

Tabitha's Travels



A Family Story for Advent

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Second edition published in 2010 by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., P.O. Box 2607, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.

Cover design and illustrations: Hile Illustration and Design, Ann Arbor, MI.

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ISBN 978-0-8254-4172-1

Printed in the United States of America

10 11 12 13 14 / 5 4 3 2 1

A Story for Advent

Stir us up, O Lord, to make ready for your only begotten Son. May we be able to serve you with purity of soul through the coming of him who lives and reigns.

Advent Prayer



Advent. *Adventus. Ecce advenit Dominator Dominus.* Behold, the Lord, the Ruler, is come.

Reaching back two millennia to the birth of the Christ child, and forward to his reign on earth, the tradition of Advent is a threefold celebration of the birth of Jesus, his eventual second coming to earth, and his continued presence in our lives here and now. God in our past, God in our future, God in our present.

Advent.

It started with people going hungry to purify themselves and prepare themselves for holy living. A *fast*, we call it, and such a fast was ordered by the Council of Saragossa in A.D. 381. For three weeks before Epiphany (a feast in January celebrating the divine revelation of Jesus to the gentile Magi), the people were to prepare themselves by fasting and praying. The tradition spread to France in 581 by decree of the Council of Macon, and to Rome and beyond thereafter. Gregory the First refined the season to its present form in about 600 when he declared that it should start the fourth Sunday before Christmas.

Fasting is no longer a part of Advent in most homes and churches (though it wouldn't be

a bad idea). For us, Advent means taking time each day, for the three or four weeks before Christmas, to center our thoughts on Truth Incarnate lying in a feeding trough in Bethlehem. It's a time of worship, a time of reflection, a time of focus, and a time of family communion. In the midst of December's commotion and stress, Advent is a few moments to stop, catch your breath, and renew your strength from the only One who can provide true strength.

Tabitha's Travels is one tool you can use to implement a time of Advent in your family—whether yours is a traditional family structure, or one of the many combinations of fathers and mothers, stepparents and grandparents, and guardians and children that make up today's families. You can use this story during Advent even if your family is just you.

Set aside a few minutes each day, beginning the fourth Sunday before Christmas (see the chart on page 159) to light the Advent candles, read the *Tabitha* story and devotional for that day, and pray together. You can also use an Advent calendar (see "Advent Customs," page 9), sing a favorite Christ-centered carol (Frosty's a nice guy but has no place in Advent), and have a time of family sharing.

In our family we set aside fifteen minutes each night before the youngest child goes to bed. Our Advent wreath has a traditional place on a table next to the living room reading chair. The children take turns lighting the candles and reading all the open windows of the Advent calendar, and then adding that day's reading at the end. By the light of the Advent candles I read the last few lines of the previous day's *Tabitha* story, and then go on to today's story and devotion.

Afterward my wife leads in prayer as we all hold hands. We close by singing one verse of a carol. Then the youngest child lights her own "bedside" candle from the Advent candles and makes her way to bed by candlelight. (This is only for children who are old enough to know how to use a candle safely.) Even when work or visiting takes us out of town, we carry *Tabitha's Travels* and a candle with us and keep our Advent tradition. Sometimes we even get to share our tradition with those we are visiting.

Simple, short, spiritual. A wonderful way to keep the shopping, traffic, rehearsals, concerts, parties, and all the other preparations of December in balance with the reality of God in our lives—past, present, and future.

Advent. *Adventus. Ecce advenit Dominator Dominus.* Behold, the Lord, the Ruler, is come. May God richly bless you and your family as you prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ!



Crossroads

Light the first violet candle.

Elisha, come on!” Tabitha pleaded. “We have to move!” She tugged at the reins with all her might, but the donkey just sat in the middle of the road looking at Tabitha with innocent eyes while the rest of the caravan lumbered by. “Don’t look at me like you don’t know what I’m saying,” Tabitha scolded, the leather reins cutting deep grooves in the palms of her hands. “You know exactly what you’re doing!” Tabitha gave one last mighty yank on the reins just as the donkey decided to obey. The donkey stood, the reins went slack, and with all her weight pulling against something that was suddenly no longer there, Tabitha fell backward, sitting down hard in the dust of the trail. A loud laugh slapped at her ears from behind.

“Such fine entertainment you provide, Tabitha,” the man laughed from atop his horse. “It will provide a good story for the campfire tonight!” The tall, thin man had a dark beard, and such a long neck that Tabitha thought he looked like a giraffe she had once seen.

“Uncle Hasbah,” Tabitha whined, “this dumb donkey won’t move!”

“That’s why he’s called a donkey!” Hasbah replied. Then, more seriously, he added, “Perhaps he simply misses the weight of your grandmother on his back.”

“Perhaps,” Tabitha said, fondly remembering her grandmother riding this very same donkey.

“Here, hold my horse,” Hasbah said, dismounting, “and I’ll show you how to get a stubborn donkey to obey.” Tabitha did as she was told, taking the reins of the horse as the line of camels, sheep, and shepherds continued to pass by. That her brothers got to be those shepherds while she herself had to cook, clean, and take care of donkeys always frustrated Tabitha. *I can do as much as any boy*, she thought.

“Now, you must take the reins just so,” Tabitha’s uncle said, wrapping the leather around his hand, “and then give quick little pulls that tell the donkey you are his master.” Hasbah did this, but the donkey refused to move.

Irritated, Hasbah pulled harder, but the donkey dug in his feet such that no man in the world could have budged him. But Hasbah was determined to try, and bent low at the waist, leaning back with all his weight. Just then a goat from the passing caravan trotted over and bit Hasbah on the rear end. Hasbah jumped up howling, spun around, and started kicking at the goat. Seeing a reason to move at last, the *donkey* trotted up and bit Hasbah on the rear end.

Tabitha was laughing so hard, she had to hold her sides, but Hasbah just began sputtering angry words as he tried to kick both the donkey *and* the goat. Just then, another man on horseback rode up.

“Brother, what are you doing?” the second man yelled. “Why are you being so cruel to these poor animals?”

“Me! Being cruel! Why I . . . I . . .”

“Stop joking around now,” his brother admonished, “and get those animals moving. We must make the Jerusalem road by sundown!”

Hasbah was still fuming and sputtering as Tabitha walked back over to him. Handing him the reins of the horse, she said, “Thank you for a fine lesson, Uncle Hasbah. You surely showed me how to get a donkey moving!”

Hasbah stopped, then finally began laughing at himself. “You are most welcome, my brother’s daughter,” he said with a bow. “Please call on me any time you need a lesson.” With that, he mounted his horse and galloped off toward the head of the line.

With a sigh, Tabitha yanked at the reins of the donkey, and this time he started walking, followed by the goat. As she watched her uncle riding off ahead of her, Tabitha thanked Jehovah once again for her wonderful family.

Tabitha liked the life of the shepherds. Even though she wasn’t allowed to watch a flock herself, she liked traveling from this place to that, seeing new sights and meeting new people. Of course, it was usually her brothers who got to have the really fun adventures—fighting off wild animals and thieves, going inside the walls of the biggest cities, and best of all,

entering the temple in Jerusalem. *As a girl, I don't get to do any of that*, she thought again with a sigh. But still, being part of a shepherd family was a happy life.

The sun was beginning to slide out of the sky as the caravan snaked over the top of a round, grassy hill. Before them, Tabitha saw a valley rich in grasses, and on the other side, a road running from left to right. Tabitha sucked in her breath at the sight of the road—roads often meant danger from thieves, or worse, Romans. She much preferred it when their family stayed out in the country, far from any roads. Except, of course, when they got to camp at a city.

Far ahead, at the front of the line that was just reaching the floor of the valley, Tabitha saw her father waving his arm over his head in a circle. At once the stream of animals and people began curving to the left, forming itself into a giant oval as it had a thousand times before. *Time to make camp*, Tabitha thought. But she wished her father had chosen some other place, not next to a road.

As the caravan continued to inch forward, and Tabitha got closer to the road, she saw that it ran far off into the distance to the right, but to the left it ran into a steep canyon of angry rocks. Tabitha gulped, thinking what a good place that would be for thieves to hide.

But then Tabitha remembered all the good times she'd had climbing such rocks. When they were younger, her brothers would have make-believe adventures in such places. They'd play Robbers and Romans, fighting each other using sticks for swords. There were only three brothers, though, so the sides were always uneven. Then one day Tabitha had climbed into the rocks to find them. She had picked up a stick and sided with her brother playing the Roman. At first the boys stopped in mid-fight and stared; girls just don't do such things, after all. But then her oldest brother said, "Why not?" and so Tabitha was allowed to play. From then on she was a part of every game, whenever her chores didn't get in the way at least.

When she first saw Tabitha playing with the boys, Tabitha's mother shrieked like a mad camel. Sputtering and scolding, she dragged Tabitha back to the cook tent and put her to work. But then she talked with her husband Eliakim, and together they decided that, really, there's nothing wrong with a girl playing with her brothers, so Tabitha was allowed to have adventures with them once again. As long as they stayed far out from camp, where the other women couldn't see!

Of course, that was only the first of many times that Tabitha would bend people's ideas

about what a girl should and shouldn't do. One time her brothers were running from a lioness protecting her cubs. They ran right past Tabitha, who calmly picked up a rock and threw it at the cat as if it were just another tree stump. The cat ran away and the boys were saved, but the only thing the women of the camp could talk about was how improper it was for Tabitha to be throwing rocks!

Another time Tabitha was sewing a new tunic and got the idea that, if you sewed two pieces of leather together just right, they would fit around a man's hands and keep them from getting cut when working with ropes. Thus Tabitha's father was the first man in all of Palestine to have hand coverings. But the women of the camp just complained that girls shouldn't be inventing ways of making work easier.

And then there was the time just the week before when a sheep had fallen into a deep and narrow crevasse. Tabitha's three uncles all stood around shaking their heads and scratching their beards, trying to figure out how to rescue the animal. Tabitha had an idea, but the men kept shooshing her to be quiet. Finally Tabitha left the three men, got a length of rope, and tied it around her waist. Returning to the crevasse where the three uncles were still arguing, she handed the other end of the rope to her uncle Hasbah and climbed down into the crevasse. It wasn't until she jerked on the rope that the red-faced, angry uncles finally noticed what she was doing. They pulled her up easily, and in her arms she carried the wayward sheep. Their faces turning from angry-red to embarrassed-red, the uncles mumbled their thanks, and walked away complaining about a girl not knowing her place!

Finally the mass of people and animals came to a stop, having wrapped itself around the hillsides of the valley. Tabitha saw her brothers each taking their flocks off in different directions, searching for grassy hollows in which to bed their sheep for the night. As for Tabitha and the other women, they knew their jobs without even discussing it. While the men set up the many tents that would house the dozens of aunts, uncles, cousins, and hired workers, the women would start setting up the cook tent and preparing the evening meal. Almost before Tabitha or her donkey had come to a stop, one of the women had a fire started with some dried brush.

Once more, we start our old game, Tabitha sighed to herself. Then, hitching the donkey to a bush, she started unloading its burden of flour, oils, spices, and dried meat. Her thoughts

turned to the days ahead, when they'd be visiting a great city and meeting many travelers from distant lands. She thought about the sellers and their goods, about the games she would play with other children, and about the deals her father would make.

It was somewhere in all that thinking, when her chores had become so routine that she didn't even realize she was doing them, and the warmth of the afternoon sun was starting to make her eyelids heavy and her brain begin dreaming of sleep . . . it was just then, as she finished unloading one side of the donkey's pack such that he was leaning out of balance, and the flies had decided that the donkey's head would be a good resting place . . . it was just then, that Tabitha heard the first of the screams.



Tabitha is not what people expect her to be! Her mother, her father, her aunts and uncles—everyone has an idea of how she should behave, what she should be like, what her future will be. So they're surprised, and sometimes upset, when their ideas about Tabitha don't match the reality of Tabitha!

It was just the same with Jesus.

Even though God had told Israel exactly how he was planning to send their Messiah, when Jesus finally arrived, he was not what people expected! Priests, fishermen, carpenters, and midwives—everyone had an idea of how the Messiah should arrive, what he should do when he got here, and how he should shape their futures. So they were surprised, and often upset, when their ideas about Jesus didn't match the reality of Jesus!

Advent is a time for us to focus on the real Jesus of Scripture; a time to get rid of our own ideas about who he is and what he should do for us. It's a time to learn from him how to be servants, to be humble, to love.

We may not fully understand what Jesus is all about, but take these next few weeks to think and learn about the true Christ of Christmas. It's what Advent is all about!