned into a riot, a wee college of priests came forward to hustle Zechariah away and restore order. The people who had waited in hope were sent away - to wonder what it all meant and to face again the fears and needs they had brought with them to the temple, to seek in their own thoughts an explanation for what God had not said.

It was surely a dark and heavy sign: God will not speak to his people. Israel’s hopes are dashed. Not for our day the liberation we looked for. God is silent and Israel must continue to suffer, for now is not God’s time to reach out in the might of his arm and break the oppression of his people. Now is not to be the day of deliverance.

But each would interpret the sign according to their own lights, talking from their own hopes and fears. “I tell you the priest was dumb. He couldn’t speak. I thought to myself: this is a powerful sign from God. The priest is dumb, like ... like ... like a lamb! I tell you it came to

me all at once – dumb like a lamb that is sold in the temple for sacrifice! It is the sign I asked for. This will be the year of lambs, of many healthy unblemished lambs. We will prosper. I will pay back my debts and this year our Ruth will be married!”

And Zechariah the priest remained dumb. There in the holiest place of all he had seen an angel of God, who told him that he, an old and childless man, was to have a son; that his barren wife was already fruitful; that the son of a priest would be a prophet, preparing the way for the Lord’s anointed Savior. And he had doubted it. For it was not in the way of things, these days, for prophets to appear in Israel. It was not in the way of things for priests to have visions in the course of their duties; and it was not in the way of things for a woman like Elizabeth, well past her age, to conceive and bear her first child. He had doubted it, and now, because he had doubted, he would stay dumb until a son was born to prove that the way of all things was now changing forever.

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In the town of Nazareth, Miriam was thinking. She had plans and she had questions, and she knew that her husband had plans, to which she must bow. She knew that both their families had plans which she must strive to acknowledge gratefully. And she wondered what were the plans of God. For she knew that even a little thing like a builder getting married in Nazareth had its place in the care of God.

“Hail! God’s favoured one – the Lord is with you.”

The voice was suddenly all around her, and as it reverberated within her, she was aware of a deep and tremendous Now! Someone had spoken, and the room was filled with power and awe, with joy and fear. Miriam was troubled, but the voice reassured her: “Don’t be afraid, for you have been chosen by God.”

Some great good news was breaking – news surely for the whole of Israel. It should be shouted in the temple at Jerusalem, but it was breaking here in Nazareth, where, simply, insistently, unshakeably, it was being addressed to her.

“You are to conceive a child.” Miriam could understand that - but she was puzzled by the immediacy of it. She was still some time short of her wedding, but the voice was speaking of now – of life about to begin in that very Now which now surrounded her. “He will be a great man. He will rule over the kingdom of his ancestor David and will save his people from their sins. So you will call him Yeshua, God Rescues.” The voice that spoke from an overwhelming splendour brought word of Israel’s Messiah, the saviour for whom oppressed Israel had longed and cried out. And the word came to her that now his time was come. God’s time was come, and she, the Lord’s serving girl, was to conceive the hope of Israel.

But the angel’s word was for now. It would not be waiting for the weeks and months to pass but already surrounded and filled her in an everlasting and imperative Now. She understood that. But she also understood about conceiving children. There was an obvious question to ask.

“How can this happen? I’ve never had sex.”

But the One whose word reached her now was the one who had created sex, who made the human race male and female in the first place, whose blessing makes every woman fertile and puts life into every man’s seed. Even without a man, the Spirit of God would be active in her

## Jesus Messiah

and she would conceive a child. Her son would be called the Son of God. And God had spoken.

Here was a power to which all powers must yield. Here was the very love that breathed life into Israel, well able to breathe life into her womb and make her fruitful before her time. Above all, here was One who could only be loved and obeyed. She must forget her plans. When God speaks, even the vital plans of a girl about to be married have to give way. Today, even the hopes and fears of a girl on the brink of womanhood had their answer from God. What could she do – what could she want to do – but to give the Lord’s messenger her consent?

“I am the Lord’s serving girl. Let everything you told me be done as you have said.”