

The Ballyhoo in Bethlehem

by Thelma Wells

The drums roll as the ringmaster gets ready to make his announcement. "Ladies and gentlemen . . ." The tension rises. "You are about to be dazzled by the most phenomenal event of the evening." Excitement! Applause! Screams of delight!

And the performance begins. The animals and horseback riders and acrobats perform outrageous feats to astound and entertain everyone within eyeshot.

Among the thousands of things that blow my mind about God is that he, of all people, could have dazzled the world with the grandest event of all time. He could have heralded his arrival on earth with the thunderous applause of the angelic host and the clash of a million cymbals. Yet the Almighty, in the person of Jesus Christ, his Son, the Incarnate Word, the Prince of Peace, the Fairest of Ten Thousand, the Lily of the Valley, the Bright Morning Star, the Rose of Sharon, the Wonderful Counselor, the Prince of Peace, came down to earth to live among us in the most ordinary way imaginable.

Just think about it! Mary, Jesus' mother, hid the Savior of the world in her mortal womb for nine months. She probably experienced morning sickness and giggled at her baby's restless kicks. We have no reason to believe that her pregnancy was anything other than ordinary.

And yet this teenage virgin who was engaged to be married became pregnant prior to the wedding ceremony. She never expected God to send an angel to her with such stunning news. It was like being congratulated as the grand prize winner of a contest she had never entered! But Mary did not balk. Rather, she willingly submitted herself to an Almighty overshadowing. And her young fiancé believed her when she told him she'd never slept with a man! Today, if a girl gets pregnant, she becomes the talk of the community or church. Multiply the scandal to the nth degree in Mary's culture! How outrageous that God would select a teenage, unwed girl to be the mother of his Son.

Equally outrageous were the circumstances of that child's birth. You would think, him being the Son of God and all, that during all the months of preparing to welcome the coming King, his earthly parents would have given more thought as to where this baby would be born. You can calculate on nine fingers about what month your baby is going to arrive, so Mary and Joseph knew the child would come during the time they would need to go to Bethlehem to register for the census. You'd think they would have made preparations accordingly.

Now, I realize they didn't have toll-free telephone numbers or the Internet to make reservations at a hotel or the local midwife's house, but you would think that they would know somebody in Bethlehem to stay with, or they could have asked someone going to town on business to make reservations for them at the appointed time. But none of that happened.

They probably thought like some of us: Well, if we leave early enough we can get there in time to find some place. Perhaps they did leave early. But a lot of people were going to the same place for the same reason, so the highway was more crowded than they anticipated. By the time they arrived, all the rooms were taken, all the houses were full, and all the tents were at capacity.

Behind one of the inns, the couple found a barn with a stable where the horses, cows, goats, sheep, pigs, and chickens were housed. Now there is no way that I would allow my baby to be born outdoors, let alone in some animal shelter. I'm just proud enough to think my child deserves better. I would have demanded a comfy bed, clean linens, adequate lighting, and a competent healthcare professional. But apparently God's ways are not my ways. He could have snapped his fingers and a greater facility than the Mayo Clinic would have appeared to tend to every need Jesus or his mother might have had. But the almighty God – majestic, regal, royal, sovereign, higher than any mountain, wider than any ocean – chose to make his appearance on earth in a bed of straw.

God's birth in a barn has made a statement to the world ever since: It doesn't matter where you're born or the condition of your surroundings; you can accomplish his ordained purpose for your life.

Before time began, the Father had an extraordinary plan for an ordinary girl: a common virgin would bear God

incarnate. My mother was an unwed teenager when she had me. Her mother, my grandmother, was so ashamed of her that she hid her in the house for months. After I was born, my grandmother forced my mother and me to live in servants' quarters in a prestigious section of Dallas. But God had a plan for me, too – an illegitimate black girl, born out of wedlock, in poverty, in the South, in the inner city.

Can anything good come out of illegitimacy and poverty? You'd better believe it, baby! God knew that one day I would be talking to you, sharing his extraordinary plan to redeem and use each and every one of us. In spite of the circumstances of my birth, I was not a mistake. My sainted great-grandmother, who raised me from the time I was two years old, made sure I knew this crucial truth. "Baby," she said, "there was never a seed planted in a mother's womb that God didn't know about and have special plans for. You just remember that. You are somebody!"