

From GRAND Junction #103
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I. First part of "Holy City"

II. Easter, with its message of hope and joy, is the center of our Christian faith. For us who have taken the name of followers of His Star, this is especially true. The Star of Bethlehem heralded the coming of the Christ, the Prince of Peace. The song of the angels has rung down through the ages, and the hearts of men everywhere are stirred by its message of peace and goodwill. But it is not in the Star that the hopes of mankind find their supreme fulfillment. It remained for Jesus to suffer and die upon the Cross and to rise again from the dead that we might know the final triumph over sin and death. We, too, must bear the Cross, but as we look beyond the shadow of the Cross to the glory of the Resurrection Morn, we receive again the glad assurance that because He lives, we, too, shall live.

III. Scripture - Palm Sunday- Mark 11: 1-10

IV. Song- "The Palms"

V. Introduction to story-

You have heard the story of Artabon, the Other Wise Man. Artabon, too, was a follower of the Star. His quest had led him for a lifetime over land and sea, searching for the King whose coming the Star had foretold, until at last he, too, came to the Cross. Here his quest was ended, and his hopes fulfilled. At the foot of the Cross, he found his King.

One of the Magi, the wise men of Persia, Artabon had studied the prophecies which had foretold that a King should arise out of Israel, a King in whom mankind should find a revelation of life everlasting, incorruptible, and immortal. He had seen the Star in the East; and Artabon had gathered his treasures to lay at the feet of the King - three perfect jewels, a sapphire, a ruby and a pearl. He had made rendezvous to meet his friends Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar - at the ancient temple of the Seven Spheres in Babylonia, ten days' ride from Ecbatana, his home.

But Artabon was destined not to keep that rendezvous. While on the road, he came upon a man who had been beaten and robbed. Artabon cared for the stranger as best he could; then he took him on to an inn and arranged for his keep. He gave the innkeeper his sapphire to pay for the wounded man's care.

The ruby he gave to one of the soldiers of Herod to save the life of a babe in Bethlehem from the sword. Then with his last remaining jewel, he followed the Holy Family to Egypt - once again to failure and frustration.

Three and thirty years of the life of Artabon had passed away, and he was still a pilgrim and a seeker after light. His hair, once darker than the cliffs of Zagros, was now white as the wintry snow that covered them. His eyes, that once flashed like flames of fire, were dull as embers smoldering among the ashes.

Worn and weary and ready to die, but still looking for the King, he had come for the last time to Jerusalem. He often visited the Holy City before, and had searched all of its lanes and crowded hovels and black prisons without finding any trace of the family of Nazarenes who had fled from Bethlehem so long ago. But now it seemed as if he must make some more effort, and something whispered in his heart that, at last, he might succeed.

It was the season of the Passover. The city was thronged with strangers. The children of Israel, scattered in far lands, had returned to the temple for the great feast, and there had been confusion of tongues in the streets for many days.

But on this day a singular agitation was visible in the multitude. The sky was veiled with a portentous gloom. Currents of excitement seemed to flash through the crowd. A secret tide was sweeping them all one way. The clatter of sandals and the soft, thick sound of thousands of bare feet shuffling over the stones flowed increasingly along the street that leads to the Damascus gate.

Artabon joined a group from his own country, Parthian Jews who had come up to keep the Passover, and inquired of them the cause of the tumult and where they were going.

"We are going", they answered, "to the place called Golgotha, outside the city walls, where there is to be an execution. Have you not heard? Two famous robbers are to be executed, and with them another, called Jesus of Nazareth, who has done many wonderful works among the people, so that they love him greatly. But the priests and the elders have said that he must die because he gave himself out to be the Son of God. And Pilate has sent him to the Cross because he said that he was the King of the Jews."

VI. Scripture - Good Friday - Matthew 27: 27-53.

VII. Second part of the Song - "Holy City".

VIII. Story -

"The King of the Jews! How strangely these familiar words fell upon the tired heart of Artabon. They had led him for a lifetime over land and sea. And now they came to him mysteriously, like a message of despair. The King had arisen and had been cast out. He was about to perish. Perhaps he was already dying. Could it be the same who had been born in Bethlehem thirty-three years ago, at whose birth the star had appeared in the heaven, and of whose coming the prophets had spoken?"

Artabon's heart beat unsteadily with that troubled, doubtful apprehension which is the excitement of old age. But he said within himself, "The ways of God are stranger than the thoughts of men; and it may be I shall find the King, at last, in the hands of his enemies, and shall come in time to offer my pearl for his ransom before he dies."

So the old man followed the multitude with slow and painful steps toward the Damascus gate of the city. Just beyond the entrance of the guardhouse a troop of Macedonian soldiers came down the street, dragging a young girl with torn dress and disheveled hair. As the Magian paused to look with compassion, she broke suddenly from the hands of her tormentors and threw herself at his feet, clasping him around the knees. She had seen his white cap and the winged circle on his breast.

"Have pity on me," she cried, "and save me, for the sake of the God of Purity. I am also a daughter of the true religion which is taught by the Magi. My father was a merchant of Parthia, but he is dead, and I am seized to be sold as a slave for his debts. Save me from worse than death!" Artabon trembled.

It was the old conflict in his soul, which had come to him in the palm grove of Babylon and in the cottage at Bethlehem the conflict between the expectation of faith and the impulse of love. Twice the gift which he had dedicated to the worship of religion had been drawn to the service of humanity. This was the third trial, the ultimate probation, the final and irrevocable choice.

Was it his great opportunity or his last temptation? He could not tell. Only one thing was clear in the darkness of his mind. It was inevitable. And does not the inevitable come from God?

One thing was sure to his divided heart- to rescue this helpless girl would be a true deed of love. And is not love the light of the soul?

He took the pearl from his bosom. Never had it seemed so luminous, so radiant, so full of tender, living luster. He laid it in the hand of the slave. "This is thy ransom, daughter! It is the last of my treasures which I kept for the King."

While he spoke, the darkness of the sky deepened, and shuddering tremors ran through the earth, heaving convulsively like the breast of one who struggles with amighty grief. The walls of the houses rocked to and fro. Stones were loosened and crashed into the street. Dust clouds filled the air. The soldiers fled in terror, reeling like drunken men. But Artabon and the girl whom he had rescued crouched helpless beneath the walls of the praetorium.

What had he to fear? What had he to hope? He had given away the last remnant of his tribute for the King. He had parted with the last hope of finding him. The quest was over, and it had failed. But even in that thought, accepted and embraced, there was peace. It was not resignation. It was not submission. It was something more profound and searching. He knew that all was well because he had done the best that he could from day to day. He had been true to the light that had been given him. He had looked for more. And if he had not found it, if a failure was all that came out of his life, doubtless that was the best that had been possible. He had not seen the revelation of "life everlasting, incorruptible, and immortal." But he knew that even if he could live his earthly life over again, it would not be otherwise than it had been.

One more lingering pulsation of the earthquake quivered through the ground. A heavy tile, shaken from the roof, fell and struck the old man on the temple. He lay breathless and pale, with his gray head resting on the young girl's shoulder, and the blood trickling from the wound. As she bent over him, fearing that he was dead, there came a voice through the twilight, very small and still, like music, sounding from a distance, in which the notes are clear but the words are lost. The girl turned to see if someone had spoken from the window above them, but she saw no one.

Then the old man's lips began to move, as if in answer, and she heard him say in the Parthian tongue:

"Not so, my Lord! For when saw I thee an hungered and fed thee? Or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When I saw thee a stranger, and took thee in? Or naked, and clothed thee? When saw I thee sick or in prison, and come unto thee. Three- and- thirty years have I looked for thee; but I have never seen thy face, nor ministered to thee, my King."

He ceased, and the sweet voice came again. And again the maid heard it, very faint and far away. But now it seemed as though she understood the words.

"Verily, I say unto thee, Inasmuch as thou hast done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, thou hast done it unto me."

A calm radiance of wonder and joy lighted the pale face of Artabon like the first ray of dawn on a snowy mountain peak. A long breath of relief exhaled gently from his lips.

His journey was ended. His treasures were accepted. The Other Wise Man had found the King.

IX. Scripture - Easter - Matthew 28: 1-7.

X. Third part- Song - "Holy City".

XI. Poem

Light- and the day slow creeping
There where the dawn colors lie.
Stillness guarding each hilltop.
Bare crosses etching the sky.
Silent the tomb in the garden,
No burden of death on its floor.
Radiance cast like an altar-
Remission flanking its door.
Housetops catch light of the morning,
Faces - a few see the light,
Turning their steps to the garden,
Finding fulfillment of night.

Dawn, and again down the ages,
The millions lift eyes to see
Forgiveness written with crosses
When sun shines behind Calvary.

XII. Repeat refrain of "Holy City."