

THE FIRST RETELLING OF AN OLD, OLD STORY

by Glynis Becker

“It’s time!”

I felt a push into my shoulder and expected a whoosh of air as someone ran past me. There was no whoosh because there was no air, something I was still getting used to. The sky that wasn’t sky was completely clear as it always was, and the street that wasn’t a street glittered like gold. It sparkled as if reflecting beams of light from the sun, but of course there was no sun, so what the glitter was from I still had no idea.

I hadn’t been here long. Or at least I don’t think I had. It didn’t really matter, but anyway, I hadn’t had all my questions answered yet, so I made a mental note to find out what I could about the streets next time I sat with the elders. I always had great intentions when we had our conversations, but they knew so much and I had such fun learning and letting the ideas and stories flow that I never seemed to get around to whatever it was I had come for in the first place.

The path I was on suddenly filled with people. Where they’d come from or when I’m not sure, but suddenly the deserted road I’d been walking was flooded. I heard the murmuring hum of many conversations but couldn’t make out anything except what the boy who’d run past me had said: “It’s time.”

Everyone seemed in a hurry, not running really, but with urgency. It must be something good, I imagined. As if everything here hadn’t already been spectacular. This had to be special.

I stopped, letting people walk around me like I was a rock in the middle of a stream. Turning my head this way and that, I was struck by not only the amount of people—there were so many now I couldn’t begin to count (as if math had any place here)—but also by the unique beauty of each individual.

People of every color—skin color, hair color—walked past me and I was struck as I always was by the Imagination that created us all.

Two women were coming my direction. One was tall, dark-skinned, wearing a bright caftan, the other smaller and pale, plaid wool dress swinging around her legs. They were laughing together and hurrying.

I put my hand out. “Excuse me. What is going on? I keep hearing, ‘It’s time!’ Time for what? I thought there was no time here.” The more I talked, the more confused I seemed to get. My brow furrowed involuntarily.

The tall one laughed. It was clear she was not laughing at me, but the look they exchanged told me they were slightly amused. “Oh, there is no time, but we do live here in its shadow.” Then her own brow furrowed and she thoughtfully continued in what was a beautiful African accent. “Well, not a shadow, exactly, because obviously there are no shadows.” Her hand came out of her caftan and she pointed to the non-sky. “No light, no shadows.”

She wasn’t really helping, I realized.

“Okay, so no shadows, no time. I get that. But where is everyone going?” I was getting a little impatient, although I’m not sure impatience is even allowed here.

The other one put her hand on the dark woman’s arm. “Ye must be new.” Her brogue was thick, but there was never a problem understanding, no matter who I’ve spoken to since I got here. The accent was just another facet of the diversity. Her eyes sparkled as she smiled too. “The first one’s always the best, isn’t it now?”

“The first what?!”

The two women—Ainsley and Kirabo; I didn’t have to ask for names, I just knew—each grabbed one of my hands and pulled me along.

They didn’t push anyone, because somehow they knew how to walk in the small spaces between the people, which were not easy to find, as there were people in every space. Soon we were running, never tiring, not breathing hard, no sweating. I’d always hated running for those reasons. But here, I felt like I could run forever, and even more, enjoy it.

We turned a corner and slowed. The women dropped my hands and I came to a complete stop. A building I’d not seen before towered in front of me. The spire at the top went beyond the sky that wasn’t sky. The width of it stretched from horizon to horizon—if there had been a horizon. How could I not have seen that just a moment ago from around that corner?

A flood of people rushed up the marble-like steps and spilled into a doorway that spanned the length—or was it width? Or did it even matter here?—of the enormous structure. The outside of it was clear, but I couldn't see inside. Or was it white? I couldn't describe it. It was made of glass or metal or stone, I couldn't tell.

I looked over at my new friends and they seemed to be enjoying watching my amazement.

“How have I never seen this before?” My voice was shaky.

Kirabo laughed. “It's not always here.”

“But, how?” I shook my head. “Never mind. Now what?”

Ainsley turned to the steps. “Now, we go find a seat. It's not possible to be late or not to get a seat, but I always like to be early.” She laughed. “Which isn't possible either, of course.”

I shook my head again, feeling stunned and out of place. Ainsley grabbed my hand again and pulled me through the clear doors. Suddenly we were part of the flood streaming in from the outside into the grandest hall I'd ever seen.

In my time I'd taken tours of several of the greatest cathedrals in Europe, like Notre Dame and Westminster Abbey. But this was indescribable. Nothing like those man-made places. Built of materials I couldn't begin to recognize or name, the ceiling wasn't a ceiling at all and it wasn't sky, but it was luminous and nearly unviewable as it was so far above my head.

I couldn't help but gawk.

We went in farther and came to what reminded me of a grand theater, like Carnegie Hall, where I'd once seen a symphony. The music had filled the space and nearly overwhelmed me. I left that night with tears of joy in my eyes and a heart overflowing with having experienced such beauty. Somehow this was already even better.

There were plenty of seats for the entire assembly, which went on in every direction. And no one was any closer to what I surmised was the stage as anyone else. Again, I had to remind myself that those pesky laws like gravity or time or distance held no sway here. So it was entirely possible that each spot was exactly the same no matter where you sat.

I took a seat between Kirabo and Ainsley. The lights dimmed. Although, again, there were no lights, but some indication caused a change in the atmosphere and the raucous, excited conversation stilled. Anticipation filled the space instead of noise.

I still had no idea what I was waiting for, but with this kind of a build-up, it must be good.

A note sounded out clear and beautiful to my left. Every head in the place turned to see one angel, a glorious mass of light and wings, singing the most beautiful melody I'd ever heard. In the time I'd been here I had heard song after song, praise after praise, but nothing like this.

Another voice rang out over the top. The first angel didn't change volume, but somehow now its song became background for the words being spoken by another. A Voice of perfect pitch—not rumbling too low, nor high and shrill. Simply, pleasingly perfect.

I knew exactly Whose it was. I had heard it from time to time, but never this dramatic and compelling and commanding.

“In dark days, I sent words of judgment and words of hope to my faithful prophet, Isaiah. He, in turn, shared them with my beloved.”

Eyes turned toward the man walking up the steps. The light shone on him and I could hear a thumping gait as he used his staff to help him up the steps. He was neither young nor old. He didn't walk with a limp, so the staff was obviously just a part of him, not because he needed it. I was beginning to feel like everyone here had a flair for the dramatic and I couldn't help but smile. This was exciting.

He stood where all could see and began to speak words I'd heard many times before. “Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit.” Isaiah continued and in his own lovely voice—did we all have lovely voices here, I wondered? I'd have to think on that some more, since in my own time I'd never been able to carry a tune. He now recited his own words from scripture. He talked of peacefulness, safety, and restoration.

I closed my eyes and soaked it in. The words spoken of a Messiah felt more real in that moment than anything else ever had. Because now I had seen Him with my own eyes.

The Father's voice could be heard again as Isaiah turned and made his way down the same steps he'd come up. How long ago had that been? Had he recited the entire scripture? Did it even matter?

"My beloved's captivity came to an end. Kingdoms rose and fell. When the time came and my silence was over, I sent another messenger."

Gabriel now stood where Isaiah had, almost too beautiful to look at, but I did, amazed, having never seen this creature before. I'd heard of him, but to see him standing there, I can completely understand why any angels' first words to us humans were usually "Fear not!".

Kirabo grabbed my hand and I looked at her with my eyes wide and my mouth open. She just smiled and nodded. "Isn't it, though?"

We both turned back to the front. I didn't want to miss anything.

Gabriel's voice rang out. "I was sent to bring a message. The message for which the world had waited. I was sent to Mary. She was scared, willing, and faithful. The child born to her would be called Immanuel."

A woman appeared, beautiful, serene. She smiled and spoke. "I was scared, but willing. How could I be anything else? We all, every one of us here, knows that when He asks of us, we must be willing to go or to do. Not because we are fearful or coerced or enslaved, but because we know in our souls we are so very loved."

A man moved to stand beside her and took her hand. "We did as the angel asked. We made our lives together, made ourselves ready for however the child would change us. We prepared in every way we could. Mary spent time with her cousin, Elizabeth, also preparing for a child, another special child."

Mary spoke again. "Come, dear cousins, share your story."

A couple walked up the steps to stand with Mary and Joseph. The man held his arm around his wife and began. "I was visited too. I saw the angel and I fear that I was skeptical. I could not believe that we were to be blessed with a child after so many years of prayers met with silence. So, for my unbelief, I was struck silent. Fitting, no? But when Mary came to visit

and the child made himself known, we all praised God that we were part of this redemptive story.” He waved his hand expansively and smiled through his beard. “As are you.”

Elizabeth smiled and nodded. “I was to be a mother, the answer to the deepest prayer of my heart. And my child would be special. The one who would point to a Savior, THE Savior, the Messiah. A great honor was given to our family.”

I watched as all four of them fell to their knees, and I couldn’t help but raise my hands in praise. Thank you, God, for the immeasurable gift.

I knew what was coming next and couldn’t help but be carried with it.

The angel that was still singing that rapturous melody in the corner, the Archangel with raised hands, the others on the ground, praising, and all of us singing and praying in our various ways and languages. But the Father’s voice cut through over everything.

“Caesar Augustus ruled that all the world would be taxed, so Mary and Joseph went to Joseph’s family home of Bethlehem to be counted in the census. While they were there the time came for the Child to be born.”

Our attention turned to a billowy image, what might have passed for a hologram in my time or a flickering movie screen. There was a young woman in labor, surrounded by people and straw, hair soaked with sweat. A groan sounded from her, then a piercing wail—the sound of a newborn—cut through the noise of this gathering. A cry went up from us all, a great shout of excitement.

The Father’s narration continued. “I sent my messenger to the fields outside Bethlehem, to give first witness to the humble shepherds of what had taken place inside the city.” His voice became playful. “I have a soft spot for shepherds, you know.” I couldn’t see Him, but I’m pretty sure He winked when He said this.

There was a laugh from the crowd and as a group of men and women in first-century dress walked up the stairs holding crooks and staffs. One in particular looked like he couldn’t wait for the rest of them to climb. He kept shoving them forward, herding them like, well, sheep.

Ainsley leaned over. “Every year. Eli just can’t wait to get up there. He’s a little excitable.”

The shepherds crowded at the front, singing, laughing, as suddenly there were angels as far as I could see. They filled the chamber from the floor to ceiling, if it had a ceiling. The song the first angel had been singing quietly through the time we'd been here was now joined by countless others and the sound was indescribable. Splendorous. Majestic. Otherworldly.

I was surprised my cheeks were wet. My brow furrowed as I wiped them off. "I thought there were no tears here."

Kirabo took my hand. "Only the good kind."

We praised with hands raised and eyes closed for a long time. Or just a moment. I couldn't get used to not being bound to time here.

The angels left, the shepherds left, and the Father's voice rang out again.

"My promise to reveal Myself to the world came through a sign, a star, guiding men from far away. They knew to watch and for many years their vigil had returned void. But one day the star shone and men from the east began a long journey to meet Us."

A group of men dressed in colorful robes, the dress of first-century Persia, made their way forward. They carried gifts, which they laid at the front and then knelt in worship. The music, back to the one beautiful angelic voice, swelled again and I couldn't help but raise my hands as well.

"Mary treasured these moments, as do all of us," the Father said. "This was another Beginning. The Word made flesh. The first step in your redemption."

As we filed out of the great hall, I took the hands of my new friends in my own.

"Every year? Really? We get to do this every year?" I asked.

They both nodded. "When Christmas is celebrated and the story is told and re-told, we get to experience it again too. Isn't it wonderful?"

I agreed it was an amazing gift.

Then I wondered what Easter morning must be like.

THE END