

Away in a Manger: A QUAKER MIDRASH

CHARLES DAVID KLEYMAYER

(Written to be read aloud, to openhearted listeners of all ages.)

Since the time I was a small child I have loved the well-known story of the birth of Jesus, and I imagine that many of you have, too. The story tells us how Joseph and Mary journeyed from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census mandated by the emperor of Rome. How Mary was expecting a child that could come at any time. How they found no place to stay in Bethlehem—all rooms were taken—but a knock on the door of the final inn led to an offer from the innkeeper for the couple to sleep in the stable out back. There the baby Jesus was born that very night, and shepherds came to pay a visit. Later, three wise men—the Magi—arrived from the East bearing gifts and wearing fine clothing. They had seen a bright star in the sky and followed it to this humble place.

But think about it. At least one piece of that story is absent from the Bible. The shepherds were local folks, but the wise men had to travel a long, long way before they could make their entry into the stable. So, how did it happen that Joseph and Mary were still there—according to tradition—for twelve more days, or even more? They were poor working folks who had no money and no room to stay in, just some straw to rest on for that one night. How was it that they were not compelled to return home to Nazareth on the very next day, thereby missing the Magi completely?

Well, in Jewish tradition—and Jesus and his parents were faithful Jews all their lives—there is a way to deal with missing details. When a gap exists in a sacred text, someone puts their mind to

it, and their imagination, and fills in that gap with whatever it takes to make the story whole. Jews call that a “*midrash*,” and there are entire books full of this and other kinds of *midrashim* (the plural of *midrash*).

So, recently I put on my daydreaming cap—which is what I’m often wearing, by the way, in silent meeting for worship, even though no one can see it. Do you know what I love about meeting for worship? I get to daydream with God. And my family and a roomful of my friends are in the meetinghouse, and they are daydreaming with God, too!

But when I put on my dreaming cap the other night, I was alone. I found a quiet space in our home and I sat down and thought up a *midrash*. It’s a *midrash* that will explain to you how it was that Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus were able to stay in Bethlehem for another two weeks or so—and that way got to meet the Magi.

If you take a deep breath, and let it out *really* slowly as you find your center, I will tell you a Quaker *midrash*.

Ready?

Once upon a time, a long, long while ago, in a far-away land named Galilee, a man and his young wife left their home in Nazareth to register for the Roman census in the husband’s ancestral village. It was called Bethlehem, which means house of bread in ancient Hebrew, and the man was a wandering carpenter named Joseph. He and his wife, Mary, had both grown up in families that had to struggle every day just to feed and clothe themselves.

The journey to Bethlehem, in the land of Judea, was slow and hard. Mary, who was expecting their first child, rode

on a borrowed donkey while Joseph kept pace on foot by her side. She was deeply worried that the baby would come while they were on the road, and Joseph did what he could to reassure her. Rising on the second day of travel, Mary sensed that her time was near, so they set out before daybreak, chewing on a few crusts of bread. They hardly rested at all as they raced the sun across the sky to reach their destination.

When the two travelers crested the final hill, they could see the houses of the town nestled together on the slope below. The corners of each house were etched by alternating patterns made of lengthening shadows and the rosy glow from the sinking sun.

As they came into town, Joseph stared at the number of people in the streets and was troubled. Where would they find lodging for the night?

The two of them went from inn to inn with no luck—all of Bethlehem was full of visitors.

When they knocked on the last possible door, the owner shoved it open on its creaking, broken hinges and told them to move along. He was tired of people rousing him to ask for a room he could not give because he had nothing to offer.

As the weary innkeeper was shaking his head no, Joseph’s heart sank and his gaze dropped to the ground. Immediately

he saw something at his feet and knelt to pick it up. The innkeeper’s *mezuzah* had fallen from its place on the right doorpost.

A *mezuzah* is a tiny parchment scroll with two passages from the book of Deuteronomy in the Torah. Those words call for Jews to love God with all their hearts and all their souls and all their might, to teach this to their children, and to place these words on their doorways and gates, in a small canister tilted at an angle.

Joseph handed the *mezuzah* to the innkeeper, with a gesture towards Mary’s condition as an expectant mother, and the voice of God flashed through the innkeeper’s mind like a nighthawk crossing the sky at dusk. With a bewildered sigh, he stepped outside and led

How was it
that Mary and
Joseph were able
to stay in
Bethlehem long
enough to
meet the Magi?

Charles David Kleymeyer, a member of Langley Hill Meeting in McLean, Va., is an author, storyteller, and international grassroots-development sociologist. This story is adapted from his intergenerational novel-in-progress about a young boy and his sister who grow up next door to Jesus and his carpentry workshop.

the couple to an old stable built into a cave in the hillside out back. The stable was full of cows and goats, plus the donkeys of several of the guests at the inn.

"Sleep here," he grumbled, "but be sure you are on your way in the morning."

That very evening, the baby Jesus

ble, they rushed back to camp, their ragged cloaks flapping around their knees like the wings of ravens.

Then they hustled back with goat's milk, and with flatbread that had just finished baking over the open fire. It looked like the bread everyone eats at

Several times during the night, Mary gave the child her breast, so that he might become familiar with nursing. At those moments, Joseph held his son's tiny feet in his massive carpenter's hands, scarred from years of hard labor with sharp tools. And again his eyes brimmed with tears of joy.

"I will teach him many lessons," he whispered to Mary. "I can teach him to use his hands and his head to build good things. People know me for making strong doors and roofs. I will teach him to do that, and perhaps to build bridges, as well."

Mary whispered back, "We will name him *Yehoshua*—God is Salvation—to fulfill our dreams. Our *Yeshu* will bring us all much love and peace."

Sleep was fitful because under the straw the ground was hard, and the new parents' heads were swarming with worries as incessant as biting flies. Where would they go tomorrow once they had registered for the census? What would they eat? Was Mary ready to journey again so soon? And what about their new child? Nazareth was two long days away. The open road could be a cruel nursery.

Dawn opened like a rose, and soon the first rays of the sun ventured through the doorway and illuminated the face of baby Jesus. The anxious new parents heard footsteps approaching. The innkeeper entered to do his morning

chores. He looked sleepy and cross and seemed unsettled to notice that a baby had indeed been born during the night. Mary and Joseph waited quietly to be told it was past time for them to move on.

Suddenly Mary's face brightened, but not from the sun's rays. She scooped up her child in one arm and reached down to tug at Joseph's sleeve, urging him to stand up. Then she strode the three steps across the stable floor to where the innkeeper stood and thrust baby Jesus into the arms of the speechless man.

Turning and reaching again for Joseph's cloak, Mary exited through the stable door pulling this other speechless man behind her. Once outside, Joseph



Alla Podolsky

was born. The night air was chilled, so Joseph helped Mary bundle their child in the warm wrapping they had packed, and he looked around for a place where a newborn would be safe till morning. All he could find was a manger. Small and made of wood, it usually held hay for the animals, but they had already fed and it was now empty.

While Joseph held Jesus in his arms, Mary carefully lined the manger with fresh straw. Feeling the warmth of that little baby spread through his chest—and then all through his body—brought tears to the new father's eyes.

Soon a family of shepherds that was camped nearby heard the cry of an infant and hurried over to find out what was happening. When they saw the newly arrived family huddled in the sta-

Pesach, the Jewish Passover. Mary and Joseph thanked them profusely, because they had gone with nothing to eat since early that morning.

Then Mary broke up one of the broad, circular loaves and gave a piece to each person in the family of shepherds. All responded with warm smiles, nodding their heads in thanks. The circle of giving was unbroken.

Soon the shepherds went back outside, to wrap themselves in blankets and gather round the fire they had built next to a stone corral. And Joseph and Mary curled up beside the manger that held their new baby, and they fell asleep. The body heat and breath of the animals kept the small family warm. And the lowing of the cows sounded like distant lullabies, soothing the baby Jesus.

Quaker Midrash

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found his voice and immediately blurted out, "What on earth are you doing, handing off our son like that to a complete stranger!"

Placing a fingertip on his lips, she replied in a soft voice, "Have faith, husband."

For a long moment they stood silently, hearing no sound at all coming from within the stable—other than a few animals stirring. Then they heard gurgling and chuckling. They peeked around the doorjamb and there was the innkeeper, his face aglow like the sunrise outside. He was staring down at the creature in his arms. Man and child had locked eyes together as if the whole world had been reduced to the space between their foreheads—and their two hearts.

Quietly Mary reentered the stable and gingerly took the baby back into her arms. Joseph followed and stood silently beside her. The innkeeper seemed reluctant to leave, but now it was *his* turn to pull Joseph outside.

Mary could hear them talking in low voices, punctuated by Joseph saying "Yes, of course!" every few moments. And then, "I thank you, good man. God will know your generosity."

Mary heard the innkeeper walking away as Joseph stepped back into the stable. The words tumbled out of his mouth as he recounted what the innkeeper had said. "We can stay as long as we like! We can eat with the servants in the kitchen. All I have to do is fix that creaking front door, and find some other carpentry chores to do around the inn."

"You see?" said Mary. "That of God in our child spoke to that of God in this man, without a single word being uttered." She smiled at him.

"Our problem is solved."

And that's how the baby Jesus—when he was less than one day old—succeeded in turning his first heart, leading it gently back onto the path of compassion and love.

And that's how it happened that Joseph and Mary were still in Bethlehem 12 days later, when the three Magi arrived bearing gifts for the newborn child.

And you? Well, I thank you for listening to my Quaker midrash. □

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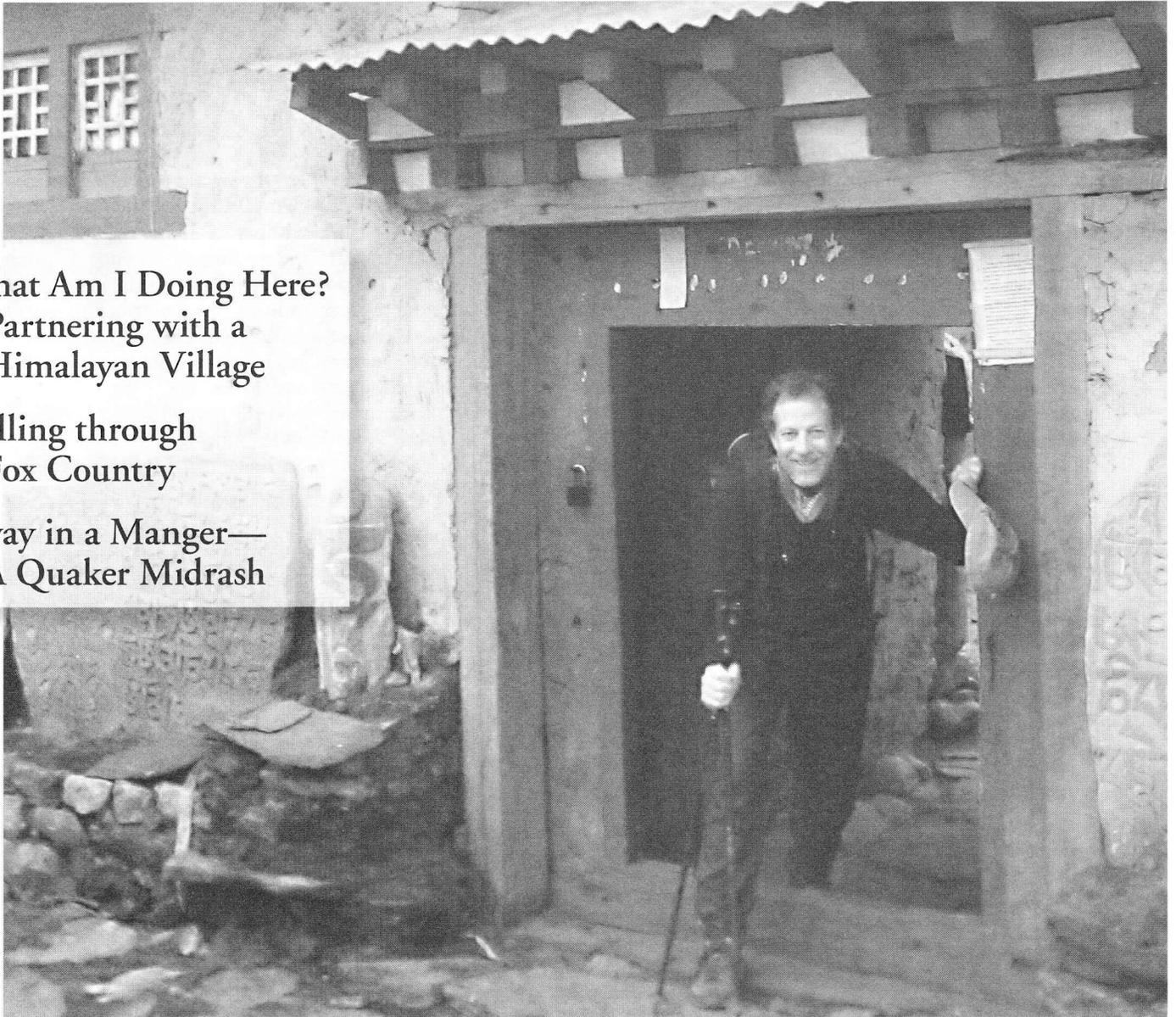
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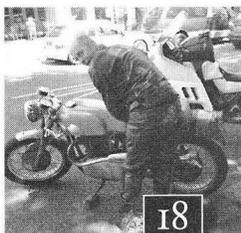
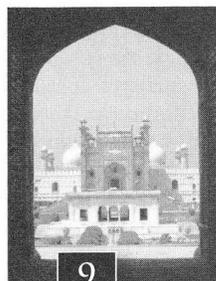
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*Cover photo:
Jeff Rasley on a Himalayan expedition in 2006*

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