

# Anticipating Christmas

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All through October and into November, Matthew Bartholomew felt at loose ends and a little out of sorts. At loose ends because he had accepted a September buyout offer at work and had time on his hands. Out of sorts because of the state of the union. The election was finished, the people had spoken. No matter how they voted, everyone seemed to be looking toward the future with anxiety, if for different reasons.

More than anything, Matt wanted to look forward with something other than anxiety. As a kid, Christmas had always filled him with anticipation. He'd feel its first twinges right after Halloween. November dragged. On Thanksgiving Day the entire Bartholomew family gathered around the television to watch Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Santa's appearance at the end of the parade marked the official beginning of the Christmas season and all through December Matt's anticipation soared.

For the past twenty years, Matt's holiday season centered around displaying the famous crèche created by his father—fifty life-sized, lifelike figures in all: Mary, Joseph and the Infant Jesus, two cows, a donkey, six angels, seven shepherds and their flock of twenty-five sheep, the three Wise Men and their camels. The figures were so realistic that some crèche visitors swore the figures moved. Years ago, a little boy had rang the doorbell and asked why they didn't let Baby Jesus sleep inside where it was warm. Matt had always regarded the boy's request as the ultimate compliment about the crèche. The figures always seemed to strengthen his own faith and each year he looked forward to displaying them.

But this year, when Matt unlocked the Christmas shed in the backyard to begin his annual inspection of the crèche figures, his usual anticipation was missing. Given the state of things, simply displaying the stationary crèche figures didn't feel like enough. This year, he needed more. Last year's children's Christmas pageant at the Church of the New Shepherd had haunted him all year. Set in the present, complete with cell phones and GPS devices, the kids' pageant had made the nativity and its meaning come alive for him in a way that the family crèche in all its beauty did not.

If only he could make these figures come alive. As he inspected them one by one, a crazy idea took shape in his mind. Rather than setting up the typical display in the front yard, what if he used these figures to create a pageant? It would alter some of the family traditions associated with the crèche display. The annual Bartholomew family pot luck supper and crèche lighting ceremony would be delayed. He would have to take some artistic license with the chronology of biblical events to finish the story by Christmas Eve, but all Christmas pageants did that. The event could be promoted on social media and people could witness the pageant on their own time.

Back in the house, he explained his idea to Deidre. His wife looked at him over the top of her reading glasses.

“How do you come up with these ideas?”

“I don't know. It just seems like the thing to do.”

“Then do it,” his wife said. “Anything to get you out of the house.”

**M**att worked out a plan that included a schedule and a list of potential helpers. He made some calls and lined up a team: his son Chris, a sophomore at Northland College in Wisconsin, agreed to be his social media advisor. His brother Tim offered up his yard and promised to help out as needed. Handyman, the Open Cupboard Food Shelf director, said he was in, especially since the project would once again collect food donations. Officer Carter, a long-time fan of the crèche, also offered his yard and then raised the question that most concerned Matt.

“You sure the figures will be safe?” Carter asked.

“It’s a risk,” Matt acknowledged, “But, I think it’s worth taking.”

“Well,” Carter said, “Though I’m retired from the force, I’ll call the district commander. If the department always knows where the figures are, perhaps a squad car can drive by during the night.”

He had a plan and a team. He put Chris to work building a basic website for the pageant and setting up a Facebook page under the name “The Stable.”

On the morning after Thanksgiving, the day Matt traditionally set up the crèche, he erected a sign in the front yard that read: TO VIEW THE NATIVITY SCENE NORMALLY DISPLAYED HERE DURING THE HOLIDAYS VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT GETTINGREADYFORCHRISTMAS.ORG. On both the website and Facebook, Matt informed crèche fans that in anticipation of the holiday, the crèche figures would act out the story of Christ’s birth between now and Christmas Eve. Readers were invited to follow the Christmas story on the website and Facebook and visit the figures as they made their journeys through the city to the stable in Bethlehem—the front yard of the Bartholomew family’s Pinehurst Avenue home. The starting points of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the Wise Men would be posted on the website and Facebook. Each day, readers could see where in the city the figures were staying that night and could go and visit them.

That afternoon, Matt assembled the stable in the front yard and placed the two cows inside. He set spotlights to show the stable empty at night, waiting. He placed food donation barrels on the front sidewalk.

He loaded the figure of Mary and a spotlight into the car and drove over to the Open Cupboard Food Shelf. He and Handyman positioned the figure of Mary in Handyman’s front yard and trained the spotlight on her.

“She’s beautiful,” Handyman said.

“I don’t know how this’ll work out,” Matt said. “We’ll have food donation barrels at each site, but who knows if people will connect with this.”

“People will come,” Handyman predicted. “There’s a longing in the air. We all feel it in our own way. You’re addressing a deeper need here than just collecting food.”

At home again, on the website and Facebook page, Matt posted the verses from the gospel of Luke describing the Virgin Mary and gave the address where she was located. “When you visit the Virgin Mary,” he added, “please bring a food donation for the Open Cupboard.” He shared this information with all of his Facebook friends, asking them to share the news with their friends.

The next morning, Matt took an angel over to Handyman’s yard and placed it beside Mary. On Facebook he posted a picture of Mary and the Angel and the passages from Luke

where the angel informed Mary that she had found favor with God and would bear a son who would be called Jesus. Through the day, a handful of family members and friends posted messages of support.

On day three, Matt drove over to Handyman's with the figure of Joseph. He placed Joseph beside Mary and with his iPad posted notes on the website and Facebook that Mary was betrothed to Joseph. The following day, he added the donkey and posted an announcement that Mary and Joseph were beginning their journey from Galilee to Bethlehem to be registered. He identified an approximate location where the Holy Couple wanted to shelter for the night and encouraged residents of the neighborhood to post an offer of their yard as an inn. The couple would remain in Handyman's yard until new lodgings were secured. This method of travel was a risk, Matt knew, but it added a sense of realism to the journey.

For two days, no one invited them and the Holy Couple remained in Handyman's yard. The request did produce posts from Internet trolls.

"Why not call a cab, LOL?" sniggered one post.

"Want to borrow one of my guns for protection?" read another.

Matt deleted the posts. He turned his attention to the shepherds. To represent the "fields" in which the shepherds tended their flock, Matt had secured permission to use the expansive lawn on the northwest corner of the University of St. Catherine campus. It took Matt and Deidre several trips with their cars to haul the twenty-five sheep and seven shepherds to the site. The University had provided them with several power cords that allowed them to set up spotlights that illuminated the flock by night.

On the website and Facebook, he posted the Bible passage from Matthew saying that "in that region shepherds were watching over their flocks by night" and gave the shepherds' St. Kate's location. On Facebook several "likes" quickly appeared along with a couple of one-line comments.

"While driving down Cleveland today," read one anonymous comment, "imagine my surprise to see a flock of sheep grazing at St. Kate's. Delightful!"

"Sheep herding," wrote someone who identified himself as Aaron the Shepherd. "Man, what a drag. Has to be something better than this! Rescue me!" The post received a score of "likes."

Originally, Matt had planned to move the shepherds and their flock every few days as if the flock was grazing, but with Mary and Joseph still stalled in Handyman's front yard, he decided to keep the shepherds on the campus. To simulate movement of the flock, every day he dropped by the campus and rearranged the figures.

By the fifth day, Mary and Joseph were still in Handyman's yard, having received no lodging invitations for the next phase of their journey. Disappointed, Matt began to wonder whether his idea of Mary and Joseph journeying across the city to the stable would work. His mood improved slightly when he read an anonymous post on The Stable's Facebook page. "We visited Mary and Joseph at Open Cupboard with our little girl, Hope. The figures are beautiful. Thank you for doing this."

Matt turned to Carter for help. His old friend lived about halfway between Open Cupboard and the Holy Couple's final destination. Covering half the journey in one move was not Matt's first choice, but moving the figures to Carter's yard at least got the journey started.

The next day there was another Facebook post from Hope's family. "We're following Mary and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem. Our little girl, Hope, believes that Mary and Joseph are real and she wants to visit them every day."

Below that post was another comment from Aaron the Shepherd. "Another boring day in the fields. What's a working class stiff like me to do? Dreaming of something bigger, better! What else is out there? Somebody tell me."

**F**or three days, Mary and Joseph remained in Carter's front yard. Matt's concern that the Holy Couple would never get to Bethlehem deepened. On the eighth day of their journey, a link appeared on the Facebook page. Matt clicked the link, which took him to a YouTube video titled "Hope visits Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem."

The screen showed Mary and Joseph and the donkey in Carter's yard. The little girl Hope looked swallowed up by her purple winter coat, her face pale under her purple stocking cap. She petted the donkey's nose and then hugged first Mary and then Joseph.

"Did you want to ask Mary something?" a woman's voice said off-camera.

"Uh-huh."

"Go ahead then and ask her."

Hope stretched up on her tiptoes and whispered in Mary's ear. She put her ear close to Mary's lips.

"What did you ask her?" the woman's voice said.

"If she wanted my stocking cap cuz it's cold."

"Did she?"

"Uh huh." The girl pulled off her cap, revealing her bald head, and placed it on Mary's veiled head.

"Let's get back in the car now," the woman said. "Say good-bye."

"Good-bye Mary," Hope said. "I love you. Good-bye Joseph. See you tomorrow—won't we, Momma?"

"Of course."

The video ended. Matt watched it again, moved by the girl's generosity, her frailty. He showed the video to Deidre.

"Oh, my," Deidre said after the video played. "How lovely." They watched the video again.

"Do you know anything about her?"

"Only what's in the video."

"You're not going to take the stocking cap off when you move them, are you?" Deidre asked.

"How can I?" Matt answered.

**E**xactly how Hope's YouTube video got to the First News television station, Matt didn't know, but on the Stable's Facebook page someone posted a link to the TV station's web page. Clicking the link, Matt learned from the accompanying news story that Hope's video had run at the end of the newscast the night before. The news story also included a link to The Stable's

Facebook page, which in turn gave directions to the location where the Holy Couple were spending the night. Traffic on The Stable's Facebook page picked up.

"OMG, what a cool idea!!!" gushed one post.

"Beautiful figures," read another. "I hope no one damages them."

The next morning, First News dispatched a reporter and cameraman to film a segment with Matt about the history of the crèche and the pageant. That night, First News did a team report. The first reporter detailed the long history of the crèche. A second reporter picked up the story. The YouTube video in which Hope gave her stocking cap to Mary was replayed. The reporter confirmed that Hope was fighting cancer and that she had taken special interest in following Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem as she continued her own journey. Citing a need for privacy, the girl's family had declined to appear on camera, but said that Hope was doing well.

The First News segment about the pageant prompted a flood of posts on The Stable's Facebook page. Many extended good wishes and prayers for Hope and her family. Others addressed the crèche itself.

"DOUBLE THUMBS UP!" exclaimed one post.

"Never knew this crèche existed," read another. "Look forward to seeing it all together on Xmas."

"Great idea," read a post by The Christmas Lady. "Hope this pageant takes my mind off the ills of the country. Heck, the whole world!"

A dozen posts extended invitations to Mary and Joseph to spend the night in their yard. "There's room at *this* inn!" one post declared.

From the addresses given, Matt was able to work out a route through the city's neighborhoods to the stable on Pinehurst Avenue. Each afternoon he retrieved the food donations from the barrel and then moved Mary, Joseph and the donkey. He posted the new location and the appropriate Bible passages on Facebook. In the fields at St. Catherine's, he rearranged the shepherd and their flock and retrieved the food donations. In performing these tasks for the crèche figures, he felt a bit like a tour manager, but at the same time, the figures seemed almost alive to him as their story unfolded day by day.

Just like Handyman had predicted, the pageant had tapped into some deep longing in the public conscience. All that had been needed was a connecting point and Hope's video had provided it. Every day there was a new post from Hope and her family. Each new post received hundreds of "likes." Many people posted their thoughts daily.

"I'm following the Christmas story on Facebook," wrote The Christmas Lady. "Visiting Mary and Joseph and the shepherds out in the city makes me feel like this is happening right now and I am part of it. I know what is going to happen (well I think I know), but still I look forward to seeing where Mary and Joseph will be tomorrow and when the Wise Men might appear. I'm struck by the parallels between then and now—fear and unrest across the land. I can't wait to visit the stable when everyone arrives there and send my prayer for our deliverance up into the heavens."

Aaron the Shepherd posted daily, documenting the drudgery of being nothing more than a shepherd, all the while longing for something he couldn't put into words. His posts spawned a

debate among readers whether Aaron was merely pretending to be one of the shepherds or addressing his own longings—or both.

In one of Aaron's lengthy posts about his day's work, he expressed his despair about his lot in life and the troubled state of the world around him. "Where is this Messiah we have been promised for so long?" he pleaded.

**I**n the bustle of keeping the pageant running smoothly, Matt didn't notice the sudden absence of posts from Hope and her family, but others did.

"No Hope today," lamented one post. At first Matt attributed Hope's absence to the passing interests of a six-year-old, but others worried aloud about the state of her health.

"What, no Hope again today?" read a post the next day. "I follow her every day. She's my Christmas star, a shining beacon of love in our troubled world. Tell me she's okay!"

Matt had no way to contact Hope other than posting a note on Facebook asking her family to reply. He called First News to see if the reporter knew any details about her condition. The reporter said that calls and emails to the family had gone unanswered.

Each day Mary and Joseph drew closer to the stable. Mary still wore Hope's stocking cap like a halo. On the day they arrived at the stable, Matt added the manger and the Baby Jesus. He took the six angels over to the field where the shepherds tended their flock, and arranged them in front of the shepherds. On the website and Facebook pages, he quoted the Bible verse from Luke where the angel appeared before the shepherds and informed them of the nearby miracle, and then was joined by a heavenly host praising God and wishing peace upon the world. His actions resulted in a new post from Aaron.

"Holy smoke!" Aaron wrote. "Some dude appeared out of nowhere tonight, surrounded by light. Scared us to death! Told us not to be afraid. (We were anyway!) Said he had "good news of a great joy." (We could stand some good news around here.) Told us that a Savior of us all had been born. (Yeah, right! Heard that one before!) Dude told us we would find this Savior (a baby, no less!) lying in a manger. Suddenly this dude was surrounded by others just like him praising God and wishing us "peace on earth." It's all we've been talking about! We decided we had to go see this Savior for ourselves."

Matt and Deidre moved the shepherds and their flock to the stable. Matt arranged the figures in such a way that crèche visitors could walk among them and become shepherds themselves.

The following day Aaron posted a long account of the shepherds' visit, concluding with "the Dude told us that a Savior had been born and exactly where to find him. We went and there he was! Praise the Lord, it must be the Messiah!"

It had been a week since Hope and her family had posted. Amid the usual daily posts by the regulars, a new post by Hope's mother appeared the morning after the shepherds' arrival.

"Sorry we disappeared," she wrote. "Hope had a setback, and all of our attention has been focused on caring for her. She is now out of intensive care. She asked us last night about Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and Wise Men. Now she's catching up with their journeys online, and hopes to visit them in person soon. Thanks for your prayers. We know they helped."

The post drew hundreds of "likes" and scores of comments.

"GREAT NEWS!"

“So glad Hope is okay.”

“Our prayers have been answered.”

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Wise Men from the east followed a star to Bethlehem. Matt filled a star-shaped balloon with helium. He attached 100 feet of fishing line to the balloon, tied the opposite end to a nail in the stable roof and let the star rise into the heavens. He trained a spotlight on it for night.

The Wise Men began their journey from the yard of Matt’s brother Tim on the city’s East Side. The previous week, Matt had posted on Facebook a map of the city detailing the approximate route of their journey. He invited readers who lived along the route to host the Magi. He received enough offers to complete their journey by Christmas Eve.

Each morning Matt posted the address of the yard where the Wise Men would stay that night. During the afternoon, he and Tim moved the Wise Men and their camels to the new address, set them in place and trained spotlights on them. Hosts reported increased traffic past their houses as people drove by to witness the Magi’s journey to Bethlehem. There was plenty of traffic on Facebook as well. By now the pageant had attracted a large community of followers.

On the fourth morning of the Wise Men’s journey, someone posted a picture showing two of the camels lying on their sides. It had been blustery through the night, so Matt was unsure whether to attribute the incident to the wind or vandalism. Still he was worried. Why would anyone want to harm these figures? That evening, he made sure the Wise Men and their camels were securely anchored.

The next morning the host called Matt to say he’d seen a man hanging around the yard in the dark. When the host went out to investigate, the man had melted into the night. Matt called the police. The department sent a squad car by during the night. On the following morning, the host mentioned that he had seen a strange man lurking near the figures and the man had slipped away when he went out to confront him.

“What did he look like?” Matt asked.

“It was dark,” the host said. “He was white, that’s about all I could see.”

Matt mentioned the stranger to the next host and suggested that if he reappeared, the host should stay inside and call the police.

In the morning, Matt received a phone call from the police. A squad car had picked up the stranger during the night. The man was unarmed and gave no permanent address. He did give Handyman as a reference. The police had talked with Handyman and upon the food shelf director’s assurance released the man. Minutes later, Handyman himself called.

“He comes every couple weeks,” Handyman explained. “Gets canned goods and dry food. He came in when Mary and Joseph were in my front yard. He asked about them and I told him about your pageant. He got real interested, told me all about the time he was one of the Three Kings in a Sunday School pageant. He came in again, right after the camels were tipped over. Said he guessed he better take care of things. Between me and the cops, we determined that he’s undertaken the safety of the Wise Men as a personal mission. He goes to the library where he has an Internet account and finds out where the Wise Men will stay that night. He goes there about bedtime and stands watch until morning, then he leaves.”

“What’s his name?”

“I only know him as Parson.”

“Parson?”

“He told me it was a nickname he picked up in the marines because he carried a Bible.”

“He’s a veteran?” Matt asked.

“The Iraq War.”

“Is he . . . ?”

“He’s fine,” Handyman said. “He’s a gentle guy who saw too much. I’ve seen my share of troubled souls. He’s not one of them. He still carries that Bible.”

“Is there anything we can do for him?” Matt asked.

“I’ve offered,” Handyman said. “He says he won’t be a ‘burden’ to anyone.”

They agreed that Parson’s service as guardian angel for the Wise Men should remain shielded from the public. Matt told the next host that Parson would be standing guard, but there was no cause for concern.

The host watched for him and when he spotted him, stepped to the door and announced, “There’s coffee and sandwiches for you here on the porch.” In the morning, the thermos was empty and the sandwiches gone. Thereafter, each host left coffee and a meal for the guardian angel as the Wise Men continued their journey without incident.

Christmas was days away. As Mary had pondered in her heart all that happened, Matt pondered all that had occurred since he conceived his crazy idea: Mary and Joseph had journeyed across the city and now cared for the infant Jesus in the manger. Mary still wore Hope’s stocking cap, a reminder to all of the little girl’s faith. The shepherds and their flock milled about the yard and Matt could feel Aaron’s presence among them. High above the stable, the star guided the Wise Men on their journey.

It was all anticlimactic in a way. There had been no great drama, only dozens of little stories—expressions of hope, of love and joy and a longing for peace. There was still so much to anticipate. The Wise Men would arrive on the morning of Christmas Eve. He would post an invitation on Facebook inviting the world to visit, to walk among the crèche figures and become one of them. Of course, there would be the usual celebrations, the family traditions.

The pageant had reminded him that good still existed in the world. People had offered their homes as a refuge to inanimate travelers who carried the Holy Spirit with them as they journeyed through both past and present to deliver a message about hope. An unknown number of people, longing for something they couldn’t express but felt in their souls, had followed the pageant on social media, sharing their hopes and dreams and prayers. They had visited the travelers as they journeyed, donated thousands of pounds of food to feed the hungry. Hopefully, many of those same people, along with others, would come to see all of the crèche figures together and he would get to meet some of them. Perhaps, Hope would be well enough to visit. Aaron might knock on their door and introduce himself. Maybe Parson would materialize out of the night to greet him.

Matt felt his anticipation soar.

**The End.**