

# CHRISTMAS MORNING 2019

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Joseph, a young man of Arimathea, was trying to sleep on the cushion in the stern of his father's boat – if you could call a burlap sack of old folded wool blankets that had been soaked wet so many times they stank of the sea a cushion.

With his eyes closed, he wondered – as he did most nights – whether there would be a dream. Not *if he would dream*, as if sleep unlocked his own imagination and the now mounting collection of his experiences at sea and in caravans on land. For Joseph, the dreams – when they came – did so unbidden and from someplace far from his ψυχη, his soul. Sometimes they were just words, said once, or perhaps recited as one would a psalm, or even sung. More often they were images, of places he had been, and occasionally of places he assumed he would get to someday.

His father, Samuel, was asleep in the cubby at the back of the hold of their boat, where there was a newer and nicer cushion, kept dry, and just barely suitable for the owner of the vessel to call his home away from home.

The two crew members went on watch just as the sun set on the Mediterranean Sea, relieving Joseph. They were indentured to his father, young men of 14 or so years, just a little younger than he was. His father paid fair wages, and would occasionally palm one or the other a bonus for work well done.

Samuel would take over just before first light, to navigate around shoals and other boats on their way to shore to land in the dusk of morning. He had a hold full of cargo, and did not want to get tangled up – as it were – with any of the fishing boats that were hauling their nets after a night's fishing, racing to bring their catch to the best spots on the beach to attract customers.

Landing on Wednesday morning, it would take three hours or so to unload their cargo, rent a wagon and a driver to haul it, and be on their way from the port of Joppa to home in Arimathea. Two long days on the road should do it, and with luck they would be there before sundown on the sabbath, and not have to rest a full day so close to home.

The rush meant that they wouldn't have time to check in on the progress of the boat that was being built for them, now about half finished, and promised to them in four more months. It was half again as long as their 30-foot craft, with a proper cabin and a stone firepot to cook on. Joseph dreamt often of the day when his father would hand the boat over to him to take his turn as head of the family business. And every so often he would dream of a great journey, that would take him through the Pillars of Hercules and north to a large and mysterious island. Dreams came of that place and a sight that he knew he would see someday, of a hill the same size and shape as Mt. Tabor near Nazareth, except it was green and not hazy gray.

At first thought, Arimathea would not seem a likely home base for a merchant family. But for several generations now, Joseph's family had plied a lucrative trade from there. Called in ancient times simply "Ramah," it was the birthplace and home of the great prophet Samuel, and many of the town's women were named for Samuel's mother, Hannah, just as the men were named for their famous forebear, or his father Elkanah.

A morning's walk from Jerusalem, it was close to the Hill Road, which traveled from there west to the sea. And it was just two easy days walk to the Kings Highway, which ran north and south on the far side of the Jordan River.

Though they favored a few cargoes, such as grain and oil and wine, they were clever speculators, taking risks on other commodities. Some

were successful; others were not. A load of valuable herbs and oils and resins from the Incense Road three days to their south was ruined by a rainstorm in transit. They had more success taking cedar boards from the Lebanon Valley to Ephesus where it was used to make small chests.

Generally, business was good. Besides the new boat, the family was also looking to lease a safe place to store some of their goods close to the Via Maris, the road that ran parallel to the seacoast. They also hoped to buy a house in Jerusalem to use when they went there to trade. Unspoken was the hope that a house in Jerusalem would make the family's presence known and welcome in the political circles that chose the membership of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. Samuel's only dream was that his son would achieve enough success to be invited to serve on that great body.

This journey had been relatively quick and easy. They traveled to Epidaurus in southern Greece for a load of high-quality olive oil, pressed just weeks ago and stored in small amphorae. Samuel liked the smaller containers, because he could fit a dozen or so extra in his hold by nesting some in between others, the bottom rows firmly held in the round holes of the cargo planks. Greek oil was much better tasting than oil from Judea, which many people said was hardly worth even the effort to burn in oil lamps. The oil of Southern Greece was much favored by the Roman officers who watched over Jerusalem from their headquarters in the Praetorium, but Samuel knew that the size of his profit depended on whether he could beat other merchants to the market.

From the port city of Joppa, they sailed north along the coast, perpendicular to the prevailing Mediterranean wind, until they could pick up the *Etesian* wind near Ephesus. They would use that northerly wind to tack through the Aegean islands to their destination.

Bringing the single sail of the boat about so many times was exhausting labor for the four of them, who worked as equals in such efforts. From time to time Samuel would call out to furl the sail and throw out the anchor so

that their muscles could recover from the strain. In other words, they stopped for a nap, each collapsing on the deck where they were.

After loading, they would use the same wind to drive them due south toward the Island of Crete. There, an important decision had to be made, based on observations of the weather, long experience on the sea, and occasionally with the advice of a diviner for a few copper coins or a trip to the Temple of Neptune to hear what others were saying – and praying -- about the sea.

If the weather had been relatively mild, they could catch the *Vendavel* breeze that charged from the west through the Pillars of Hercules and hundreds of miles later was still sufficient to push their boat due east to the coast of Gaza.

If the weather had been more difficult, yet another choice had to be made. Often a breeze called the *Lodos* would blow up from the southwest. If they sailed around to the windward side of the island they could pick it up for a very quick but more dangerous passage across the eastern half of the sea. The trick was that a couple of times a year, the *Lodos* would reach gale force, and a 10-meter craft like Samuel's would not survive the enormous waves.

Once in a while, at first, Joseph would share a dream that had come to him about the winds and the waves. Samuel soon learned to trust his son's dreams, sometimes urging him to trust the *Lodos*, sometimes urging a stay on Crete of up to a week before smooth sailing was guaranteed. Conversations with other watermen both on the island and back home suggested that by heeding these nocturnal warnings, Samuel had both avoided disaster and made some profit by landing ahead of other traders.

This trip they took the risk and it paid off – or was about to. They would get their olive oil to Arimathea and then Jerusalem a full week before anyone else, and therefore fetch a better price for it.

It was a good thing too, because Samuel had spent some of the money set aside for fresh water and sea rations on another precious cargo. He was able to buy five bags, each as big as he could lift, of finely ground tin ore. Just south of Arimathea and Jerusalem there were great copper mines, but a portion of tin was required to turn the copper into bronze, and there was no local source of tin anywhere south of Rome.

Samuel and Joseph had heard stories in tavernas all around the Mediterranean that there were great tin mines in the far north of the empire, on the great island where the Britons and the Celts lived. The ore there was mined by small men with light hair, very little language, and who didn't so much dress as cover themselves with blue mud to keep warm. The ore Samuel had bought, he was told, came from that far northern place and was superior in purity to Roman ore.

The larger boat, they hoped, would allow them to pass safely through the pillars of Hercules and travel north, up the coastline of Gaul and across the channel to Britain. That trade in tin ore would bring them wealth above and beyond their hopes and dreams.

Such were the thoughts running through Joseph's head on his cushion as he tried to get some sleep.

Perhaps an hour or two later, he awoke, hearing the voices of the two crewmen speaking loudly, and it was evident that they were terrified. Terrified and amazed.

As he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, Samuel was surprised to see that the sky was full of light. It was still night, yet it was brighter than a full moon reflecting on a calm sea.

"Is this a dream?" he thought to himself.

The light was in the east, high in the sky, and glared so harshly bright when you looked towards it that you could see nothing else. No sign of coastline, no nearby boats traveling in that direction. After just a few seconds it blinded Joseph, so that he had to turn away and close his eyes for a minute. That physical pain was no dream.

The conversation on the deck was chaotic. Where did the light come from? How did it just suddenly appear? Was the light a sign of good or evil? Would they still see it during the day? How could they navigate safely to shore without being able to see in that direction?

The volume of the conversation wakened Samuel, and he climbed out of his cubby onto the deck. He too looked at the light, and then was forced to look away. No one spoke while they waited for Samuel to offer some wisdom.

He took a deep breath, and smelled fish. That meant they were close enough to the shore to be careful of other boats and to begin looking for the landmarks that would steer them to port.

But details were unrecognizable in the backlight of this dazzling surprise.

Samuel shouted to haul the sail and to throw off the anchor. Counting the knots, he could see that the water was still some 60 feet deep, the boat still safe from the shoals near land.

They waited.

Waited for the sun to come up and to see whether then they could see enough to navigate safely. But as far as they could tell, the only change was that the sky around the light was now light blue instead of black. Nothing yet could be made out on shore.

Hunger made them realize how long they had been sitting there, and Samuel broke the last piece of hardtack into pieces to share around. Their

next meal, if they couldn't move, would have to be fish, served cold and raw.

More waiting, and more silence ... until Samuel reached out and touched Joseph's arm.

"Do you still have the stone?" he asked.

"The stone?" Joseph replied, fighting the fatigue from their hours-long vigil. "Oh, the needle stone. Yes, it is in my bag under the cushion."

Joseph got up and pulled aside his cushion to reveal two items. The first was his walking stick – his staff, he called it -- and he took it with him everywhere, even though everyone told him it was of no use on his boat.

Tied to his staff was a small bag. He reached in and fished out a small blueish gray stone, about the size of a hen's egg. And, as he expected, there was a small steel needle stuck to it as if it held by dry resin.

"Does the needle still always land pointing the same direction when you drop it on the stone?"

"Yes, at night when I have played with it, it always points to the stars in the bear constellations, the great bear and the lesser bear. And it points close to that star in the bear's tail that always stays in the same place, even while the other stars move."

Samuel smiled at his son's observations. "So, when you drop the needle on the stone, it almost always points to the north."

"Almost always."

"Well, we'll have to pray to God that almost will be enough."

And the two of them, for a minute, each bowed their heads and prayed. It would have amused them to know that each, independently, had recited the first verse of Psalm 121, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills. From where is my help to come?"

Samuel held the stone tightly in his two hands while Joseph dropped the needle from a foot or so above. As it just touched the stone, it seemed to twist itself and pointed just off the port side near the bow of the boat.

“So, if that is north ...” Samuel began to say.

Joseph finished, “then we must steer east or that way.” He pointed off to the near starboard.

And so they made their way on a severely reefed sail, dropping the needle on the stone every few minutes to check their bearing, and weighing anchor about every hour to measure their depth. Brightest in the middle of the night, it seemed to them that the light had faded just a little bit as morning approached.

It was impossible to tell exactly what time it was that their keel struck the sand bar near Joppa, but their elation at reaching dry ground overcame their exhaustion – at least for a few minutes. They dragged the boat up the beach as far as they could, to keep it away from the next rising tide. Samuel went off in search of food. The two crewmen dug a pit in the sand and began to search for driftwood to start a campfire.

And Joseph returned to his cushion, stretched out and wondered if he could sleep now.

Sleep he did, but while sleeping, a vivid dream came.

It was as if he was back on a boat sailing ahead of a brisk wind. A voice spoke his name, “Joseph!” When he turned to the voice, he saw that it was coming from the great light itself.

“Joseph, I have heard the prayers of your fathers and mothers before you, and know of their faithfulness. You will travel far to the north to find what you are looking for. Yes, you will find tin, enough to make you wealthy. But the cargo you will carry with you is worth far more than tin or bronze or silver or gold. You will carry with you the highest hope of

your people stretching back to the days of Moses. This light you see is a sign of the coming of the Messiah. And with you he will see and learn that the wisdom and the power of God reigns not just here, but can be found also in distant places and in foreign people.

Suddenly, Joseph saw himself standing on a hill looking ahead at the mountain like Tabor. He rested on his staff, and while he did it sank into the ground and burst into bloom, despite the fact that it was mid-winter. The young man standing next to him smiled at this little miracle.

The voice spoke again from the light. "Joseph, I give you a sign that this will be. Look in your father's bags."

Still dreaming, Joseph found a bronze cup in one of the bags of tin ore. It was plain, and beautiful in its simplicity and utility.

And then another voice spoke. "This is the cup of a new Covenant. Drink this in remembrance of me."

The original voice spoke again. "Joseph, when your tasks are finished, return this cup to me on that mountain."