

CHAPTER ONE

MARY AND JOSEPH: WALK WITH THEM!



On this day, many years ago, pregnant Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem because of Caesar Augustus's decree. It was only ninety-three miles, about a two and a half hour trip in a car, but remember, Mary rode a donkey. Joseph walked. I wondered what it would be

like walking with them and imagined myself joining this couple and their unusual life-changing experience!

It had to be a struggle for Mary—and for Joseph as he watched her. A struggle for both. I watched them—Mary absorbed in her pregnancy and this ordeal, and Joseph stressed as he watched Mary.

Their baby was due at any time. In fact, Mary had warned him she felt the event they had been waiting for was almost here!

The donkey's slow pace rocks Mary into a lulled state. Her head bobs, but she is safe because Joseph keeps his hand on her leg to keep her from falling off. The silence surrounds them. I smell the strong pungent donkey odor that lingers in the air. He brays, asking to stop, so we do. I respect their privacy and keep my distance, but I marvel as Joseph cares for her.

With Joseph's help, Mary rolls off the donkey and discreetly relieves herself in the bushes. Joseph provides a small drink for the tired donkey and a bit of hay. He also quenches his and Mary's thirst, and they share a piece of bread to stay them. I grab my canteen and drink with them. My stomach growls as I forgot to bring any food for this journey. They hear the ominous rumble and share their meager snack with me.

As they negotiate getting Mary back up on the donkey, they laugh at the absurdity of their trip and her awkward size. And once again, they continue toward Bethlehem, resuming the rhythm of the donkey's gait. Watching their total acceptance of this needless trip, I want to help, but it's my job to just be there with them, a silent witness!

That beautiful part of the day comes—the link between darkness and light. This makes the travel much more treacherous. Joseph stumbles often, catching himself. He can't fall; he must make sure Mary's safe on their donkey. A couple times, I brace Joseph so he can keep going. I have to assist him because

of the dark, because of the mission, because of the precious cargo he needs to protect.

Darkness comes, and a beautiful canopy of stars twinkle above us. One predominant star shines brighter and brighter, almost like it is guiding them to their destination. Then Mary's scream scares Joseph and me, and he knows the time is approaching too fast—way too fast. But she settles back into the rhythm of the road, and he knows she hides any discomfort from him, to protect him.

We haven't arrived yet in crowded Bethlehem. Because of their slow travel, we will arrive late in the evening, and they'll have a new problem: none of the inns will have room. But right now we are working our way to Bethlehem, anticipating what's ahead.