

Shelter Seeking



The long trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem (80 miles) is captured in a single image: the pregnant Mary on a donkey, Joseph leading the way. There is no inn, and no innkeeper.

Two Faces

The map of the exhausting journey, the past experience of the couple, and the emotions and foreboding of things to come, are written all over the faces of Joseph and Mary. But fatigue is only part of what we see on Joseph's face. There is also a certain weariness, made of fear and lassitude, and a recurrent question, why do we have to do this? And there is more; underneath the sweat and grime of the road, there is a steely determination belying the fear in Joseph's eyes. He has a goal, he has a mission. It is not only the enrollment ordered by Caesar Augustus; Joseph has a pregnant wife, soon to give birth.

Mary, now wearing the veil of a married woman, is sitting sideways on the donkey's back. Her left hand rests on a rolled blanket, her right hand holds on to the mane of the animal. There is a different look from that of Joseph in Mary's face. She looks into the distance as if she would see the future through wide open doors. Her eyes reflect wonderment mixed with apprehension. Joseph is searching the road for a shelter, Mary's gaze seems to be picturing in her mind a cradle and swaddling clothes.

Seeking Shelter

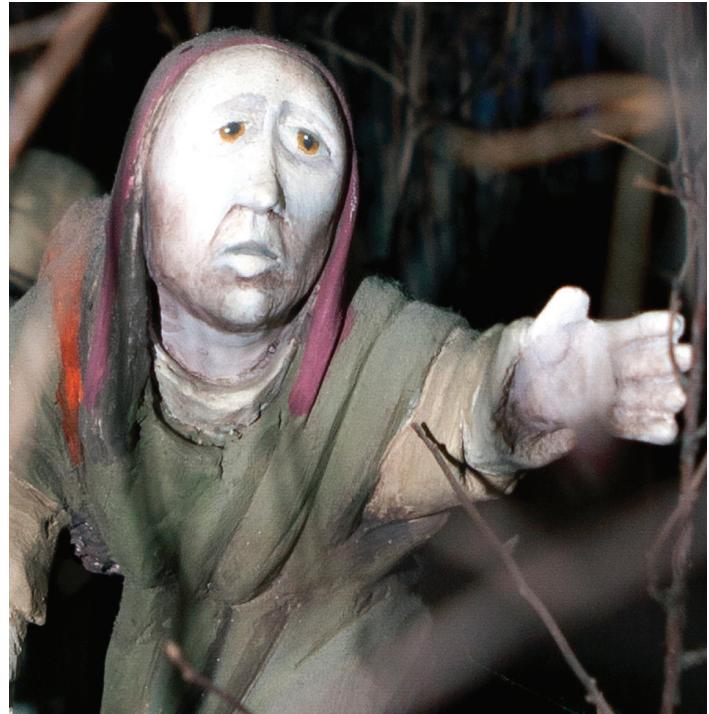
Events of the Bible and salvation history frequently led to reenactments and the creation of special customs. The shelter seeking of Joseph and Mary is one of those events. The custom is a so-called compensatory gesture or a spiritual compensation for the innkeeper's refusal to extend hospitality to the holy couple. The custom is practiced in different ways and at different dates in Advent. The purpose of this custom is to open homes to the visit of the Holy Family, sometimes only to Our Lady, or to the Christ Child in the manger.

The figures travel from home to home where they are greeted with flowers and candles, and venerated in song and prayer. On Christmas the "Holy Family" is returned to the church. Depending on the various cultures the custom is practiced all through Advent; it may only start with the feast of the Immaculate Conception (Carrying of Our Lady or Frauentragen), or take place during the last week before Christmas (Posada). Where the holy couple was once rejected or found only locked doors, people now open their doors and extend hospitality in the name of Jesus, the rejected one.

The Known Unknown

Intensely present in this scene, Saint Joseph is a familiar feature of every Christmas scene. But for many centuries people paid him scant attention. So eager was the Church to emphasize Jesus' divine paternity that Joseph, the surrogate father was consigned for a time to the shadow-lands. After the Reformation, Saint Joseph began to figure more prominently in popular devotion under the title of "provider and protector." Patron of the Universal Church, Saint Joseph is hailed for his active devotion to the Divine Child and his mother. He is the patron saint of many countries (for example, Austria, Canada, Mexico and Peru) and of many causes: for a good death, chastity, orphans, for marriage and families, inns and innkeepers, refugees, fundraisers, carpenters and woodcutters.

Saints were influential in deepening the devotion to Saint Joseph. Among them we count Teresa of Avila, Francis de Sales, and Bernadette Soubirous. However, one of the more beautiful characterizations of Saint Joseph is found in the *Akathist Hymn* (7th c.). It offers a skillful blend of honest questioning on the part of Joseph, with a prayerful praise of God's supernatural intervention and guidance: "Filled with a storm of contradictory thoughts, the wise Joseph was greatly disturbed: until then he had seen you a virgin, and now he suspected you of secret guilt, All-blameless one! Learning that your conception was of the Holy Spirit, he cried out: Alleluia."





Advent Spirit

Advent is a season of coming and becoming. It teaches waiting. Waiting is not a strong point of contemporary culture. Many people equate waiting with waste, a waste of time. If we are asked to wait, we get nervous and guilty. Advent is a season of waiting because it is a season of spiritual anticipation. All important realities of life need a period of patient growth: a lasting friendship, a change of heart, a work of art, and foremost a healthy baby. The typical verbs of Advent are germinating, becoming, and ripening.

This is why Mary is the chief figure of Advent. She had to wait. Patiently, she had to create space for the child in her womb, in her life. She waited nine months to look into the face of her Savior and ours. But she was actively engaged in this process of waiting and becoming. She developed a new awareness about herself, her life, the world, and, of course, about God.

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