

## CHRISTMAS

Shopping sprees, gala events, twinkling lights and mistletoe. Ah, the glorious days of December! Christmas is just around the corner.

But wait. Is this—these traditions and sparkles and busyness—the real thing? Is this Christmas? What did the birth of Jesus feel like to Joseph, to the magi, to the scribes and chief priests who received strange visitors and even stranger news? What did the birth of Jesus feel like to the mothers and fathers of Bethlehem who lost their little boys one fateful night? What did this time mean for them?

### **REST STOP #1: A Guided Meditation on Matthew 1:18-25**

By Mark Horst

Imagine this:

You are a young man, working in your woodshop in the garage. One day while you are busy working on a new dining room table for your parents, you notice your fiancé standing at the door watching. You haven't seen her all day, so you stop what you are doing and go over to see how she is doing. You talk about your wedding that is coming up in a few months, and then she says something that you are not sure you really heard right.

"Come again?" You reply.

"I'm pregnant." She says again with a slight tone of embarrassment. Then there is a time of awkward silence where neither you nor your fiancé know quite what to say. The silence is finally broken when she says, "I know you are not going to believe me, but an angel came to me and said that I was going to have a baby even though I am still a virgin."

You walk out the door, past your wife to be, without saying anything and go straight to your room.

An angel... yeah right. What are you going to do? Will you believe her story? You are so flustered that you can't focus on anything. So you head back to the garage to try to take your mind off of the whole subject. You just can't get any work done... all you can think about is what you are going to do about this baby. It's not yours (you know that for a fact) but then is it really from God?

No, it can't be.

You decided that you are going to break it off, but instead of publicly humiliating her, you are going to divorce her privately. You have no choice, but oh, the pain cuts so deep. The nails in your hands blur through quiet tears.

It has been such a long day that you don't even eat dinner. You just go to bed and collapse from mental fatigue.

Are you making the right decision?

You finally fall asleep, but then you have the most interesting dream that you have ever had. You see a shimmering being sitting beside you... something, someone, you have never seen before. He says that she really is going to have the Son of God. Then, he—it—was it an angel?—is gone. You wake up in a sweat. Oh boy, now what do you do?

Was she really telling the truth?

Is this an angel of God, or is it indigestion from the bean soup you ate yesterday?

What will you do?

## **REST STOP #2: Journey of the Magi**

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) was an American-English poet who loved to draw on the rich allusions that the biblical narrative affords. Mixing symbols and stories, Eliot helps us see a different side of the Christmas story through the eye of the Magi and their quest. What did it mean to travel so far? What hardships did they endure? Did they ever doubt themselves? What does it mean for us today that these wise ones were foreigners?

Were these travelers ever the same again? Can we ever be?

### **Journey of the Magi**

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel at night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.  
Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow-line, smelling of vegetation,  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky.  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,

Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.  
But there was no information, and so we continued  
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.  
All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'Journey of the Magi' (1927)

### **REST STOP #3: Guarding the truth and guarding it well**

When we think of the original characters in our grand Advent drama, we don't usually include the scribes and the chief priests of Matthew 2:1-12. What was the first Christmas like for them? Matthew leaves several narrative gaps in the story. We don't know with certainty what these men did or did not do. But if we could guess ... if we could fill in the gaps ... what would we say?

#### **Put yourself in this man's shoes:**

You glance around your office and let out a big sigh. It's the end of a long day and the end of a long week. Your floor is stacked with piles of unfinished business. Well, at least it can't get any worse. Two more minutes and you will be on your way home. Just in time to prepare for Sabbath and then—rest.

There's a knock at your door. "Come in." But you grit your teeth against—this inconvenience. You grit your teeth against your own fatigue.

It's one of your messenger boys. Shouldn't he be running home himself by now? His face looks flushed and yet pale, all at the same time. "Have you heard the news? Some foreigners are in town, magicians, wise men, they call themselves, studying all the devilry like the sweep of the stars and the"

"Hold on, what? Magi? You're going on like a crazy man, slow down!"

"Some foreigners, Gentile pigs, from the east, these men saying they are looking for the child who will be born king of the Jews! Can you believe it? They even went to Herod. They've come to pay him homage—foreigners seeking out Messiah, our Messiah!"

What? Your mind is working so fast you can't seem to focus. So many things, so many pictures flash through your mind. The baby has come? But you just visited Bethlehem, none of the prestigious families, if you can call any families in Bethlehem prestigious, were expecting. Mattathias Ben Yeshua? No, couldn't be him and his wife. What about Nathaniel? No—focus. Why didn't you know? Foreigners touching the baby? This can't be. This isn't the way it was supposed to be. The book! Get out the book!

You scramble for the scroll! Ah, how could the Torah room be so far away from your own? But you know the scripture by memory; you don't really need to see it, to read the sacred words. But maybe if you just touch the text, maybe it will help you understand.

Maybe it will help you understand why this sounds like bad news instead of good news.

Your partner looks confused. He runs after you, panting, "Isn't Messiah supposed to come from Bethlehem? Micah 5:2?"

"Yes, you idiot, don't you think I ... I'm sorry. I'm just flustered with the news. Why didn't I know about this? I am one of the chief priests. And the goyeem\* knowing this first? No, it can't be."

You shake your head. It can't be.

You stop dead in your tracks. "Sabbath. I must go home and prepare for Sabbath."

"But sir?" You look at the messenger and stare hard. Why won't he go away? "Sir, what about Herod? The king wants to come see you. You know how horrible, how mean he is. Why does he want to come to us now?"

"That is a very good question. A good one indeed." You decide to ignore the fading light; somehow all this—checking the scrolls, thinking things through—this is more important than Sabbath. And why would Herod come?

"He'll kill the boy." Your messenger, hardly more than a boy himself, breathes out the words in a whisper. And you know he's right. You've seen what Herod did to his own sons. Word on the street is that it's better to be Herod's dog than his son. If he would murder his own children, why wouldn't he murder the infant king of the Jews? Of course he would. Of course he would.

What will you do? You stare at the ornate walls of the Temple. Your fingers lightly touch the soft animal skin of the scroll. What will you do? Cooperate? Tell Herod where the child is to be born? Try to protect the family? Try to protect yourself?

This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen.

"Sir? Will you yourself go to look for the child? In Bethlehem, that is? Sir?"

"No, my son. There is no child to see."

\*Goyeem means Gentiles or pagans

## **REST STOP #4: Losing your baby: A Christmas prayer station remembering grief**

By Annie Stutzman

### **Materials Needed:**

Bible

Little pieces of papers cut in the shape of a bottle (pattern below)

Felt Markers

**PART 1:** Read Matthew 1:18-2:18

**PART 2:** Take as many paper "bottles" as you need to and write down on them your hurts and your grief. You may write down things that have been taken away from you such as a loved one, or self-confidence or joy just like the women in this passage got their babies taken from them. These are your "babies" that are being taken away.

**PART 3:** Take each of your bottles and "pour" all of your heartaches out to God. He wants to help you heal.

**PART 4:** Ask God to fill you up with His love and be free of this grief that is so hard to bear and let go.

This is a wonderful time of year. It is Christmas and there is happiness all around. It seems like such a joyful time where people gather with their families and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. But there is so much pain around as well. People are missing their loved ones and missing the things that have been taken from them. The women in this passage had their babies taken from them and killed. Many people today are wandering around with this sort of grief. Give it to God today. Follow this prayer station and make a step towards releasing this grief you carry. God is almighty and wants to help you feel joyous and feel like you want to celebrate. Give your hurt and grief to God today and celebrate the birth of Christ Jesus.

