

THE VITAL SIGNS

A Play for Christmas
By Jewell Ellen Smith

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"Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign: Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (God with us)"—Isaiah 7:14.

"The angel said unto them (the shepherds) ... this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."—Luke 2:10-12.

"There shall come a Star..."—Numbers 24:17.

"We have seen His star in the East and are come to worship Him."—Matthew 2:2.

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Time: Christmas Eve night, 1983. And, a time 2,000 years ago.

Place: Crawford Memorial Hospital, at a U.S. Army Post in the South.

Theme, or Purpose: To tell the age-old Christmas Story a new way, by showing how the ancient prophets of Israel foretold—in prophecies filled with signs and wonders—that God would send the Messiah. And, to show that these vital signs came true when the Christ Child was born in Bethlehem.

CAST OF CHARACTERS: *In the order of appearance:*

Captain Nan Allen, an Army nurse

Dr. Wiley, a major in the U.S. Army Medical Corps

Sergeant MacDougal, a medical specialist

Carl, a medical technician

Eddie, a medical technician

Dave, an Army ambulance driver

Chaplain Wright, a retired Army chaplain from North Carolina

Isaiah, an Old Testament prophet in Jerusalem, about 750 BC

Voice of God

King Ahaz, an evil ruler of Judah in the time of Isaiah

Attendants of Ahaz (3)

The Angel Gabriel
Myra, an elderly resident of Nazareth, grandmother of Joseph
Two Women at the Nazareth village well
Micaiah and Jochebed, young girls of Nazareth
Mary, a young woman of Nazareth
Joseph, a carpenter, who is engaged to Mary
Angel of the Lord
Bethlehem Innkeeper
Host of Angels
Bethlehem Shepherds: Spokesman, Second Shepherd, Third Shepherd
Forerunner of the Magi
Magi from the East: Balthazar, Gaspar, and Melchior
Christ Child
Wedding party from Mississippi:
 Sally, the bride, granddaughter of Chaplain Wright
 Lee, the bridegroom
 Two Bridesmaids
 Maid of Honor & Best Man
 Two Groomsmen
 Flower Girl & Ring Bearer

SYNOPSIS of THE VITAL SIGNS

The Vital Signs is two stories, one within the other.

The first one opens Christmas Eve night, 1985, in the Emergency Room of Crawford Army Hospital, as an ambulance crew brings in retired Army Chaplain Wright of North Carolina. The chaplain, badly injured in a car wreck, had been enroute to Mississippi to officiate in the Christmas Day wedding of his granddaughter Sally.

Dr. Wiley examines the chaplain, determines that he will need immediate surgery and has Nurse Nan Allen call in an orthopedic surgeon. Dr. Wiley orders that the patient's vital signs be taken every hour, and, that Sergeant MacDougal and the other medics on hand sit with the elderly patient throughout the night.

After his surgery, Chaplain Wright's sleep is disturbed again and again as his attendants take his vital signs. He dreams that God sends an angel robed in an Army nurse's uniform to check his vital signs and to show him that there are many vital signs in the Bible.

On Christmas morning the chaplain determines to search the Scriptures for the signs the angel-nurse has described. He asks ambulance driver Dave to read to him from the new Bible that was to have been Sally's wedding gift. And he gets Sergeant Mac to take notes.

As Dave reads, and Mac and the chaplain listen, the second story begins. The ancient prophecies and events concerning the advent of the Christ Child unfold before them. The three see Isaiah the prophet praying to God, pleading with the wicked King Ahaz, and writing down these words of the Lord:

"Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign: Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son ..."

Next, the Angel Gabriel comes to Nazareth. At the village well he speaks first to Myra, an aged kinswoman of Joseph, and then to Mary, whose engagement to Joseph has recently been formalized. Gabriel announces to Mary that God has chosen her to become the mother of Jesus. Later, the chaplain and the soldiers hear Mary tell Joseph that she is "with child." Next, they see her run away to the Hill Country. And they watch an angel appear to Joseph in a dream, telling him not to be afraid to take Mary to be his wife.

As Dave reads on, the three follow Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, where the only lodging available is a stable. After that, they see a host of angels announcing the birth of the Christ Child to some shepherds out on the hills. The shepherds hurry off to Bethlehem to find the Holy Child "wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

Traveling with the shepherds is a party of magi from the East. However, the magi are reluctant to believe that the Babe in the stable could possibly be the royal, newborn Child whom they seek. Only after they have reviewed the signs associated with the Child do they bow down and worship Him, and give Him gifts.

Dave and Mac are greatly moved by the beautiful story of the Christ Child. While they are still talking with the chaplain, the other story ends when Sally arrives from Mississippi with her wedding entourage—so that her grandfather can perform the marriage ceremony, after all.

Before he does the honors, Chaplain Wright presents the Bible to Sally and declares: "There are 'vital signs' in the Bible. God had them put there long, long ago to foretell the coming of the blessed Child whose birthday is today! Christmas Day!"

SCRIPT

ACT I Scene 1

Scene 1. It is early evening, Christmas Eve, 1983. In the Emergency waiting room of U.S. Army Crawford Memorial Hospital, Nurse Nan Allen is leaning over the reception desk, busily straightening a stack of medical records-her back toward the audience. There is a miniature Christmas tree on the table in the corner. The EMERGENCY ROOM sign above the door is flanked by Christmas wreaths, and there are other holiday decorations about the room.

Temporary partitions draped with white sheets separate the front part of the room from the examining section.

Major Wiley comes bustling in, his raincoat and umbrella dripping with rain, his briefcase stuffed with medical journals. He is talking to himself as he enters.

DR. WILEY: Wow! What a miserable Christmas Eve night! Freezing rain, and "cold as floogins!" *Shakes out umbrella, peels off wrap.* I hope to heaven we don't get a flock of patients tonight. I want to catch up on my journals. *Takes journals from briefcase, as he turns to nurse.* Merry Christmas Eve, Captain Allen!

NURSE NAN: *Looking up for the first time* Same to you, Doctor Wiley! But it may not be so merry around here.

DR. WILEY: What's up?

NURSE NAN: Our ambulance crew just left. There's been a wreck over on US 31, right at State Line Road.

DR. WILEY: Bad?

NURSE NAN: I don't know exactly how bad. An 18-wheeler bashed into three cars. The state trooper who called in talked to Sergeant MacDougal. And he said the patient we're to get is a retired Army chaplain, with a North Carolina tag on his car. He is—*phone rings, nurse answers*—Emergency Room, Crawford Hospital, Captain Allen speaking. May I help you? *pause* Yes, Sergeant Mac. *pause* Heavens, I don't know. Dr. Wiley just walked in. You'd better talk to him. *hands phone to Dr. W.* It's Sergeant Mac.

DR. WILEY: Dr. Wiley speaking. *Pause* Sure, Sergeant. First, tell me what his vital signs are. *reaches over to pick up pen, pad.* —*pause*— Respiration 20. *makes notes as he repeats after Mac* —*pause*— Pulse rate 120.—*pause*— Blood pressure 90 over 60! My! My! Can you estimate how much blood he's lost?—*pause*—That's bad. Temperature 97.—*pause*— I'm worried that he could go into shock. Start an I-V line: Ringer's Lactate at 200 c.c.'s an hour.—*pause*—Facial lacerations and broken lower extremity? One ear almost severed? We'll be ready for him. —*pause*— Who's driving the ambulance tonight? Dave? Well, you tell Dave to be extra careful. That rain's freezing as fast as it hits the ground.

Hangs up phone, turns to nurse.

Captain Allen, call the blood bank and have them send up two units of O-Negative.

NURSE NAN: Yes, Sir.

DR. WILEY: Sergeant Mac says the patient is rather badly injured.

NURSE NAN: Is he conscious?

DR. WILEY: Semi-conscious. One problem is going to be his age. He's up in years, Sergeant Mac said. *Picks up stack of journals.* I don't guess I'll read any journals tonight.

Doctor goes behind partition screen to put on his white coat and to get his stethoscope; nurse dials phone.

NURSE NAN: *on phone* Hello? Is this the Blood Bank? This is Captain Nan Allen in EMERGENCY. Doctor Wiley needs you to please send up two units of O-Negative. —*pause*—Yes, there's been a right bad auto accident, and we're getting one of the patients. —*pause*—You're the only person on duty, and you don't have anybody to send? —*pause*— Well, I'll come get the blood myself.—*pause*—You mean to say the whole Intensive Care Unit is closed till after Christmas Day? I knew we'd just have a skeleton crew on duty, tomorrow being Christmas Day, but— *pause*— I'll be down there in a minute. *Hangs up, calls out to doctor, who is still behind the screen.* Doctor Wiley, I'm going down to the Blood Bank. They're short-handed down there.

DR. WILEY: *calling out* All right.

Nurse exits, doctor remains behind screen.

End of Scene 1

Scene 2

Scene 2. Same as Scene 1, a few minutes later. Nurse Nan has returned and is seated at the desk. Dr. Wiley walks about anxiously, impatient for the ambulance to arrive.

DR. WILEY: *looking at his watch* I wonder what's keeping that ambulance? Dave knows every minute counts. Sergeant Mac, too.

NURSE NAN: Don't worry. They'll be here, any time now.

DR. WILEY: The roads are slick as glass. I just hope to heaven Dave doesn't let that ambulance slide in a ditch!

NURSE NAN: He won't. Dave is a real good driver.

Off stage there is a commotion, with loud voices, indicating the arrival of the ambulance.

NURSE NAN: That's them now!

Doctor hurriedly moves screen aside so that the crew can place patient on portable examining table. Audience can hear Sergeant MacDougal giving orders, instructions.

SGT. MAC: *offstage, in loud urgent tone* Easy with him, Carl! Eddie, let me get there! You take care of the I-V pole! Dave, turn off your motor and come help us! You bring the patient's suitcase and stuff.

As crew comes in, the nurse and doctor hurry to give assistance. All medics are wearing raincoats. Carl and Mac bear the stretcher on which Chaplain Wright lies, partly covered by a blanket. Eddie is holding up the I-V pole. Ambulance driver Dave follows, carrying a dress blue uniform in a plastic bag, a suitcase, a briefcase, and a large gift-wrapped package that has been crushed to the extent that the large Bible inside is spilling out.

The patient's forehead and right ear are bandaged. There is blood on the bandage and all over his face, and the civilian clothes he wears are rain-soaked. The I-V tube has been attached to his lower left arm.

DR. WILEY: *urgently* Put the patient here, Sergeant. *indicates exam table*

SGT. MAC: Stretcher and all? Or do you want us to take him off the stretcher?

DR. WILEY: Leave him on the stretcher 'till I can get his vital signs. Here, I'll help you.

Doctor helps lift side of stretcher, keeps talking. Dave puts patient's belongings down, the Bible falls to the floor. Dave picks it up, places it on the desk.

Nurse, get the transfusion started! Then wash that dried blood off his forehead so we can see the gash there in his hairline. Take the bandage off his ear, too!
Nurse, assisted by Sgt. Mac, hurriedly places two units of O-Negative blood on I-V pole, fastens tubes to I-V line. Then she hurries to get a basin of water. Ambulance crew members take off their rain coats, step out of the way. Mac remains at doctor's side.

DR. WILEY: *Leaning over patient* Sir, I'm Doctor Wiley. You're at Crawford Army Hospital now, and we're going to take care of you. First, I need to take your vital signs. Can you hear what I'm saying?

CHAPLAIN: *groaning* Ohh-h-h me! I can hear you, Doctor, but why do you want my wallet size? I guess the wallet's in my pocket.

DR. WILEY: *as he wraps on blood pressure cuff* Not your wallet size, Sir. It's your vital signs. Your blood pressure, your pulse rate, respiration, temperature. All that.

CHAPLAIN: *halfheartedly* Oh. That. I see. I thought sure you said my wallet size.

Nurse starts bathing patient's face

My ear feels like it's coming off!

NURSE NAN: Let's take off this bandage and have a look at your ear. It's going to be all right. The bleeding has nearly stopped. *Doctor continues examination as nurse talks to patient soothingly* That was some accident you had.

CHAPLAIN: Terrible! Rain and sleet thick as gravy. Couldn't half see. That 18-wheeler went right through the red light. The minute I saw him coming, I started praying. But it didn't do a bit of good. Blam! And I was in the ditch! *catches breath* Ah, I ought not to say such a thing—me being a chaplain. I could'a been killed. I ought to be thanking the Good Lord. And I do! I thank the Lord I'm alive!

NURSE: Of course you do. *moves back*

DR. WILEY. Sir, hold this thermometer under your tongue, just a minute. *looks at injured ear, forehead* Hmm-m, could be worse. Much worse. So you're a chaplain. From North Carolina, the state trooper told us.

CHAPLAIN: *through clenched teeth* Uh-huh. My name's "Wright."

DR. WILEY: Wright? *takes thermometer, reads it* That's a good name. Now Chaplain Wright, I'm going to do a little poking around. And I want you to tell me when it hurts, or if it hurts. *Presses hands against rib cage* First, your rib cage. Does that hurt?

CHAPLAIN: Some, yes. But not too much.

DR. WILEY: Have you spit up any blood?

CHAPLAIN: Not that I know of.

DR. WILEY: *Mashes on patient's stomach* Does your stomach feel Ok?

CHAPLAIN: Yes, Sir.

DR. WILEY: Do you have any pain in your hips or along your pelvis bone?

CHAPLAIN: No, Doctor. I'm plain shook up all over. But it's just my leg that's killing me!

Doctor runs fingers along patient's left shin bone.

DR. WILEY: Along about here?

CHAPLAIN: *screaming out* Yi-eeek! Good Lord, Doc! Don't do that again!

DR. WILEY: I'm sorry. I promise I won't even touch that leg again. That's where our main trouble is. *pulls blanket up around patient* Chaplain Wright, I don't think you're too badly injured. The gash across your forehead is not so deep. And we can save your ear. Your rib cage could be damaged, but I can't say for sure. Your left leg and foot are definitely fractured. I can't tell to what extent, exactly. So, first, we'll send you down to X-Ray. But, now, Sir, you don't need to worry. You'll be in good hands. We have two fine orthopedic surgeons. I'll call one of them in, and before Santa Claus makes his run tonight, we'll have you all fixed up!

CHAPLAIN: Santa Claus? Oh, my! I'd plumb forgot it's Christmas Eve. *becomes upset* Oh, Lord! Sally! The wedding! I don't know what to do!

NURSE NAN: *hurries to patient* What did you say about a wedding?

CHAPLAIN: *sadly* It's Sally's wedding. Christmas Day. I'm supposed to perform Sally's wedding. I know I can't make it! Look in my briefcase, and— Oh, mercy, what'll I do?

NURSE NAN: Just relax, Sir. You don't have to do a thing. We'll call Sally, and take care of everything.

CHAPLAIN: *with a sense of resignation* Sally is my granddaughter. Tell her— I don't know what to tell her.

NURSE NAN: We'll tell your granddaughter you're here, and everything's going to be all right. We'll put in the call as soon as we get you settled.

DR, WILEY: *to Mac and other medics* Take the patient on down to X-Ray, and get these wet clothes off of him, soon as you can.

SGT. MAC: Yes, Sir. *motions to Carl to assist him*

DR. WILEY: I'll be down there in a minute.

Mac and Carl roll patient out.

DR. WILEY: Dave, put the patient's things away, go park the ambulance, and then come back.

DAVE: Yes, Sir. *Follows instructions, handling the Bible in such a way that the audience sees it*

DR. WILEY: Captain Allen, look on the roster and see which surgeon is on call. Give him a ring and tell him to come on in. And let's hope to heaven he can get here.

NURSE NAN: What about the anesthetist? (*a-NES-thuh-tist*)

DR. WILEY: See if you can get hold of Major Kemp. If you can't get him, try calling his civilian assistant.

NURSE NAN: Yes, Sir.

DR. WILEY: *turning to Eddie* Eddie?

EDDIE: Yes, Sir?

DR. WILEY: Get the operating room ready. And you and Dave set up a bed in here.

EDDIE: We won't be sending the chaplain to Intensive Care?

DR. WILEY: ICU is closed till after Christmas Day. So we'll keep the patient in here. I want his vital signs taken every hour, on the hour.

EDDIE: Yes, Sir.

Doctor exits. Eddie goes behind portable partitions. Nurse begins making phone call. Lights go down, out.

End of ACT I

ACT II Scene 1

Scene 1. Same as Scene 2, ACT I. Shortly before midnight. Chaplain Wright's surgery has been successfully completed, and he is asleep in the bed set up for him in the EMERGENCY ROOM. The patient's left leg is in traction, with a huge bandage. His forehead is bandaged, his left ear covered. The I-V is still attached to his left arm.

Sergeant Mac is sitting with the patient and holding the wedding gift Bible in his hands. The chaplain's dress blue uniform is hanging on a stand in the corner. The room is in semi-darkness, except for a table lamp shining on Sgt. Mac.

Now and then the patient rouses and mumbles something. Sgt. Mac bends over him again and again, trying to hear what he says, and trying to reassure him.

CHAPLAIN: *with thick tongue* The Bible? Did you find Sally's Bible?

SGT. MAC: The Bible is right here, Sir.

CHAPLAIN: Did it get wet?

SGT. MAC: No, Sir. Feel of it. *puts patient's free hand on Bible* See? It's o.k. The box got smashed, but not the Bible.

Dr. Wiley comes in, very quietly. Nurse Nan follows, and immediately starts taking patient's vital signs.

NURSE: Sorry to wake you up again, Sir. I'm just checking your vital signs. Doctor's orders.

DR. WILEY: *to Mac* is he doing all right?

SGT. MAC: Yes, Sir. I think so. He's been talking in his sleep a whole lot. He tells me over and over that he was on his way to Mississippi to perform his granddaughter's wedding tomorrow.

DR. WILEY: Too bad, about the wedding.

SGT. MAC: He keeps asking what's happened to his dress uniform and this new Bible. *holds up Bible* It's his wedding present to Sally.

NURSE NAN: *jotting vital signs on chart* His vital signs are better.

DR. WILEY: Let me see. *takes chart* Yes, lots better. *Feels patient's free hand and arm, listens to chest with stethoscope* Spread another blanket over him. He feels cold. Now, Sergeant, if he takes a bad turn, you come wake me up. Since I've got duty again tomorrow, I'm going to go catch a few winks.

SGT. MAC: Dr. Wiley, you mean you volunteered for tonight and all day Christmas Day, too?

DR. WILEY: Well, yes. Some of the other doctors wanted to take leave and go places. I didn't have anywhere to go; so here I am! Call me, now, if you need me.

Exits. Nurse finds blanket, carefully tucks it around patient, exits. Dave enters, quietly.

DAVE: *in low tone* Mac, what am I supposed to do the rest of the night?

Dave notices Mac is holding Bible. He assumes playful tone.

Hey, man! Look at you—readin' the Good Book! This old banged-up chaplain's done made a believer out of you! Right?

SGT. MAC: No, nothing like that. He keeps worryin' about—

DAVE: *still joking* Wait'll I tell the guys! They'll be callin' you Preacher MacDougal! The Reverend Mac! I can hear 'em now!

SGT. MAC: *laughing* No, they won't do that. They all know me. Why, Dave, I haven't set foot in a chapel since I've been in the Army!

DAVE: How many years you got in now?

SGT. MAC: Come New Year's Day, it'll be 12 years. Exactly. Not a bad twelve years.

DAVE: Me, I've been in four. Don't let the word get back to my folks, but I never go to church, either. Except maybe at Easter and Christmas. I don't much plan to go tomorrow.

SGT. MAC: *Changing the subject*, Dave, but would you go down to the Break Room and see if there are a couple of paperbacks I could read? I've got to stay here till the morning shift comes on.

DAVE: Any special kind you like?

SGT. MAC: Murder Mysteries. Or, I can read detective stories. Won't make much difference.

DAVE. I'll be right back.

Exits. Mac gets up, lays Bible aside, checks I-V line. Patient groans. Mac bends over him.

SGT. MAC: Everything's all right, Chaplain. You're doin' fine. Just go back to sleep.

CHAPLAIN: *wearily* What time is it?

SGT. MAC: It's not quite midnight.

CHAPLAIN: It's not Christmas Day yet?

SGT. MAC: No, Sir. It's still Christmas Eve.

CHAPLAIN: That's good. *drifts back to sleep*

Nurse Nan enters, carrying vital signs equipment, and a miniature flashlight.

NURSE NAN: Sorry to wake you up, Sir, but I've got to check your vital signs again. Doctor's orders. *puts thermometer in patient's mouth, but he sleeps on.*

SGT. MAC: Want me to do the blood pressure for you?

NURSE NAN: I wish you would. *Hands cuff to Mac, records figures on chart. Mac takes blood pressure. What do you get?*

SGT. MAC: It's nearly normal. 110 over 68.

NURSE NAN: *cheerfully* That's great. *starts out* Did you know it's snowing, like all get-out?

SGT. MAC: You're kiddin'! I didn't think it ever snowed down here in the Deep South.

NURSE NAN: Oh, yes. Every 10 years, or so, we get a big one!

Nurse starts out, singing "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know..." etc. Nurse meets Dave in doorway. He has a stack of paperbacks in one hand, a plate piled with fruitcake, candy, cookies in the other. Nurse casually picks up a piece of candy, pops it into her mouth and keeps going.

NURSE NAN: Thank you, Dave!

DAVE: You're welcome! *to Mac* Sorry it took me so long. Ol' Eddie made the mistake of opening up his Christmas package from home, and it had all manner of cake, and cookies, and fudge, and divinity candy—a heap of stuff-in it! So, naturally—

SGT. MAC: So naturally, the rest of you guys had to be sociable and eat some of it. Probably all of it!

DAVE: No, no. We saved you some. Here you are. *hands plate to Mac* 'Course it's against regulations to eat in here; but since it's Christmas, it won't matter.

SGT. MAC: *much delighted* Ah! Looks delicious! *grabs up piece of divinity and looks at it* I haven't tasted any divinity candy since I left home. My mom used to make tons of it, every Christmas.

Dave and Mac move over to one corner of the room, continuing to talk and to eat the goodies. Audience does not hear details of their conversation. Instead, the audience—but not the two medics—sees the dream which comes to the chaplain.

The Chaplain's Dream

Nurse Nan, looking like both a nurse and an angel, glides in from a side entrance. She wears her white uniform, covered over with the feathers and wings of an angel. On top of her nurse's cap is a golden halo. She carries a blood-pressure cuff, a stethoscope, a flashlight, and the patient's chart.

ANGEL-NURSE: Sorry to bother you, Chaplain. But I've come about the vital signs. God's orders. *begins checking pulse rate*

CHAPLAIN: *talking in his sleep* O.K. I'm used to the vital signs, now.

ANGEL-NURSE: God sent me.

CHAPLAIN: God? Oh, yes. Sure. I've been prayin' to God. But I didn't ask him to send an angel. *with alarm* Oh, mercy! You're not the Death Angel, are you?

ANGEL-NURSE: Oh, no, no. I'm not the Death Angel. You're not going to die. Not now, that is. Death comes someday—to everyone. That's the way of the earth.

CHAPLAIN: Yes, I know.

ANGEL-NURSE: God wants me to tell you not to forget.

CHAPLAIN: Not forget? Not forget what?

ANGEL-NURSE: Not forget the Christmas vital signs.

CHAPLAIN: I don't know what you mean!

ANGEL-NURSE: I'm talking about the vital signs in the Bible.

CHAPLAIN: I've never seen any vital signs in the Scriptures!

ANGEL-NURSE: Why, Chaplain, I'm surprised at you! *picks up Bible, brings it to bedside* You should have noticed how God had his prophets foretell the coming of the Messiah! They wrote—often in signs—using poetic words, wondrous sayings. For instance, there is the Star. *leafs through Old Testament till she finds Numbers 24:17*

CHAPLAIN: Which star?

ANGEL-NURSE: The great brilliant star which the magi followed to Bethlehem. That was surely a sign. Right here *shows chaplain page* in the writings of Moses the Christ is called "the Star."

CHAPLAIN: I've read the Old Testament through and through, but I—

ANGEL-NURSE: Maybe you weren't paying attention to what you read! Listen to this: *reads*

"I shall see Him, but not now: I shall behold Him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, And a Sceptre (*or great King*) shall rise out of Israel ..."

CHAPLAIN: Well, I— I—

ANGEL-NURSE: There are many, many signs. They're sacred. God wants you to find them, Chaplain. And tell people about God's sacred signs.

CHAPLAIN: Tell what people?

ANGEL-NURSE: You will know them when you see them.

Angel replaces Bible, slips away. The chaplain sleeps on. Lights out.

End of Scene 1 of ACT II

Scene 2

Scene 2. Same as Scene 1. It is Christmas Day, at breakfast time. Chaplain Wright is sleeping soundly, his left leg still in traction, his arm still attached to the I-V tube. Sgt. MacDougal enters, carrying a breakfast tray.

SGT. MAC: *Cheerfully* Wake up, Chaplain! I've got your breakfast here.

CHAPLAIN: It's breakfast time, already?

SGT. MAC: Right! This is a real Christmas breakfast. *lifts cover from tray* Looks good! Scrambled eggs. Toast. Coffee. Orange juice. Cereal—the works. Do you feel hungry?

CHAPLAIN: I can eat, I think.

SGT. MAC: Here, let me raise the head of your bed so you can sort of sit up a little. *cranks up head of bed* Chaplain, I wish this room had a window so you could look out and see the snow!

CHAPLAIN: Snow, way down here?

SGT. MAC: It's knee deep.

CHAPLAIN: My goodness!

SGT. MAC: Between midnight and 2:00 AM we had a real snowstorm. Roads are closed. Power lines are down. Phones are out. It's a good thing the hospital has its own generator, or we'd be in a fix.

As Mac is folding up the patient's top blanket, Dr. Wiley enters. He is in a happy mood.

DR. WILEY: Merry Christmas, Chaplain Wright!

CHAPLAIN: Same to you, Doctor.

DR. WILEY: How are you feeling this morning?

CHAPLAIN: Pretty good, considering everything.

DR. WILEY: Did you get any sleep?

CHAPLAIN: Off and on. Between the times the nurse was taking my vital signs. I even dreamed the Good Lord sent down an angel to take my signs!

DR. WILEY: Well, I'll tell you, God must'a had an angel looking out for you when that 18-wheeler bashed into you last night. You had a close call, Chaplain.

CHAPLAIN: Yes, I know.

DR. WILEY: We mustn't let your breakfast get cold, but I want to listen to your lungs a minute.

CHAPLAIN: Sure.

Doctor lifts patient's pajama top, places stethoscope on patient's back.

DR. WILEY: Take a deep breath. *moves stethoscope* Breathe again, real deep. *patient obeys* One more time. *patient takes third very deep breath.* Sounds good. *moves around to examine broken leg and foot* I see you've got a bit of swelling here. That's to be expected. Now I'll be checking on you through the day. If there's anything you want, just tell Sergeant Mac here. We've got this wing of the hospital all to ourselves today.

CHAPLAIN: How's that?

DR. WILEY: Last night, when we saw we were in for such a snowstorm, we sent 'most everybody home—so they wouldn't be marooned here in the hospital all Christmas Day.

SGT. MAC: Doctor, I reckon you knew ol' Dave didn't go back to his barracks.

DR. WILEY: *surprised* He didn't? Why not?

SGT. MAC: All the guys he knows have gone home for the holidays, and he said he'd just rather stay here. Said maybe he could help us.

DR. WILEY: *as he turns to leave* Deep as the snow is, he sure won't have to drive the ambulance today.

SGT. MAC: I'll find something for him to do.

DR. WILEY: *exits, but comes back immediately* Chaplain, I forgot to tell you—
We called your granddaughter last night.

CHAPLAIN: *eagerly* What'd Sally say?

DR. WILEY: Of course she was upset over your accident. Then, just as she was saying she would phone you today, the line went out—on account of the storm. So it may be a couple of day before you hear from her.

CHAPLAIN: Well, thank you for calling her.

DR. WILEY: Glad to do it. *exits*

CHAPLAIN: *turning to Mac* Sergeant, I'll tell you what I'd like for the ambulance driver to do. *takes sip of coffee* You heard me tell the doctor I had a peculiar dream last night?

SGT. MAC: Yes, Sir. I wondered what—

CHAPLAIN: I dreamed that an angel who was dressed up like a nurse—an Army nurse, at that—came in here, and—

SGT. MAC: An angel dressed up like a nurse?

CHAPLAIN: She walked right up to my bedside, here, and started taking my vital signs and telling me that there are vital signs in the Bible!

SGT. MAC: *much interested* Go on!

CHAPLAIN: She called 'em "sacred signs." Said God wants me to find these signs and tell people about them. She even read one to me—out of Sally's Bible.

SGT. MAC: Sir, you must have been dreaming.

CHAPLAIN: Now, here's where Dave comes in.

SGT. MAC: How? Dave doesn't know a thing about angels. And me, neither.

CHAPLAIN: My glasses got smashed in the wreck last night, so—

SGT. MAC: I know. I picked up the pieces, myself.

CHAPLAIN: I can't see to read a blessed word without those glasses. So I would like for Dave to read a bit out of the Bible to me. That way, I can find all those signs.

SGT. MAC: I'm sure Dave will be glad to read for you. I'd do it myself, but, Chaplain, I never read a word out of the Bible in my whole life!

CHAPLAIN: It's easy. And parts of it are plain fascinating!

SGT. MAC: I'll go get Dave. *exits*

CHAPLAIN: *To himself* I've got the feeling I ought to do something about what the angel said that God said. *pauses, sips orange juice* I've got it: I know what I'll do! While this boy reads to me, I can make mental notes—maybe even an outline—for a sermon about the signs. A Christmas sermon!

gets rather carried away

That's it! A real Christmas sermon. Why, I could do a series of sermons. One for every Sunday in Advent! Ah, I can almost hear the first one now. I'll start off with the grand old prophets. Isaiah will be first. *raises voice*

"The Lord himself shall give you a sign ..."

checks his own enthusiasm

But right now I guess I'd better finish this breakfast.

nibbles at toast

The more I think about that dream, the more I wonder if it was a dream. Maybe it was real. Maybe God actually sent an angel, and I just thought she was a nurse. Or, maybe, it was a nurse, and I just thought she was an angel. *Sighs* Ah, me—I just don't know. In ancient times God did speak to people in dreams. The Bible says so.

Drinks a little coffee. Enter Mac and Dave

SGT. MAC: *in much good humor* Chaplain, here's your reader. Dave is agreeable.

CHAPLAIN: Good morning, Dave. Or rather I ought to say "Merry Christmas!"

DAVE: Merry Christmas to you, Sir. Mac here says you need somebody to read to you out of the Bible.

CHAPLAIN: Yes. You'd be doing me a great favor. Will you do it?

DAVE: I'll sure try. But I warn you I'm not such a good reader—'specially out of the Bible. I don't reckon I've read a verse since I was a kid in Sunday School—twenty years ago.

CHAPLAIN: Never mind that.

SGT. MAC: *picking up tray* Let me get this tray out of your way. Then you two can get down to business. *exits, carrying tray*

CHAPLAIN: We'll use this Bible. *points to gift Bible*

DAVE: *carefully looking at the Bible as he picks it up*. I noticed your Bible last night. It surely is nice. Looks brand new.

CHAPLAIN: It is new. It's the wedding present I was taking to Mississippi to give to my granddaughter Sally and her bridegroom on their wedding day.

DAVE: I believe I heard you say the wedding is today?

CHAPLAIN: Yes, this afternoon. Somebody else will have to do the ceremony, needless to say.

DAVE: That's a shame.

CHAPLAIN: Well, it can't be helped. So let's get on with our little project. You sit right over here, and I'll pick out the passages for you to look up. You'll have to read fairly loud, because with my ear bandaged, I can't hear worth a hoot.

DAVE: No problem.

CHAPLAIN: Turn to the Book of Isaiah.

DAVE: Isaiah? I'll have to look in the index. 'Cause I don't know a thing about Isaiah, or his book.

As Dave searches, the Chaplain talks on.

CHAPLAIN: Isaiah was one of the great old prophets of the Jews. He lived in Jerusalem and prophesied for a long time. Some 60 years. A good 750 years before the coming of Christ. Isaiah's book is the very heart of the Old Testament.

DAVE: *with enthusiasm* I've found it. You want me to start with the first verse?

CHAPLAIN: That'll be fine. Read slowly. That way, I can think about it and see it all in my mind.

Mac enters, unobserved by Chaplain and Dave. He carries a fresh I-V bag, but he becomes so enthralled with Dave's reading that he sits down to listen, still holding the bag.

DAVE: *reading* "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uz-ZI-ah, JO-tham, A'-haz, and Hez-e-KI-ah, kings of Judah.

"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the Lord hath spoken, ... it shall come to pass ..."

Voice fades, as Scene 3 opens, without a break. Spotlight shifts from Dave and Chaplain to Isaiah's garden.

Scene 3

Scene 3. It is early morning, in Jerusalem. Isaiah, a man up in years, is in his garden, walking to and fro, as though he is weeping, worried, and in deep thought. Now and then he wipes away his tears. Isaiah stops abruptly and lays aside the scroll in his hand. He hears the voice of God.

VOICE OF GOD: *calling, as if to a friend* Isaiah, my servant?

ISAIAH: *falling to his knees and gazing toward the sky* Yes, Lord?

VOICE: Why are you weeping, Isaiah? Am I not your God? And are you not my prophet—the one I have chosen for Judah? Your heart should not be troubled.

ISAIAH: Yes, Lord. You are my God, and I am your prophet. But my heart quivers with fear, like the leaves of the Tell tree when the East Wind blows. I fear greatly for Jerusalem and all the land of Judah. We are surrounded by enemies.

Rezin the king of Syria; and Pekah, the son of Israel's king, plot war against us. And the Edomites and the Philistines are just waiting.

All this, our worthless King Ahaz knows. Yet Ahaz does nothing but sit in his palace and tremble.

Ahaz does not call on you, the Lord God of Hosts, the God of our fathers. Ahaz walks in the ways of the heathen kings, making molten images for Ba-alim. He sacrifices and "burns incense in the high places, and on the hills, and under every green tree!"

Players, see II Chronicles 28:1-8

VOICE: I know how King Ahaz has forsaken me, the Lord God of his fathers. He has transgressed sore against me. He has provoked me to anger. Yet, I will

deliver Ahaz, and save his land, if he will turn to me and acknowledge me in all his ways.

ISAIAH: Lord, I am glad.

VOICE: Go now, Isaiah, and meet King Ahaz and reason with him. These are my words to him: "take heed, and be quiet, and fear not. Neither be faint hearted." *Players, see Is. 7:34* Say to Ahaz that the Lord himself will give him a sign, if he asks.

ISAIAH: Yes, Lord. I will go to King Ahaz.

VOICE: You will find him "in the highway of the fuller's field," near Jerusalem.

Begin Scene 4, without a break

Isaiah rises and walks some distance to another portion of the stage, where he meets King Ahaz and three attendants along a road. One attendant fans the king as he walks, the other two hold a colorful, square umbrella-like shade over his head. Isaiah approaches, bows to Ahaz.

ISAIAH: King Ahaz, may I have a word with you?

AHAZ: *without trying to conceal his displeasure* What word this time, Isaiah? Usually your words are full of woe and dire prophecies.

ISAIAH: This time, what I say can be worth more than gold, King Ahaz. If you heed what I tell you.

AHAZ: If you are going to remind me again about the danger of war with Syria and Israel—or about the Edomites and the Philistines—I refuse to listen!

ISAIAH: King Ahaz, I bring you a message from the LORD our God, the Lord of Hosts, who dwelleth in Mount Zion, the God of Abraham and Isaac, and Jacob. The God of David and of your own father, Jo-tham.

AHAZ: Get on with what you have to say.

ISAIAH: God spoke to me, saying that He will deliver you, King Ahaz, and the land of Judah, and Jerusalem itself you will turn to Him, and walk in his ways.

Moreover, the Lord said: "Say unto Ahaz, "Take heed, and be quiet, and fear not. Neither be fainthearted."

AHAZ: You know well that I do not put my trust in the LORD, your God. What else did he say?

ISAIAH: The LORD said that he will give you a sign, if you ask him. The sign you ask can be as "deep as Sheol (*SHE-ol*) or as high as heaven." *see Isaiah 7:11*

AHAZ: I will not ask for a sign. I need more than signs and wonders. I need horses and chariots, spears and shields, and warriors, a host of warriors. Mighty men in battle! You know what I'm going to do, Isaiah?

ISAIAH: No, King Ahaz. I don't know what you plan to do. I just know we'll be at war, in a matter of days!

KING AHAZ: I am going to make an alliance with the king of Assyria. He will help me. I will send him gifts, many gifts. I will strip the gold and silver from the temple! And take more riches from the palace. With Assyria on my side, I'll crush my enemies. They will lick the dust! Beg for mercy!

ISAIAH: *aghast* Oh, King! Do not rob the temple! It is the house of the Lord!

AHAZ: You waste your breath and my time, Isaiah.

ISAIAH: Do you not even wonder what sign the LORD our God would give you?

AHAZ: No, I don't wonder; but what is the sign?

ISAIAH: These are the words of the Lord himself: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

AHAZ: A virgin conceive? Impossible! A virgin cannot be with child! Have you lost your mind?

ISAIAH: No, King Ahaz.

AHAZ: And call his name Immanuel? What does Immanuel mean?

ISAIAH: It means "God with us."

AHAZ: *with ridicule* God with us? Ah, my great prophet Isaiah—you who claim to speak for the LORD God—you have outdone yourself!

A young woman who has never married is going to bring forth a son. Not just any son. But God Himself! Hah!

Isaiah, I wonder about you. Be gone! Go back to Jerusalem! Go to Egypt! Go somewhere! I don't want to see you again in a long, long time!

King stalks off, his attendants trotting behind him. Isaiah exits in opposite direction and returns to his Jerusalem garden. Scene 5 opens without a break.

Scene 5

Scene 5. Isaiah's garden, a short time later. When Isaiah enters, he goes to the spot where he had talked to God earlier and kneels to pray. His scroll and ink and pen are still on the garden table.

ISAIAH: *Praying* Lord, woe is me! Woe is the Land of Judah! Woe is Jerusalem! King Ahaz would not listen.

VOICE OF GOD: Isaiah, my servant, fret not thyself because of Ahaz. "Take thee a great roll, and write in it ... the words which I tell thee." *see Isaiah 8:1*

All people shall know my mercy and my faithfulness. "My hand is stretched out still."

ISAIAH: O, Lord, what shall I write? *rises and takes up scroll and pen*

VOICE: Write these words:

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: They that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, Upon them hath light shined...."

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

"Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever.

"The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this." *See Isaiah 9:2, 6, 7*

At the same time the VOICE is saying "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this," DAVE is reading the same sentence to the chaplain. The spotlight leaves Isaiah and returns to the Chaplain and Dave. This, to give the effect that Dave has been reading all of Scenes 3,4, and 5 from the Bible. Of course Isaiah exits.

DAVE: *reading* "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this." *turns quickly to Chaplain* Chaplain Wright! I didn't know all this was in the Bible!

SGT. MAC: Me, neither!

DAVE: *much surprised* Mac? I didn't see you come in!

SGT. MAC: I've been listening to the whole thing! I hope you don't mind, Chaplain.

CHAPLAIN: Glad to have you hear it. And, since you're in here, Sergeant, let me please ask another favor.

SGT. MAC: Anything. Just let me fix this I-V for you. The doctor changed the formula a little bit. *swaps bags* There you are! Now, what can I do to help you?

CHAPLAIN: Get a piece of paper and jot down a few notes, as Dave reads along.

SGT. MAC: Sure! *finds paper and pen on nearby reception desk.*

CHAPLAIN: That'll help me a lot when I do the outline on my new sermon.

SGT. MAC: A good idea. What's first?

CHAPLAIN: So far, we've found two, or maybe three, of the sacred signs. Jot down "Virgin Birth," "Great Light," and "Isaiah."

And put down that Isaiah said the coming Messiah would be descended from King David. Just write "House of David" and I'll remember what it means.

SGT. MAC: *as he scribbles notes* I've got it.

CHAPLAIN: Now, Dave, turn over to the New Testament. I want to refresh my memory about the Annunciation.

SGT. MAC: The what?

DAVE: Mac, don't show your ignorance! Everybody knows God sent the angel Gabriel down to earth to tell the Virgin Mary she was going to be the mother of Jesus! That's the Annunciation. Everybody knows about that.

SGT. MAC: Not me. All I ever heard about Gabriel was that on the Judgment Day, Gabriel is going to blow his horn! That's right, ain't it, Chaplain?

CHAPLAIN: I don't know exactly what Gabriel will do on the Judgment Day, but he is the angel God sent to speak to Mary. And Gabriel's announcement to her is

called "The Annunciation." Dave, it's in the Gospel according to Luke. Mac, you don't need to worry. The name of the announcement is not important. It's the announcement that counts.

END OF ACT II

Dialogue continues, without a break.

ACT III, Scene 1

Scene 1. Same as the previous scene, in the Emergency Room of Crawford Army Hospital. Chaplain Wright, confined to bed because of an auto accident, is spending Christmas Day working out a sermon titled "The Vital Signs" and has enlisted the aid of two medics, Dave and Mac. Players would do well to read the following Bible verses for background on the coming scenes: Luke 1:26-56; Matthew 1:18-25.

DAVE: *Reading* "And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

"And the angel came ..." *voice fades as spotlight shifts to Nazareth village well.*

Three teen-age girls—Mary, Micaiah, and Jochebed—and two village women have gathered at the well. The women are talking to each other, their backs to the audience. The girls are pouring water into their large earthenware jars and pitchers.

With the girls is Myra, an old woman, who sits some distance from the well, waiting patiently for the girls to draw their water and to finish their laughter and talk.

Angel Gabriel enters—unobserved by the people at the well—and goes to speak to Myra.

GABRIEL: *pleasantly* Good woman?

MYRA: *with interest* Yes?

GABRIEL: I have never been to Nazareth before. Can you please tell me where to find a young woman named Mary? She is the daughter of one He-li, descended from the House of David.

MYRA: My, my, you are a stranger in Nazareth. Everybody knows Mary. She is the most beautiful young woman in the whole village. A sweet girl, too.

And besides that she is engaged to be married to my grandson! And my grandson Joseph is the finest young carpenter in this village or any other village. I'd go so far as to say "the finest carpenter in all Galilee!"

GABRIEL: *patiently* Yes, Ma'am. Where—

MYRA: *dreamily, as if she sees the wedding already in progress* Ah, I can't wait for the wedding. It will be so wonderful! So beautiful! Feasting! And dancing! And celebrating! I can see it all.

It's to be the first week in harvest. That's the best time for a wedding. That's when I was married.

You know why I'm so proud Joseph is going to marry Mary?

GABRIEL: No, Ma'am, I have no—

MYRA: Because she is of the House of David—just like us. We didn't want Joseph to marry an outsider. All his life I've prayed for Joseph to get a good wife. And Mary is the one! Young man, did you know the LORD our God answers prayers?

GABRIEL: Yes, I know. Ma'am, where does Mary live?

MYRA: You see those three young girls over there at the well?

GABRIEL: Yes.

MYRA: The one in the middle is Mary. The other two are my cousin's daughters, Micai'ah and Joch-e-bed. They' re almost old enough to be married. Now, me, I was betrothed when I was thirteen. Married at fourteen, and then—

GABRIEL: *bows to Myra* Yes, Ma'am. Thank you very much.

Gabriel makes his way toward the well.

MYRA: *without looking toward girls* Come, girls! We must go home. You can talk to Mary tomorrow. *pauses as girls leave Mary* Now careful with that water. Don't spill it! There's no need to come to the well and draw water if you're going to spill it on the ground!

Myra hobbles away, followed by Micaiah and Jochebed, who continue chattering to each other. Neither they nor the two women still at the well pay any attention to Gabriel's conversation with Mary.

Mary has picked up her pitcher of water and has turned to leave the well—going in the opposite direction from that of Myra and the girls—when Gabriel speaks.

GABRIEL: Hail to thee, Mary! The Lord is with you! You are highly favored!

MARY: *startled* Sir, I— I— *backs away*

GABRIEL: Blessed are you among women!

MARY: Sir, what a strange— It's— It's very strange for you to speak to me that way. I must go! *starts to leave*

GABRIEL: Mary, please hear what message I bring. Of all women on earth, you are the most blessed. You have found favor with God.

MARY: *showing bewilderment* I've found favor with God? I don't know what you mean! And I don't even know you!

GABRIEL: I am Gabriel. God has sent me to earth to tell you that He has chosen you. You have found favor with God. So, rejoice, young woman, and listen as I repeat to you the holy message of the Lord Most High:

"Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

"He shall be great, and shall be called 'the Son of the Highest': and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David;

"And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end."

MARY: *with awe and wonder* Oh, Sir! Blessed be the name of the Lord! My heart rejoices at the thought of what you are saying! But how can this be? I am not yet married.

GABRIEL: It shall be in this manner: "The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you;

"Therefore also that Holy Thing which shall be born of you shall be called 'the Son of God.'... For with God nothing shall be impossible."

Mary kneels, in humility

MARY: *as a prayer* Behold, O, God, I am "the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."

While Mary is praying, Gabriel exits. Brilliant light plays on Mary, slowly fades.

Mary rises, exits, taking the water pitcher with her. The two women at the well—still oblivious to Mary—continue their visiting for a bit and then exit.

End of Scene 1

Scene 2

Scene 2. At the Nazareth well, early in the morning, several weeks later. It is too early for the village women and girls to be coming to draw water. But as the scene opens, old Myra arrives, accompanied by her grandson Joseph. She carries no water jar, only her walking stick. The two are talking as they enter.

MYRA: Joseph, I know you're wondering why I asked you to come to the well with me so early in the morning.

JOSEPH: Ah, Grandmother Myra, that's all right. I get up early every morning. These days I have more carpenter work than I know how to handle. I have to rise early.

Where's your water jar? You forgot to bring it, Grandmother! I'll run back and get it. *turns to leave*

MYRA: No, Joseph. I didn't forget my water pitcher. I didn't come to the well to get water.

JOSEPH: *with surprise* You didn't?

MYRA: That sweet Mary sent me word to meet her here this morning.

JOSEPH: Mary?

MYRA: Yes. And she asked me to bring you with me. She said she has something to tell you, and she wants me to hear it.

JOSEPH: *much concerned* Something to tell me? Why, I talked with Mary and her Father He-li, just yesterday. You don't suppose—

MYRA: Oh, I pray to the LORD that old Cousin He-li hasn't changed his mind about the wedding! That would kill me! It would absolutely kill me, Joseph!

Mary approaches, carrying a large covered basket.

JOSEPH: Don't you worry, Grandmother. The wedding will take place the first week of harvest—just like we've all planned. Mary's Father He-li is not going to change his mind.

notices Mary approaching, hurries to her

Ah, Mary! I didn't see you coming!

MARY: *in dejected tone* Good morning, Joseph. Good morning, Cousin Myra. *embraces Myra*

MYRA: *warmly* Good morning, Child!

MARY: Thank you for getting up so early to meet me.

JOSEPH: Your basket? What on earth do you have in such a big basket?

MARY: It's a few of my clothes. You see, I—

MYRA: *with enthusiasm* Your clothes? I know! You're going on a journey! That's it! You're going somewhere, and that's what you wanted to tell Joseph and me! That's right, Child. Isn't it?

MARY: Yes, Cousin Myra, that's part of it. I'm going up into the Hill Country, and—

MYRA: *with relief, delight* To see your Cousin Elizabeth! I knew it! You're going to visit Elizabeth and her husband! Zechariah, I believe his name is. That's good. Don't you think so, Joseph?

JOSEPH: I suppose, Grandmother. But- *turns to Mary* Are you going to visit your Cousin Elizabeth?

MARY: Yes, that's where I'm going. But the thing I was going to tell—

JOSEPH: *anxiously* You won't stay too long, will you, Mary?

MARY: It may be quite a while, Joseph. You see, there's something I must tell you. You won't believe me. I know you won't. You won't understand. And, Cousin Myra, you won't understand, either.

JOSEPH: Why, Mary, you can tell me anything.

MYRA: *with much kindness* Child, what is troubling you?

MARY: *crying out* I am with child!

Joseph, stunned, gasps in disbelief

JOSEPH. Mary!

MYRA: *throwing up her hands* The LORD have mercy! *turns away, murmuring* Mercy! Mercy! Mercy! *throws her shawl over her face and weeps silently as she sits down on bench by well*

JOSEPH: *with great emotion* Mary! My love, you couldn't be with child. You know you're not! I know you're not!

MARY: It's true, Joseph. I will bring forth a child, a Holy Child. He will be holy unto God, for the Lord himself has said so. He will be called "the Son of God."

JOSEPH: *shaking his head in dismay* I can't believe it! I can't believe it. Can't! Can't! Can't!

Myra returns to Mary and Joseph

MYRA: *placing her arm around Mary's shoulders* Child, you are beside yourself. You are just imagining things. When harvest time comes, you and Joseph will be married. Then perhaps next year you will have a son, and he will be called "the Son of Joseph!"

MARY: *in desperation and with sadness* I knew you couldn't understand. Neither of you. How could you? How could you comprehend such a glorious, miraculous thing!

JOSEPH: *pleading* Mary, let's talk this over.

MARY: Joseph, I don't want to disgrace your family! Nor mine! So I'll go up to the Hill Country. And stay.

Runs off, leaving Joseph and Myra shocked, stunned

MYRA: Oh, Joseph! This is a tragic thing!

JOSEPH: What should I do, Grandmother?

MYRA: *shaking her head* I just don't know, Son. We'll have to think about it a long time. But I don't see how you can marry Mary now.

JOSEPH: I suppose not. But I can't bring myself to hurt her. I wouldn't make Mary a public example. Not for the world would I do that.

MYRA: Son, my advice is this: don't do or say anything for a while. Then, if Mary stays with her Cousin Elizabeth, the matter of calling off the marriage contract can be handled privately.

JOSEPH: *dejectedly* Yes. Privately. But, oh, Grandmother, this all breaks my heart!

MYRA: I know, Joseph. I know. My heart, too.

The two leave stage, arm in arm

End of Scene 2

Spotlight returns to hospital room, where Dave continues reading. This time, from Matthew 1:18

DAVE: *reading* "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.

But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream..." *voice trails off*

Scene 3

Scene 3. Joseph lies asleep in his Grandmother Myra's home. The Angel of the Lord enters slowly, approaches Joseph.

ANGEL: *looking down at Joseph* "Joseph, thou son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife; for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

"She shall bring forth a son, and you shall call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

"This is what was spoken of the Lord by the prophet Isaiah, saying 'Behold a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son and they shall call his name Immanuel, which being interpreted is God with us.'"

Fear not, Joseph. Mary is that virgin. Hasten to the Hill Country and bring Mary home.

Angel slips away.

JOSEPH: *still asleep, but crying out* I will! I will!

Wakened by his own voice, Joseph jumps up.

That's what I'll do! I'll go get Mary! This very day! I will! I will!

Myra comes hurrying in, much alarmed. She has a wooden bowl of raw dough in one hand, flour all over the other one.

MYRA: Joseph! are you all right? I heard you crying out in your sleep!

JOSEPH: *joyously* I'm fine! Absolutely fine! Grandmother, I'm going to get Mary! Today! Right now!

MYRA: *with excitement* Joseph! That's wonderful! I'll fix your breakfast right away. This dough is ready to bake now.

JOSEPH: I don't need any breakfast!

Joseph grabs up his cloak and starts out, leaving his sandals beside his bed.

MYRA: Your shoes, Joseph! *grabs up sandals and runs after Joseph* Your shoes! You forgot your shoes!

Joseph quickly takes the shoes, kisses Myra on the cheek, exits

MYRA: *as she exits at a leisurely pace* Ah, blessed be the Lord God of Israel!

End of Scene 3

Light again returns to hospital room. Dave reads on.

DAVE: *reading* "Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the Angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS." *Dave turns to Chaplain Wright.* You want me to keep on reading?

CHAPLAIN: Why, yes. Turn now to the second chapter of Luke.

SGT. MAC: Gee, Chaplain, the way Dave reads it, these people in the Bible seem real! Like people, just like us. I can nearly 'bout see 'em!

CHAPLAIN: That's true, Sergeant.

DAVE: *reading* "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.... And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

"And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David which is called Bethlehem: (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

"To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, ..." *voice trails off*

Scene 4

Scene 4. It is the spring following Mary's and Joseph's marriage. They have just arrived in Bethlehem. Both are very tired. Mary is very pregnant. As the scene opens, they stand at the door of the Bethlehem Inn, talking with the innkeeper.

JOSEPH: Are you the innkeeper?

INNKEEPER: Yes, I'm the only innkeeper in Bethlehem.

JOSEPH: Well, Sir, we're from Nazareth, and we're desperate for a place to lodge. We've been on the road for days. I thought we'd never get here. And my poor wife—As you see, her time has about come!

INNKEEPER: Yes, Young Man. It is a long way from here to Nazareth. And I know both of you are exhausted. But I can't help you.

JOSEPH: But Sir, we—

INNKEEPER: My inn is crowded to capacity. You see, Caesar's tax law has brought people to Bethlehem in droves!

JOSEPH: I just don't know where to go, or what to do!

INNKEEPER: The only place I can think of is a cave near here that's been turned into a stable.

JOSEPH: A stable?

INNKEEPER: Shepherds sometime keep their sheep there. It's dry. And you'd be out of the cold, wet wind.

JOSEPH: We'll go there then.

INNKEEPER: Walk back out the village gate and turn left. You'll soon see the cave.

JOSEPH: Thank you.

Innkeeper exits, Joseph turns to Mary.

JOSEPH: Mary, I'm very sorry we're going to have to spend the night in a stable!

MARY: That's all right, Joseph.

JOSEPH: Tomorrow we'll find something better.

Mary and Joseph move off stage slowly. Dave continues reading from Luke 2.

DAVE: *reading* "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid ..." *voice fades*

Scene 5

Scene 5. Three shepherds sitting by a campfire are suddenly surrounded by a dozen angels. At the same time an exceedingly bright light floods the hillside. Terrified, the shepherds back away from the angels.

ANGEL OF THE LORD: *coming closer to shepherds* Shepherds of Bethlehem, do not be afraid. We "bring you good tidings of great joy!"

SHEPHERD SPOKESMAN: Wh— Wh— What good tidings? Shepherds sure need good tidings!

ANGEL OF THE LORD: We bring good tidings "which shall be to all people."

SPOKESMAN: Then tell us!

ANGEL OF THE LORD: "Unto you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord!"

SPOKESMAN: A Saviour? In Bethlehem? That City of David?

ANGEL OF THE LORD: Yes, in Bethlehem of Judah- as it was foretold by the ancient prophets.

SPOKESMAN: This Saviour Child—-who is he?

ANGEL OF THE LORD: The Messiah! The One God has promised from days of old.

ALL SHEPHERDS: *with great amazement* The Messiah!

2ND SHEPHERD: *much excited* How can we find Him?

3RD SHEPHERD: How will we know Him when we see Him?

SHEPHERD SPOKESMAN: Yes! There could be any number of babes born today in Bethlehem. How will we know which one is the Messiah?

ANGEL OF THE LORD: "This shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." When you find Him, give glory to God. And praise Him!

ALL ANGELS: *chanting* Praise Him! Praise Him! Give praise to the Lord Most High!

ANGEL OF THE LORD: Exalt His name forever!

ALL ANGELS: Give glory to God in the Highest!

ANGEL OF THE LORD: The Babe brings peace on earth and good will!

ALL ANGELS: Peace, Good Will,

Peace, Good Will,

Peace on earth and Good Will.

ANGEL OF THE LORD: The Babe shall be The Prince of Peace!

ALL ANGELS: *chanting* The Prince of Peace is born. *Softly*
The Prince of Peace is born. *more softly*
The Prince of Peace is born. *very softly*
The Prince of Peace ...
voices fade out as group leaves

SPOKESMAN: *to his companions, with excitement* Let's go to Bethlehem!

2ND SHEPHERD: Yes! Come on!

3RD SHEPHERD: What about our sheep?

SPOKESMAN: They'll be all right! Can't you see that God wants us to find the Holy Child! The angels gave us a sign! Remember?

3RD SHEPHERD: That's right!

At the same time the Shepherds turn to go, DAVE resumes his reading, and the three Magi and their Forerunner come on stage. The Forerunner approaches the Shepherds; the Magi stop some distance away.

DAVE: *reading* "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the East ... saying 'Where is he that is born King of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East, and are come to worship him ...'" *voice fades*

FORERUNNER: *calling out* Good Shepherds?

SPOKESMAN: Yes?

FORERUNNER: I see that you are in a hurry, but these magi, *points to magi* my masters, wish me to ask you how to find the city of Bethlehem. Could you tell us the way?

SPOKESMAN: Sure! We'll show you. We're on our way there now—to find a Holy Child!

FORERUNNER: That's odd. We, too, are searching for a Child in Bethlehem. We have journeyed a long, long way—for two years we've traveled—always following the Child's Star.

SPOKESMAN: You've been following a star?

FORERUNNER: The star of the new King who is born in Bethlehem. We saw his star in the East and have come to pay homage to him.

SPOKESMAN: I've never heard of a king in Bethlehem, and I don't know how you'll find him—if he is there. We have a sign telling us how to find the Child we're looking for. He will be "wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

FORERUNNER: That is a remarkable sign. I wonder if perhaps we are searching for the same Child. No. That couldn't be. Surely the royal infant we seek will not be sleeping on straw in a stable!

SPOKESMAN: No. Kings don't sleep on straw, in stables.

FORERUNNER: Never mind that. Please let us follow you, and when we reach the city, we can make further inquiries.

SPOKESMAN: We go this way—toward the west. *beckons group to follow*
Shepherds set off. Forerunner rejoins magi, and the four follow the shepherds off
stage.

End of Scene 5

Scene 6

Sc. 6. In the Bethlehem stable, that same night. In the center of the stable there is a traditional manger half filled with straw. Mary sits on the right side of the manger, holding the Christ Child in her arms. Joseph is in the process of filling the manger with light, fluffy straw.

JOSEPH: *putting in a double handful of straw, and turning to Mary* Mary, I think this is enough straw, don't you?

MARY: Yes, Joseph. That will be fine. *carefully places baby on top of straw* Oh, Joseph, isn't He a beautiful child!

JOSEPH: He is. Perfect! Absolutely perfect!

MARY: Have you thought any more about His name?

JOSEPH: We will call his name JESUS—just like the angel told me in that dream.

MARY: I'm glad. I like the name JESUS. *pauses* Joseph, I've been thinking. It's not far from here to Jerusalem, is it?

JOSEPH: No. It's just five or six miles.

MARY: Do you think we could afford to take the Baby to the Temple?

JOSEPH: Of course we can afford it. We must always obey the Law of Moses and keep to our traditions. As soon as he is old enough, we'll go to the Temple and present Him to the Lord.

I'm afraid we can't buy a lamb for the sacrifice, but we can get two doves. That will—

sees Shepherds and Magi approaching

Look, Mary! Shepherds and some strange-looking travelers. They've come to see the Holy Child! I'm sure of it! *goes to greet shepherds*

DAVE begins reading again as Shepherds and Magi approach stable.

DAVE: *reading* "And the shepherds came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child ..."

JOSEPH. *warmly, to shepherds* You must have come to see the Holy Child?

SPOKESMAN. *with enthusiasm* Yes! A band of angels told us! And they gave us a sign! And besides that they said He is Christ our Lord!"

JOSEPH: *with joy* Come and see Him! *beckons to shepherds to come nearer to the manger*

As shepherds kneel in adoration, Joseph goes to magi, who have stopped some distance away.

JOSEPH: Strangers, have you come to see the Holy Child?

FORERUNNER: Sir, we don't know if we are here to pay homage to this Child or to another. My honorable masters are magi from the East, and they would like to speak with you about the newborn king for whom they search.

JOSEPH: Certainly. *Joseph moves closer to magi; Forerunner steps aside.*

BALTHASAR: *to Joseph* Sir, I am Balthasar. And these are my friends, Gaspar and Melchior.

Magi and Joseph exchange bows.

BALTHASAR: We have made an exceedingly long journey, coming all the way from "The Land Between Two Rivers." Perhaps we should explain the serious nature of our travels. We are trying to find a Child who is "born King of the Jews."

MELCHIOR: In Jerusalem we were told—by King Herod himself—that we should come to Bethlehem to look for this royal Babe.

GASPAR: Yes. We were in Jerusalem several days, and we talked to many, many people. We even went to the temple, and there we learned much from a devout old man named Simeon.

JOSEPH: I have heard of this Simeon. 'Tis said he never leaves the temple.

MELCHIOR: Simeon declared that he is expecting a great King to come—very soon. Simeon told us an odd thing.—And I'm sure it's true.—He said that the God you worship had revealed to him that he will not see death until he has seen this Saviour King!

BALTHASAR: Simeon explained that there are certain signs by which this Holy Child King will be recognized. The signs, he said, are written in your sacred books—the work of your prophets of centuries gone by. One sure sign is this: the Child will be descended from the king called David!

JOSEPH: *with excitement* Yes, Yes! I know! This Child in the manger is of the House of David! God has promised that He shall rule on the throne of David. Rule a kingdom that shall have no end!

MELCHIOR: Ah, that is good!

GASPAR: Yes. Very good. Very good, indeed. Thank you for telling us.

BALTHASAR: I was quite taken with one other prophecy the venerable man at the Temple explained. His eyes, so old and dim, filled with tears as he repeated the words.

"Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee ...

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem!

"Behold thy King cometh unto thee: He is just, and having salvation,...

"... meek and lowly" Cf. *Zechariah 9:9, Matthew 21:5, 11:29*

Balthazar stops abruptly and turns to his companions, speaking with new excitement. Meek and lowly? My friends! We have been blind! As blind as

beggars beside the road! Of course this Child here in the manger is the One!
Who could be more meek and lowly than a babe born in a stable!

GASPAR: That is right!

MELCHIOR: *speaking at the same time as Gaspar* We have been blind.

BALTHASAR: We've found Him! Come! Let us bow down before the holy newborn King!

MELCHIOR: What a joy!

GASPAR: A joy beyond measure! Let us open our treasure, right now, and give Him gifts!

JOSEPH: Walk this way.

Joseph leads magi to manger, where they kneel. Forerunner follows and kneels at a distance. As the magi bow down, DAVE reads.

DAVE: *reading* And when the wise men "were come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh."

As the magi lift up their gifts, the lights dim, go out.

END of ACT III

ACT IV, Scene 1

Scene 1. Same as previous scenes in Chaplain Wright's room. It is still rather early on Christmas Day. The chaplain is still flat of his back, his leg in traction. The two medics are seated nearby, Dave with the big Bible in his hands, Sgt. Mac with paper and pen. What Dave has been reading from the Bible has had a profound effect on the two soldiers.

SGT. MAC: *earnestly* Chaplain, you know what I think?

CHAPLAIN: What is that, Sergeant Mac?

SGT. MAC: What Dave has just read is the best thing I ever heard in my whole life!

CHAPLAIN: I'm glad to hear you say that.

SGT. MAC: You know what else I think? Actually, I don't just think it, I know it!

CHAPLAIN: What?

SGT. MAC: I'm going to start going to Chapel!

DAVE: Me, too!

CHAPLAIN: Ah, boys, you make my old heart happy! Somehow, it doesn't matter now that I won't be in Mississippi for Sally's wedding this afternoon. Maybe that 18-wheeler that hit me was some kind of blessing in disguise. I think—

Chaplain is interrupted when DR. WILEY appears in the doorway.

DR. WILEY: *staying in doorway* Sergeant Mac, I'd like a word with you, please.

SGT. MAC: Yes, Sir. *hurries to doctor*

While Mac is talking with the doctor, the chaplain turns to Dave.

CHAPLAIN: Dave, I surely thank you for reading to me. I've got my new sermon on "The Vital Signs" firmly in mind now. And when I ever get to Mississippi and can give the Bible to Sally, I'll tell her how you read it today.

DAVE: Is Sally your only grandchild?

CHAPLAIN: Sally is my only living relative. She's all I've got. That's the reason I was—

Mac returns, interrupts the Chaplain. Mac is exuberant.

SGT. MAC: *in very high spirit* Chaplain, you're in for a big surprise! Dave, gim' me a hand here! We've got to make room! Chaplain Wright is going to have company!

As the soldiers shove back the desk, the chairs, the bedside table, and other furnishings, Dr. Wiley ushers in Sally and her entire wedding party.

DR. WILEY: Chaplain Wright, here's someone to see you!

CHAPLAIN: *with great amazement* Sally! Oh, Sally!

SALLY: Granddaddy! *rushes to kiss and hug chaplain, burying his face in her bridal bouquet*

CHAPLAIN: Sally! Sugar, I can't believe it's you! I must be having another dream!

SALLY: It is me, Granddaddy! And this is Lee! *brings bridegroom to bedside*

CHAPLAIN: *shaking Lee's hand* Hello, young man! I've heard a lot about you!

LEE: It's good to meet you, Sir.

SALLY: Grand Daddy, I just couldn't stand it for you not to do our wedding! So we just decided to fly over here and have it. Right here! Right now!

LEE: My dad let us use his plane, bless his heart!

SALLY: Will you do the wedding? Or, do you feel up to it?

CHAPLAIN: *with great delight* Lord bless you, Sugar! I've never performed a marriage ceremony, lying flat of my back, but I can sure do it! *changes tone, as he sits up straighter*

First, though, Sally, I want to give you and Lee your wedding present. *turns to Dave* Dave, bring the Bible over here.

Dave brings Bible. Wedding group moves nearer to bed. Sally hands bridal bouquet to maid of honor so she can take Bible

SALLY: *as she accepts Bible from her grandfather* A family Bible! How precious!

Oh, Granddaddy, you're wonderful! *kisses him again*

LEE: Yes, Chaplain Wright. We thank you, very much.

CHAPLAIN: *in a light tone* I don't reckon either of you has ever been in a hospital long enough to know about the vital signs, have you?

SALLY: I haven't ever been sick in a hospital.

LEE: Me, neither.

CHAPLAIN: Well, in a hospital, when you're in bad shape, you can't get much sleep, or rest, or anything. Somebody is always coming in to take your vital signs!

All in room laugh, especially the doctor and medics.

Seriously, I want every one of you to know that there are Vital Signs in the Bible. God had them put there long, long ago to foretell the coming of the Blessed Child whose birthday is today. Christmas Day!

Now, Sally, sugar, if you and Lee will stand over here and join hands, we'll get on with the ceremony.

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here ... *voice fades*

Curtain
THE END

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