

# THE SOLITARY TRAVELLER



by  
Thom  
Van Dycke

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written for Crossing Funeral Care's  
Service of Remembrance,  
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[www.thomvandycke.com](http://www.thomvandycke.com)

For those who have lost loved one  
and feel that loneliness especially  
at Christmas.

# One.

The day had arrived.

I woke up very early and very tired. And it wasn't going to be a relaxing day; today was the day I would make the long walk back home to the village where I was born.

It wasn't that I didn't want to return home to the hills and olive groves of

Hebron, I just didn't look forward to the trek down dessert roads which would take several days. I also didn't like being told what to do, and citizens throughout the Roman Empire had been ordered home by our Roman Caesar – including the Jews of Judea

I had moved to the Cana countryside to work in the vineyards and had only been here 14 months when we were ordered back home for the census. Fortunately, the summer harvest had already concluded, and my employer wasn't going to feel my absence from his labour force.

As I prepared food for the journey, I thought about the dangerous points

along the way. There were spots where I would have to be alert. I wrapped up my bread, dried fish, and cheese, and then topped up my wineskin. A little nip of wine would make the crowds more bearable.

The sun was lighting the eastern sky as I walked into the warm morning air.

Although I was without a travelling companion, I wasn't alone. It was as if all of Israel was on the move and the dusty roads were packed. Truthfully, I was grateful to be travelling *without* companions because it meant I could set a brisk pace, I wanted to make the trip in 3 days instead of the typical 4 or 5. Of course, I also knew that pushing hard would be difficult once the afternoon

sun beat down on. A mid-day rest was almost a certainty.

*Too many people*, I thought to myself. People were the reason I lived in the countryside in a rented room close to the vineyard. Other labourers rented rooms in Cana, but I needed to be away from the endless noise of merchants, children, and parties.

For a moment I contemplated leaving the crowds of the main route and travelling through the hills. I shook my head. That would be a foolish move. Those hills were not nearly as empty as they appeared. They were full of thieves, and criminals. Gangs of men from the east lived in the caves far from

the law-abiding and law-*enforcement* of the more populated areas.

Lost in thought, I stepped into a warm, soft pile of donkey dung. I cursed under my breath. Some kids across the road pointed and giggled. Their mother scolded them but shot a sly smile my way as she prodded them along.

Manure and kids, or solitude and cheating death. Cheating death was feeling more attractive. But I carried on. More carefully than before.

As the sun reached its zenith the crowds thinned on the road. The shade offered by infrequent trees was crowded with travellers visiting cheerfully, sharing bread and cheese, and resting until it



was time to move on. I felt mildly annoyed knowing that my shade would more likely come from a boulder than a tree. Of course, boulders afforded less shade and less shade meant fewer people to share the shade.

Shortly, I found a suitable spot and sat down alone, to rest and watch the travelling groups. I noticed a man walking among the people across the road. The fact that I noticed him struck me as odd for two reasons. First, there was nothing *to* notice about this man. I couldn't tell his age, although he was older than I was. He looked every part a Jew and peasant, curly hair, ragged beard, rough clothing, and sandalled feet. Second, no one else seemed to

notice him. The people were generally chatty and friendly towards their fellow travellers. But no one chatted with this man. And that didn't seem to bother him.

Another solitary traveller. I could relate.

I guess he could sense me staring at him, and at one point looked directly at me... I didn't look away quickly enough and awkwardly gave him a nod. He smiled and started down the road again, as the crowds began to stir from their mid-day break.

The afternoon went by relatively quickly, and although my feet were starting to ache slightly, it was mostly uneventful.

This came to an abrupt halt, however, as I crested a hill. The road was crowded as travellers hesitated to travel into the valley. Grumbling, I had to push to get through the hot and sweating crowd. When I emerged from and peered into the valley, I saw the source of their hesitation. A small cohort of Roman soldiers was hovering over what looked like a crumpled body lying still on the road.

Even from a mile, I could hear a wailing woman. She was being restrained by her companions as she shouted at the soldiers. I feared for her. I knew nothing of what happened, but a soldier's sense of justice was very different from a

peasant, and they had little compassion for high emotion.

People in the crowd were speaking in hushed, but urgent tones.

“What that Matthias’s son?”

“Mama is that man dead?”

“Do we continue? We must continue, in hours it will be dark.”

I decided that I would risk travelling on.

My heart pounded in my chest as I approached the brightly uniformed soldiers. A thickly muscled centurion sat on a dark horse observing. He glanced at me but didn’t give me much more than that. Meanwhile, the screaming

woman could not be consoled by her friends.

“You killed him! You killed him!” She howled in angry grief.

“He drew a weapon,” a soldier responded. “He left us no choice.”

“Why did you even stop us.” She sobbed.

“We are stopping everyone. It’s for your protection,” the soldier responded. He wasn’t entirely lacking empathy, but he was also very matter of fact. He was a man acquainted with death. “Your husband was acting strangely, and when I asked him to present his documents, he drew a dagger and came at me.”

“He was afraid! You Romans are always mistreating him! Your soldiers took our last denarii last week. We have nothing left!”

The centurion stiffened slightly.

“Woman, he drew a weapon, and my men defended themselves. This is nothing more than an unfortunate accident. Now move along.”

I was *stunned* at the centurion. How cold and calloused could a human be? The man who had been restraining the woman now had to tighten his grip and braced his legs in the road to keep her from throwing herself at the soldiers in fury.

My pace quickened, but as I passed on the far side of the I glanced back over my shoulder. My heart skipped a beat, the man restraining the woman was the solitary traveller. He was holding her tightly, but from this angle, it looked far more like an embrace than restraint. His eyes were closed as if he was focussing all his mental energy on the woman. She screamed furious profanity at the soldiers and violently spat at them; his hands tighten on her. And then he whispered something into her ear, and she crumpled into his arms sobbing. Tears, snot, and dust made an unholy mess of her face, and she pressed her face into the man's chest. One hand caressed her back, and the other gently

held the back of her neck like a father with his baby girl.

I hurried past, pressed as close to the far side of the road as I could. I didn't look back again.

The crowds cautiously moved forward from both sides of the incident, some opting to walk far off the road among the boulders. I couldn't stop thinking about the man embracing the woman. I had never seen anything like it. I wondered how they knew each other. He wasn't old enough to be her father, but perhaps a brother? How had he comforted her? What did he say when she collapsed onto him?





At dusk, hundreds of migrants struck camp near the banks of the Jordan River on the outskirts of Aenon. Families set up their haphazard but secure tents and gathered fuel for cooking fires. This was a chance for fathers and grandfathers to relive and teach their children ancient skills from their nomadic past. As expected, the chatter around the campfires was almost exclusively about the scene from the road.

I made a fire and cooked the small fish I bought from a local boy and smiled remembering the delight in his eyes as he flipped him the small coin in payment. It was probably more money than he had seen in his lifetime. The fish was fresh and tasty, but I much preferred

those caught in the deep cold waters of the Sea of Galilee. I had a little bit of my bread and a solid swig of wine as I settled onto the ground for the night. The nights were still warm, and I had opted to travel light without a tent.

As my fire burnt low, the stars appeared brighter, and I was entranced as I watched the eyes of heaven sparkle and dance. The welcome embrace of sleep wrapped my body.

# Two.

Loud shouting jarred me awake.  
“She’s gone! She’s gone! Ibrahim,  
she’s not in her bed!”

The frantic voice of a mother cut across  
the quiet camp followed by the low  
rumblings of a father.

“She was just here. Michael, did you see where your sister went? Jeremiah! Wake up, Hadassah isn’t here.”

I could hear frantic searching inside the tent and then the family burst from their tent with small lamps. A small group of men still visiting around their campfire now sprang to their feet.

“Who is missing?” One asked the father.

“My daughter, Hadassah. She is just three years old. We don’t know how she got out of the tent without us seeing.”

“We will find her.” The man reassured him. And he went about shaking the nearby tents and prodding those sleeping on the ground hastily forming

a search party. Moments later fires were being stoked and lamps were moving like fireflies among the tents and rocks. I joined the effort. I didn't know what Hadassah looked like, but I assumed I would recognize a lost little girl. I shuddered to think that someone with ill intentions might find her ahead of us.

Her siblings were interrogated for any clues as to her whereabouts and I listened in.

*Where did they use the washroom before bed?*

*Who did they speak with?*

*Where did they play before dinner?*

One of the kids looked up urgently, “We made boats by the river. Oh no! We forgot to bring Hadassah’s back and she was upset.”

My throat tightened. The river at night. I rushed with the others to comb the banks of the river for signs of the little girl.

Crashing about, a man violently shushed the crowd. Everyone froze and held their breath.

There it was... the sounds of splashing upstream. A small voice cried for help and then went silent.

Time stood still in the brief second it took for us to move but then a dozen

people raced upstream trying to locate the place where the splashing had stopped. As we did, a man ran past me and leapt into the river. He disappeared under the water and emerged holding a body.

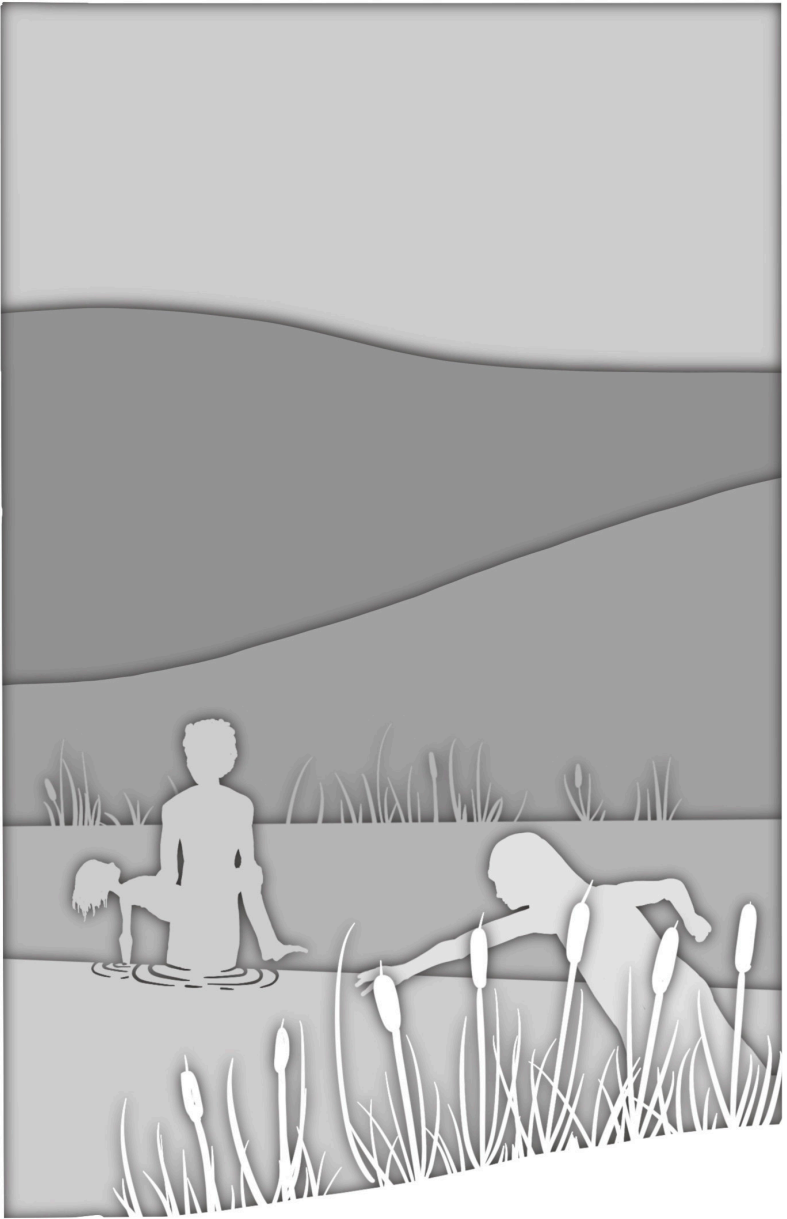
The mother screamed and stumbled down the banks of the river as she tried to reach her daughter.

But I stopped dead in my tracks.

It was him again, the solitary traveller.

He was holding the little girl and I heard him repeating, "I have her, I have her. It's ok, I have her. Miriam, look at me, I have Hadassah your baby girl."





The world faded away from my consciousness and I was completely consumed with fear and wonder. It was a strange emotion, even I recognized that. But how had this man appeared three times in one day? Yes, I felt fear. I left the crowd by the river and retreated to my fire to warm off the chill I was feeling.

The men in the search party gradually made their way back to camp and an eerie hush fell across camp like ash from a grass fire. I tried to sleep but the exhaustion of my emotions could not overpower the adrenaline of the search.

# Three.

**A**s soon as a faint light appeared in the sky, I rolled up my mat, extinguished my small fire, and left the camp. I could hear soft crying as I passed by Hadassah's tent. The terror of the night had left a scar on the family.

Although I had lots to think about from my first day of travels as I walked, I

didn't allow my pace to lessen; I wanted to make it to Jericho, or even as far as Bethlehem.

As the day wore on, the road became full again. I felt a bit bad for the families. So many parents and were burdened with the little ones. The nursing babies were a nuisance I'm sure, but it was those chunky toddlers, too small to keep pace, but heavy to haul over long distances that made for slow travelling. I offered to piggyback a kid a few times throughout the day to the gratitude of their families.

But the folks I felt the sorriest for were the elderly. The census didn't discriminate for age; *all* Roman citizens

were required to report to their hometowns. Sometimes the elderly rode pack animals and some were supported by their adult children and grandchildren, but equally many walked as couples or even on their own, dutifully carrying out the wishes of an emperor they would never see, meet or likely respect.

Late in the day, I came up to one couple. They looked as old as Abraham and Sarah, half their original height for the curve in their backs. Leaning heavily on their staffs for support they shuffled on in the dust and sun. They were so diminutive that I wondered if I couldn't pick one up on each arm and carry them with little effort.

I slowed down to their pace as I came up behind them. I almost died it felt so slow. How would they ever reach their destination?

The woman coughed gently, and her husband looked at her with deep concern. "Deborah, shall we sit and rest?" he asked hoarsely. And then coughed himself.

"No Ephraim," she replied weakly, "we can't get caught out again." But her eyes were shining as they welled with tears of exhaustion.

*"Sh, sh."* Ephraim comforted his wife.

My heart broke as they struggled and I couldn't pass them by for all my desire

to make it to camp quickly. They went on in silence for several moments but then Deborah slowed even more and stopped. Ephraim shuffled on head down a few steps before he noticed his missing bride had paused. He slowly looked back with concern, his eyes asking the question. *Can you go on?*

But Deborah just shook her head slightly. *I cannot.* Ephraim shuffled back as travellers passed by.

Licking his dry lips he asked, "What do we do now?"

"I can't make it, my love," Deborah whispered with a weak smile. I could see that she was already slipping away.

“No, no,” Ephraim said. “We will stop at the next town. We will say that is as far as we go for this census.”

But Deborah shook her head.

A tall man brushed past me. It was him again. He got down on both his knees and placed a hand under her chin lifting it gently. Deborah’s eyes focussed and then a sparkle, “Oh...” she said, “it’s you.”

“Shh, precious one.” The man gently said. “Shall I carry you home?”

Ephraim swallowed hard. “Is it that time?” He asked the man.

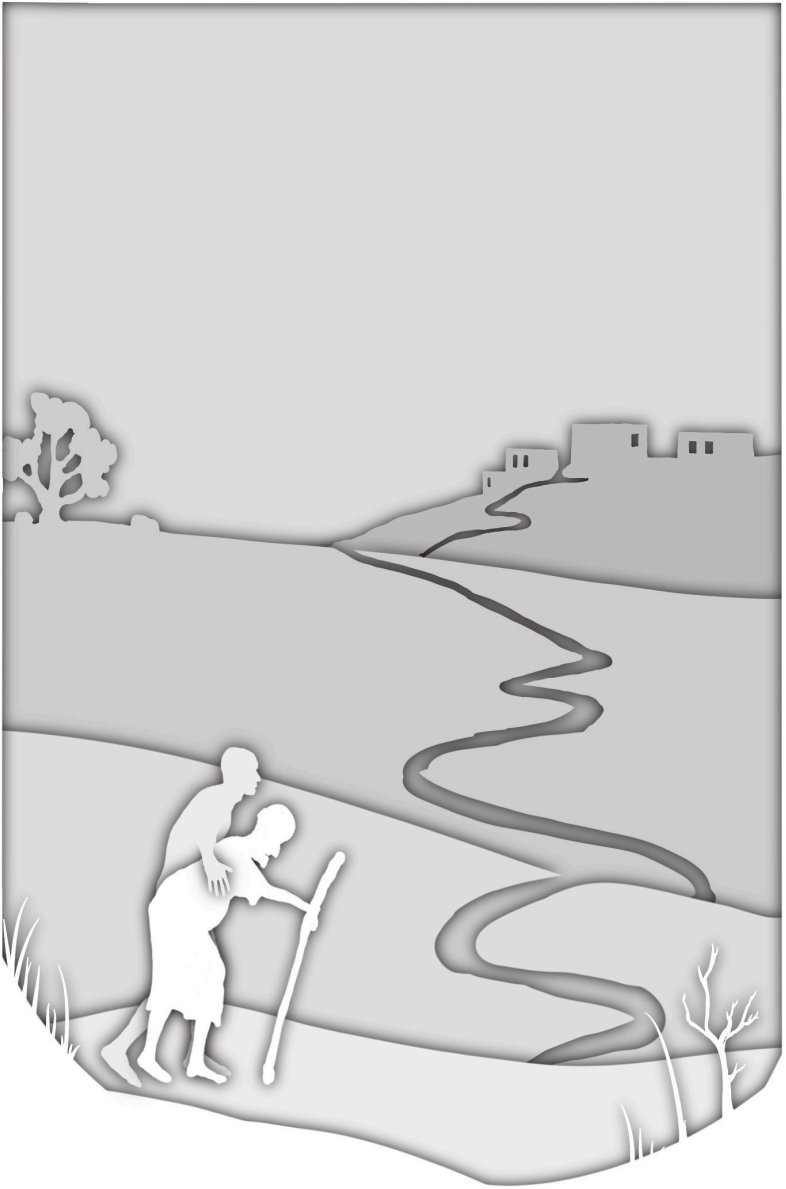
“It is.” He said ever so gently. “But it’s alright. I’ll go on ahead, and this young



man will help you along. When it is time, Ephraim, I will come to retrieve you as well. It won't be long now."

Ephraim looked at me with weary, watery eyes, and I nodded that I would help. I looked ahead at the rolling hills. My heart sank when I couldn't see our destination.

The man knew my thoughts. "Son, it's just another mile to Bethlehem. You will see it when you pass that bend in the road and you can stay there for the night. There are no longer rooms to rent, but Ephraim has a grandson who lives in the first home you will see. You will recognize it because of the stable that is hewn into the side of the hill behind the courtyard."



I started to ask a question, but the man turned away. Stooping once more he gathered Deborah into his arms and walked ahead carrying the elderly woman.

“Can I hold on to you?” Ephraim tugged on my sleeve like a small child.

“Uh... um... yes of course.”

Ephraim hooked his arm in mine, and we shuffled on down the road. I wanted to ask Ephraim many questions, but I knew that he didn't have the energy to speak. He could barely move his feet through the dust.

In due time we arrived at Bethlehem. The normally sleepy town was bustling

with visitors – although there was a tangible weariness in their movements. I looked for Deborah and the man, but I couldn't see them anywhere. As directed, I took Ephraim to the first house. We went to the gate, and I shouted in. A man older than I appeared in the door, silhouetted against the glow of oil lamps. Recognizing his grandfather he exclaimed, "Saba! What did you do? You are too old to obey this census!" Ephraim's grandson paused and then asked, "Where is Savta?"

Ephraim looked tearfully at his grandson and shook his head slightly, who sighed gently and took his grandfather by the arm.

I was going to explain about the man on the road but before I could say anything, Ephraim's grandson looked up and exclaimed, "Oh son! I'm sorry. Thank you for bringing my grandfather here safely. You are an angel to our family. Do you have a place to stay? We don't have much room even the stable is occupied."

"Oh... that's ok," I stuttered awkwardly. "I'll camp tonight."

Ephraim's grandson nodded, "Well then, go up on that hill," he said gesturing behind me. "You will find some very friendly shepherds there. Friends of mine. They will happily give

you company and protection through  
the night. Tell them Malachi sent you!”

He smiled, blessed me, and led his  
grandfather into the home to rest.

# Four.

I walked out of town and wandered up the hill. Although I could see them, I didn't go to the shepherds right away. I needed to sit and think for just a bit. Where had the man taken Deborah? I wondered.

"Home." The voice of the solitary traveller startled me. "Can I join you, son?"

Bewildered I just nodded.

“That was quite a journey, wasn’t it?”

He asked with a gentle smile.

I nodded again.

“Thank you for walking with Ephraim this last mile. I know it was a tremendous inconvenience.”

I stared blankly but then said, “Sir, I have never seen you before yesterday and yet... you showed up three times and once today.”

“You mean twice today. I just showed up again.” His eyes sparkled.



I relaxed a little bit and smiled back. It was as if he had an aura of peace that affected everyone he spoke to.

We sat in silence for a moment and then I said, "That woman by the soldiers yesterday... is she ok?"

"Hmmm, Tabitha. No, she is not ok. But she will be."

"Was that man her husband?"

The man pursed his lips. "Well, he was her boyfriend. His name was Simon. He was very troubled. They were *both* very troubled. Still, the soldiers acted rashly."

"That centurion was so cold." My heart sank at the thought.

“The centurion has known only death throughout his life. He was very young when he lost the one person who loved him. He is the product of a cold, violent world.”

I was about to ask how he knew so much about all these people but then I remembered the little girl. “What about Hadassah?” I blurted out. I had left the river before knowing whether she was ok.

“Didn’t you hear what I told her mother?” The man asked. “I have her.”

“But... what does that mean?”

The man smiled at me. “Son, I am the safest person you will ever meet and the people I have are *safe*.”

I contemplated what he was saying. It made sense, I felt safe with him. He had embraced Tabitha, and she had collapsed in his strong arms. Then he reassured Hadassah’s mother at the river. And Deborah had allowed the man to *carry her*.

“How did Deborah know you?” I asked.

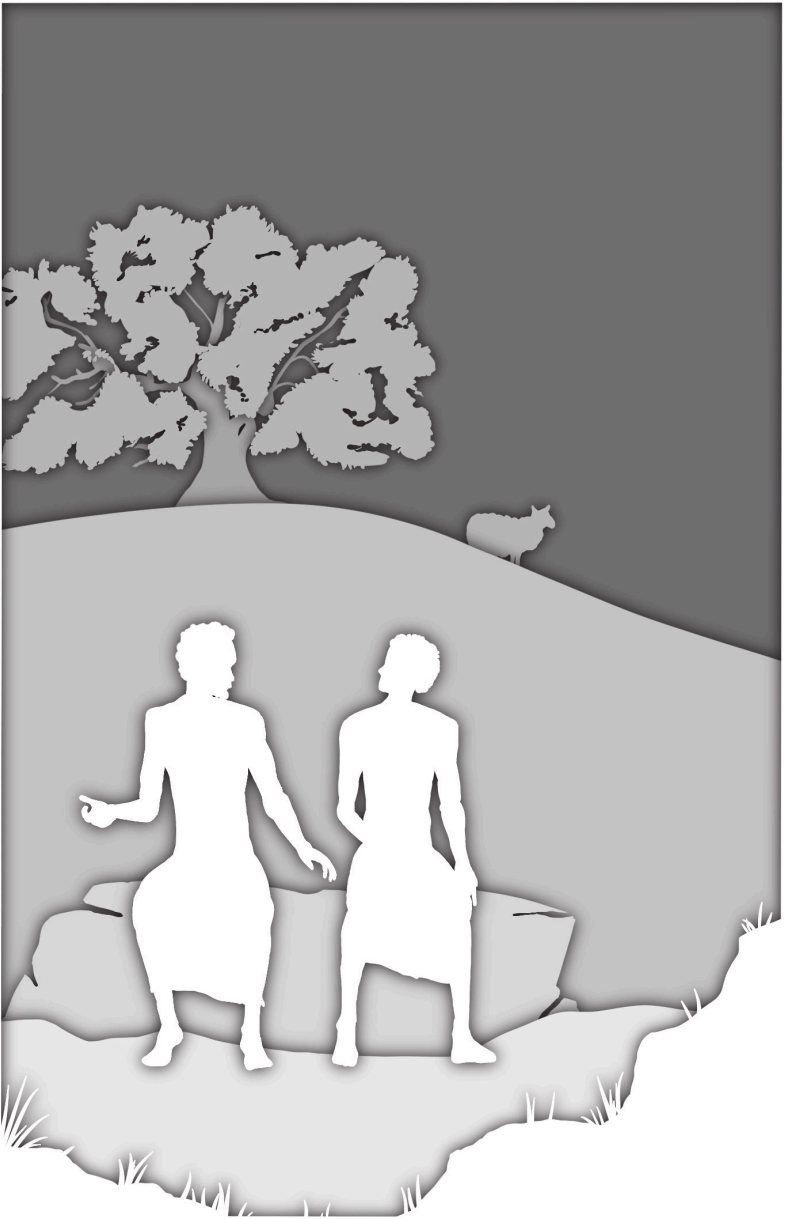
“Oh, well, we’ve known one another for a long time. We talked almost every morning of her life from the time she was very young.”

“How is that possible? She is three times as old as you.”

The man’s eyes sparkled in the fading daylight. “You don’t know me yet, but when you do, things will make much more sense.”

“I would like that very much,” I said with as much sincerity as I had ever felt. “When can we meet again?”

“I come through Cana often! Perhaps we’ll run into each other there! But son, chances are good that if you look carefully, you’ll see that I have been your constant companion for a long time. None of us are quite as alone as you might think.”



Now I was confused again, but as I started to ask another question he got up.

“Well, it’s time.” He said with a bit of a sigh and smile.

“Time for what?”

“Oh... I’m starting a new assignment tonight.” He pursed his lips as he considered it and started walking away. “Should be interesting...” I heard him say quietly.

I watched him wind his way back to town until he disappeared into the darkness.

After a few more minutes, I decided I didn't want to be by myself anymore, so I made my way to the little band of shepherds. When they heard Malachi had sent me, they slapped my back like we had been friends for years. They shared their supper with me and told stories about their adventures on the hill pastures of Bethlehem. Then one took a harp and played the slow, dramatic Jewish songs I knew from childhood.

It was late when we finally stopped singing. As the hum of the harp gave way to the silence of the countryside, I thought I heard a baby crying in the dark.

But that darkness lasted only a moment... before things got much brighter than any night I had ever experienced in my life.



Thom Van Dycke was a pastor for 19 years. He is currently a writer, speaker, coach, and most importantly a dad.

He and his wife, Tara, have 8 children, and have welcomed 30 foster children into their home since 2011.

They live in Southern Manitoba in the middle of trees so tall that they don't feel the wind in winter and so lush that it feels like a rain forest in summer.

