

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**Today the Church celebrates Mary as the Mother of God and our Mother too. Our Gospel text tells us that after the visit of the shepherds that “Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.” As I meditated on that verse, it occurred to me that someone was missing from the tableau. Where was Joseph in this moment? What was he thinking? What was he feeling? What was in his heart? So, I asked him.**

**What follows is my imagined response from St. Joseph:**

**“Yeah, I guess I am kind of the forgotten person in the Christmas story. Oh sure, you all have little statues of me in your crèche scenes at home and you set them out every year at Christmas, but let’s face it: people looking at it are always looking at the Christ Child and His Mother. I’m kind of pushed in the background with the cows and the sheep and the donkey. Even the shepherds and the wise men are arranged more centrally than I am. They even have lovely Christmas carols written about them (even a little drummer boy who wasn’t really there). That’s all pretty much okay by me. I kind of like being in the background. But, I was surely there and I felt blessed to be.**

**You see, I am the Father of Jesus. Well, actually I’m more like a stepfather since Jesus wasn’t conceived in the usual way, which took quite some getting used to on my part, not to mention Mary’s. But more on that in a minute.**

**The fact is that as far as Jesus was concerned I was His Father and I knew that He was my son—the son God entrusted to me. So, let me tell you a bit about my family. Families were terribly important in my culture. I hope they still are in yours. My father’s name was Jacob, who traced his ancestry through some famous names in the Bible, like Solomon and Josiah and the great King David. In fact, your Scriptures trace my family all the way back to Abraham, and even according to St. Luke who wrote about all this, even to Adam and Eve. My Dad taught me to be proud of my heritage and to pass on our family traditions of service to others and faith in God to my Child. I tried my best to give him that legacy.**

**I spent my life as a carpenter, making a lot of different things for the people of Nazareth—tables, chairs, benches, even doors and window frames. I also did a lot of work for the local farmers. I made yokes for their oxen. They were fairly quick and easy to make, but I taught my son to take pride in even the simplest jobs. Good carpentry requires great care and careful measurements. Even a yoke has to fit the oxen snugly so as not to chafe their necks. I know that Jesus learned that lesson well and I was really proud when I heard he had said, “Come to me, all who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”**

Well, enough about me, my family, and my work. I know you really want to hear my take on the Christmas story, and I won't disappoint you. It happened pretty much the way the Bible says it did, but it was a lot harder and messier than the way it's portrayed. For instance, the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem took about ten days to walk about ninety miles over rocky, rutted, slippery, muddy roads. While I had secured a donkey for Mary to ride, in her very pregnant condition, I knew she felt every bump and stumble, and I was afraid for her. It tore at my heart when she winced in pain.

I got to thinking that if this was God's plan and she was chosen for this, why did it have to be so hard? Then, it finally occurred to me that's why God had chosen me too. He left it up to me to provide for her and the Child she was about to give birth. That was my job! All throughout that difficult journey, I prayed, asking God for strength and courage.

Then I started to appreciate God's plan. How else could it happen? How else could God come into the world? He had to be fully human so that we could accept him as one of us. He had to be born of a Mother's womb. But, he wasn't merely human flesh. He had to have been conceived directly by God's Spirit. It wouldn't have worked any other way.

You see, the real wonder of Christmas is not the mechanics of how Jesus was born—it is knowing who He is—fully human and fully God. It sounds contradictory, but it's true. Push either one of them too hard and you lose the mystery of Christmas. That is the wisdom I finally gained concerning the nature of my Son, God's Son, which I now pass along to you.

Mary and I talked about this a lot as we struggled toward Bethlehem, but in spite of all our conversation, neither of us were prepared for what was waiting for us. I guess we figured God would take care of us since this was His only begotten Son who he entrusted to us. But, Man, everything about this birth was hard.

As you know when we got to Bethlehem, we couldn't find a room to rent. There was just nowhere to stay. One not-so-kindly innkeeper told us there were some caves on the hill behind his place that other travelers used to shelter their animals. He said maybe we could find some space there.

It wasn't pretty like the manger scenes in your churches and your homes. It was literally a cave, filled with donkeys and sheep, and their droppings. You can't imagine the filth and the odors in that place. But there was no time to even think about it. Mary's labor had begun.

I scooted a couple of donkeys away from a bale of hay for Mary to lie on, quickly built a small fire to warm her, and ran to the well to get some water. By the time I got back poor Mary could no longer stifle her screams. She was in agony. The labor continued throughout most of the night. I never felt so helpless in my life. All I could do was hold her hand and put cool compresses on her forehead.

**Only women who have given birth can imagine what she went through. Remember back then there were no painkillers, no fetal monitors, only spasm after spasm after spasm of agony. Her loud cries pierced the night and pierced my heart. Finally, with a final push and a strangled cry, He appeared.**

**I gently lifted the tiny infant in my rough, callused, grimy hand and he scared the heart out of me as he wailed a terrible cry. Quickly, I realized what a shock it must have been for him to leave the loving warmth of his Mother's womb for the cold, cruel world he had just entered. Now crying with him and for him, I called him by name, Jesus, the name the angel mentioned in my dream so many months ago. I lifted him to my heart and promised him I would always be his protector. He looked up at me and seemed to smile and it looked like he lifted his hand in blessing over me.**

**Mary's blood mingled with the hay as she slumped back and sighed in relief, sweat dripping from her every pore as she cried with us. Quickly, I washed the baby with warm salted water as was our custom. Again, as was customary, I swaddled him in strips of cloth I had torn from an extra cloak I had brought for the journey, and rested him on his Mother's breast. I looked at him intently, studying his face. There he was! There, amid the stench and the straw, the snoring and grunting animals, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, God's only begotten Son was born.**

**Sweetly, Mary sang to him the song she had sung throughout our journey. The song that first came to her when she visited Elizabeth: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness. Behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is His Name." Jesus looked up into her eyes and again seemed to smile in benediction.**

**Again, we cried, Mary and I. These tears, however, were not tears of fear or sorrow or pain. They were tears of joy. A child had been born to us. A savior had been given to us.**

**All of a sudden we weren't alone. Shepherds arrived. With their eyes sparkling and their rough, weather-beaten faces glowing in the firelight they talked so fast and excitedly of angels singing as they bended near the earth. Then, they carefully repeated every word the angels had said. Falling to their knees, they worshiped him.**

**After our visitors left, Mary and I lay down in the straw, with the Baby in a manger I had borrowed from a family of sheep. I looked at her in truly awesome wonder. She was so radiant. So beautiful. I told her that God had chosen the most beautiful, the most magnificent woman ever to be the Mother of His Son; to be the Mother of God.**

**As we laid there holding on to each other for warmth, looking past the pain and perplexity, even with the stench in that cold, crude cave, we took in what was truly a silent, holy night. The stars were shining brightly, bathing the world in love's pure light. It was a night for the ages.**

**I hope I've conveyed that to you. I hope I've touched your imagination today and given you at least some sense of that first Noel—the way it was, in all its humble, terrible, wondrous majesty.”**

**That, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, is the way I hear St. Joseph telling the story of Christmas, the story of the Mother of God giving birth to the one Isaiah the Prophet spoke of as “WONDER COUNSELOR, GOD-HERO; FATHER-FOREVER; PRINCE OF PEACE.**

**May I suggest when you go home today that you might want to take the statue of St. Joseph out from the background and place it a little closer to the Baby and His Mother.**

**MERRY CHRISTMAS!**