

Christmas Morning, 2012

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Remember, please, what it was like in Bethlehem just before sunrise the night Jesus was born. Mary felt the baby stretch his little body in her arms, but – thanks be to God – he stayed asleep and that promised Mary a few more minutes of peace. Joseph rolled over in the straw, almost as if he was trying to bury his head under it in the hope that dawn would not find him so quickly. Outside of the stable the distinct aroma of sheep still hung in the air after the shepherds' visit. The star which had brightened the night now hung low in the Eastern sky. The innkeeper's daughter and her friends had long ago returned home, and the hearths of Bethlehem – the "House of Bread" – were now baking the first loaves of the morning.

At a small farmhouse on the outermost ring of the homes that made up the village, a young soldier stood guard at the front door. The house had been commandeered by his *principalis* – essentially his "chief master sergeant" – to become the Registry for the census that had been ordered. It housed the *beneficiarius*, the officer assigned to supervise the census and the scribe sent to Bethlehem from Damascus, Syria, from Quirinius, to record the names of those registering. More importantly – and the reason for the armed guard – it housed the records themselves. Written by hand by the scribe on sheets of papyrus and immediately copied, the census records were valuable to many people.

Gangs of bandits coveted them as a source of information about who had money and who had none. Roman tax collectors were eager to see the "unedited" versions, knowing that by the time they got their "official" copies many of the numbers would be changed and some names eliminated altogether – friends of the *legati*, the generals, or of the *adiutori*, the adjutants, who had paid significant bribes not to be listed at all, and therefore not have to worry about taxes at all. The rebel bands, the *sciari* and the zealots as they were called, that organized from time to time in Judea would love to simply take them and burn them as a sign of their hoped for revolution. Even the Sadducees, the Levites and the temple priests wanted a look to make sure that their records and the Roman records were tabulating the same information.

And so the door was guarded.

The young man had served five years as a *miles* in the *Cohors II Italica Civium Romanorum*, a foot soldier, to prove his strength, his bravery in battle and perhaps show a little leadership. They were based at Caesarea Philippi, a new city forged of a new technology – hydraulic cement -- which enabled Herod the Great to create a new harbor on the Mediterranean Sea to present as a gift to his emperor.

But because he was from a modestly prosperous family, he had been reassigned as an *immunes*, a soldier who specialized in non-combat duties. Presumably, if he was efficient and stayed out of trouble and kept good company – and if his family bribed the right officers – he would work his way up through the ranks and become a *Centurion*, in charge of a cohort of one hundred soldiers and free to choose his own duty stations.

As Christmas morning broke, he was awake and at attention at his post at the farmhouse door. He was cold, he was hungry, he was exhausted.

And he was deep in thought, and not a little disturbed by what he had seen, or at least by what he had thought he had seen.

The ovens of Bethlehem's bread baking industry occupied the highest point in the village, and so his view of what was going on in the stables of the other side of town was at least partially obscured. But sound traveled well in that evening's weather, and what he heard – or at least what he thought he heard – perplexed him as well.

At the first sight of the blinding light he became terrified, though at least a small corner of his mind wondered why the villagers weren't pouring out of their huts and houses to see this great mystery. A question came unbidden to his imagination: "who else is seeing this? Surely, I am not the only one. Yet the rest of the village seems not to be disturbed."

His knees shook as his heart fought with his feet. As a soldier he was trained – and well trained, and tested and proven – to stand his ground despite any threat, obstacle or fear. But his heart told him that this was something beyond the scope of any of his training. It cried out inside his chest, "Fly, you fool!"

But his heart was, itself, torn. If his feet would dare to break ranks and move, would they run toward the light, or away from it? Would he attack, or desert? His knees quaked at the question. A trained soldier pretty much has only those two verbs to choose from, and one of them is usually right and the other is usually wrong. Usually. That will get you exhausted pretty quickly.

And then he heard the sound, actually two sounds. The first he recognized. It was the unmuffled muffle of a large flock of sheep – maybe several flocks – moving with their shepherds to the place from which the light seemed to be shining. A bleat here and a baa there seemed to confirm his first impression.

Another question, also unbidden. “Something is going on here, something at least weird, maybe even magical. So why is it shepherds and sheep, for the love of Mithras, who are coming to see it?”

And then, the second sound. He could not hear what it said, but he knew what it said. It was a voice, and the voice said, “Fear not.”

And he stopped. Fearing. He stopped fearing.

His knees immediately calmed; the choice between flight or fight now seemed utterly inconsequential.

That night, however, that first Christmas, the light dimmed and the voice faded away and as the smell of the sheep wafted his way, he began to wonder, and even fret – “fretting” is a good word for this – and questions began to assault the mind that was, for a few moments, absolutely at peace.

As dawn approached, and with it the comfortable thought of his replacement and the chance to sleep, he had the presence of mind to rehearse over and again what he had seen and what he had heard and what he had felt.

That, by the way, is a part of the skillset that good leaders must have.

Over the next four decades, as he indeed rose through the ranks and became the Centurion of his *cohors italica*, he would many times find himself confronted by fearful circumstances – in battle or before one, standing in front of an ignorant governor or an angry general, hiding from lightning and thunder or hunkering down in an earthquake. And each time he would recall that midnight clear and the light and the sound of the voice. And each time the echo of that voice in his ear would cast away all fear.

And he lead, and his men followed, and Caesarea Philippi was safe and secure and at peace under his leadership.

And when he heard that voice again – and, of course you knew he would – three-plus-decades after the first time, he immediately knew how to respond.

Forgive me! I have left out an important detail. I have not told you his name. His name was Cornelius.

And the second time he heard the voice, it led him to a house in Joppa, on the seacoast, where a man by the name of Peter was preaching good news about a man who was born in Bethlehem all those years before and whose life, preaching, death and ultimate resurrection was bringing salvation to all who heard of it.

Amen.