

My First Noel

We can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures.

~Thornton Wilder

We all know the story -- how Jesus was born in a stable after Joseph and Mary journeyed to Bethlehem and couldn't find an inn with a vacant room. And we've also seen it depicted on Christmas cards and in Nativity scenes -- Mary in her flowing gown, the well-kept stable, the Christ Child wrapped in spotless white or baby blue swaddling clothes. But what was the first Christmas really like? I've often wondered about that, and now I think I know.

It was almost Christmas 2004, and a few of us had made the long trip from Kampala, Uganda, to a remote mountainous region in the north. We were taking medicine, school materials, and the Gospel to a primitive agrarian and goat-herder people known as the Ik.

It was the furthest from modern civilization that I had ever been. The people's dress couldn't have been simpler -- colorful beads and unfinished swaths of fabric that they draped over their shoulders or wrapped around themselves. Their homes were mud huts. We pitched our tents inside the stick-fence borders of their villages.

Each day we trekked along goat trails to another village, where people gathered to meet and listen to us. I'd brought a whiteboard and colored markers, and told them stories from the Bible as I illustrated the main events and characters.

In the third village we visited, a mother had recently given birth. I knocked on the door of the "medical center," which was no more than four mud walls.

As I stepped inside, I was met by the smell of stale air mingled with smoke. There, on the hay-strewn floor, beside a few hot coals, sat a thin woman nursing a tiny baby boy wrapped in a towel. The mother looked up at me, her eyes filled with anxiety. "My breasts are dry," she said, in her own language, gesturing to the small bundle that suckled hopelessly.

A little light streamed in through a small opening in the wall that served as the only window. As I looked around the room, trying to imagine what it would be like to give birth under such circumstances, village sounds drifted in -- bleats from the goats, little children's laughter as they played, and faint, scratchy music from someone's radio that was hooked to a hand-cranked generator, the Iks' only source of electricity.

I stepped outside and called Katrina, a Czechoslovakian linguist who had come along to make a documentary about the Ik. I explained the situation, and we quickly agreed to give the mother what was left of our milk.

As Katrina went for the milk, I asked the mother if I could hold the baby. She smiled and handed him to me. His towel fell open and I could see that he was still unwashed, and the umbilical cord still hung from his navel.

A breeze swept through the tiny window. The mother shivered and pulled her wrap tightly around her shoulders. The temperature had dropped unexpectedly in the last week.

Then a thought from my childhood came back -- If I could have seen the newborn Jesus, what would I have given Him? The similarity of this situation seemed to cry out to me. No, I told myself, the parallel is absurd. This is no Christ Child, and this isn't Bethlehem two thousand years ago!

But the truth rang even louder. Did it matter that this baby was no one special? Did it matter that his mother was a lowly tribeswoman who few in this world knew or cared about?

Every detail of this new birth mattered to God, who at that moment was peering down from Heaven, proud and pleased with His new creation. And this was, in truth, probably a more accurate picture of the world into which Jesus was born than the idealized one depicted in most Christmas cards, Nativity scenes, and paintings.

What would I have given Him? The thought came again, followed by Jesus' own words from the Gospels, "If you have two shirts, give to him who has none."

I had two shirts. In fact, I had two on and plenty more at home. I didn't need both of these. Meanwhile, in my arms, I held a representation of that wonderful birth celebrated by billions. Suddenly, I felt an unexplainable joy. Here was my chance to give the Lord something real at Christmas!

Taking off one shirt, I gently wrapped the baby boy in it. How handsome he looked now, and how proud his mother seemed, the smile on her face reflecting the gratitude in her heart.

The music from the radio outside came through stronger now -- Christmas music! "Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Let Earth receive her King!"

He had truly come. This wasn't a mere stage reenactment with actors in costume. This was real -- as real and as close as I had ever come to knowing what the first Christmas might have been like.

The song on the radio finished and another began. "The first Noel the angel did say was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay; in fields where they lay tending their sheep, on a cold winter's night that was so deep...."

There, far away from civilization and the usual glitter of Christmas, with humble goat herders in the remote mountains of Uganda, I experienced my own First Noel.

~Nyx Martinez

