

The Cast of Christmas

— Originated by Community Full Gospel Church —

William Shakespeare penned these words in his play, *As You Like It*, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances..."

Most of us have seen a wide variety of Christmas plays and pageants in our lifetimes and have even been in one or more of them ourselves. We enjoy seeing the tiny tots program—Mary in her blue dress and white veil; Joseph in a too-large bathrobe; both kneeling beside a manger with the "Baby Jesus" (nearly as large as them); and the little angel choir with crooked tinsel halos heartily singing "Away in the Manger" behind them. We perhaps, too, have seen or participated in elaborate Christmas pageants with huge casts and conceivably thousands of dollars spent on costumes, backdrops, real animals, and professional sound and lighting. Both of these, in its own way, characterize that first great "Casting Call of Christmas." God the Father signed on and coordinated the innocent and the majestic, the humble and the proud, the unlearned and the scholarly, the good and the evil in the widely diverse characters for roles in that first great Christmas drama. God's choice of players are:

MARY: A young woman, pledged to be married to Joseph, finds herself visited by the archangel Gabriel one night. Gabriel announces to her that she will become pregnant. To overcome her confusion since she is a virgin, the angel explains to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." Though under Jewish law Mary knows she can be stoned to death for being pregnant outside of marriage and knowing that her husband-to-be will probably not understand, she bravely responds, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." She ends up giving birth in a stable and laying her newborn in a manger.

JOSEPH: A righteous man pledged to be married to Mary. When he finds Mary to be with child, he decides to divorce her quietly and not embarrass her publicly. (Under Jewish law, engagement was as binding as marriage. To break it, a legal divorce was required.) Before he could do this, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream, explains the situation, tells him to take Mary as his wife, and when the child is born "...to give him the name, Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Joseph does as he is commanded, takes Mary as his wife but has no sexual union with her until after Jesus is born. This fulfills the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14, "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son and will call him Immanuel."

CAESAR AUGUSTUS: A Roman emperor (a small but very important part in the "Play"), who issues a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Everyone must go to his own town to register. This requires Joseph to go up to Bethlehem, taking the very pregnant Mary with him, since he is of the house and line of David. This fulfills the words of the prophet Micah written over 700 years before, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, ... from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity." (Micah 5:2, NASB)

THE SHEPHERDS: Generally uneducated men doing what they do every night. Nothing extraordinary happens to them with the exception of an occasional predator coming along to scare away or kill to protect their sheep. But the Author of the "Play" has something special planned for this night. They are about to be astonished by the brilliant *shekinah* glory of the Lord ripping open the quiet night skies, the angelic proclamation of a newly-born Savior and a great multitude of angels praising God. After recovering their senses, they hurry off to find the Savior. After seeing Mary, Joseph and the babe in the manger "just as they had been told," they return to their work. As they go, they glorify and praise God and testify to everyone who will listen of what they have seen and heard.

THE MAGI: Wise men, astronomers, from the east. They have seen "His star" and have traveled a great and dangerous



distance to find and worship the newborn King. Stopping in Jerusalem to speak with King Herod, they find that the new King of the Jews is to be born in Bethlehem. Going there, these obviously wealthy and prestigious men now bow in worship before this special Baby, recognizing Him as King. After seeing the Savior and presenting Him their precious gifts, they are warned in a dream not to tell Herod where they have found the Babe so they return to their country another way.

HEROD, THE GREAT: The "bad-guy," the current so-called "King of the Jews." He is greatly disturbed by the Magi's questions, since the birth of a new king would mean his reign is nearly at an end. He is a tyrant of the worst kind. He deceives and lies to the Magi, asking them to return to him after they have found the baby so that he, too, "may go and worship him." When the Magi do not return to him, he puts his jealous plan to kill the Christ child into effect. Without knowing the exact location or age of the Baby, he orders the death of all Jewish male children under age two.

CHIEF PRIESTS AND TEACHERS OF THE LAW: The scholars, theologians and religious leaders of their day. After the Magi come asking their questions, Herod consults these men to find out where the Christ is to be born. Although they know the prophecies and teachings of Scripture that explicitly detail the time and place of the Messiah's birth which they relay to Herod, there is no place in Scripture that records any of them seeking out the Christ child. Conversely, it is mostly men in these positions that call for the death of Christ a little over thirty years later—perhaps some of these very men.

SIMON: A righteous and devout Jew to whom it has been revealed by God that he will not die before he has seen the Messiah. Moved by the Holy Spirit to go to the temple on the very

day that Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to be dedicated to God, he takes Him in his arms and praises God saying, "...my eyes have seen your Salvation."

JESUS CHRIST, Son of God and Son of Man: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning... The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1: 1-2, 14). Jesus willingly gave up the majesty and acclaim of heaven. He humbled Himself so far as to be born a baby in a stable surrounded by the stench of animals and among human beings, most that would neither recognize nor care that He had arrived. As a Man, he got hungry, cold, and tired. As he grew, he was tempted in all ways, just as we are, yet was without even one sin. Then, in the fullness of His time, at the exact moment prophesied, he gave up His life on the Roman cross. The Jews of his day intentionally and wrongfully condemned Him to death; the Romans carried out their dreadful crucifixion; but it was our sins—yours and mine—that fashioned the nails. But, the great "Play" doesn't end there. Jesus is not dead! He rose again to life everlasting and lives today in heaven in the place of honor at the right hand of God the Father!

As the "Drama" now continues, what role will you play? At the end of it, where will you be found?

We urge you to receive Christ into your heart this Christmas! Live for Christ every day of the year! Look forward to spending an eternity with Christ! He's looking forward to spending it with YOU!

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