

When the Shavings Sing: The Loneliness of Joseph the Carpenter (excerpt)
By Ted Loder

**It is me, Joseph.
For a long time I have not spoken to you directly,
But surely you have not forgotten me.**

**I made this altar for you as my offering.
Bit by bit it took my life to build it, and much pain:
To find the wood, to cut the parts,
To fit the joints, to make it stable,
To plane it smooth, to carve this paneled scroll,
To rub in oil so it would last.**

**Each time, with the oil, I rubbed in prayers.
Not words such as I speak now
But prayers, still, of tears and curses,
Of broken dreams and rumpled loneliness.**

**Every year I've resolved to tell you, and almost begun,
Then pulled back into my too-willing unreadiness,
Waiting for a smoother season in my life,
With no rough edge, no gnarl, no splinters,
No cracked place to have to work around.
It never came. I knew it wouldn't.**

**Ready or not, the time has come for this to happen,
For time itself has become the splinter. So I begin:**

**"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe.
Who forms light and creates darkness,
Who makes peace, who creates all things."**

**But, peace, Lord, you did not make for me.
O Lord, King of the universe, hear me
For my heart is open before you on this altar.
I am alone. It is my voice alone I lift to you.**

**Mary's son – and who else's – was half the ache
I carried through these years,
Hoping to be delivered of
Before the fullness of my time had come,**

Not that I didn't love Jesus all the while.
Yes, I loved him, yet, from a lonely place,
Outside, some distance between us,
Knowing he was not mine.

I remember how it was before his birth.
Mary was poor and young-maiden plain,
Though to these already seasoned eyes,
Which saw fine tables in rough planks,
She was quite beautiful indeed.

I was not a young man, nor handsome, as you know.
But my being able to provide made my desperation
Seem to her to be the essence of devotion.

So the arrangements were made, such as they were,
Between her family and mine,
And the deal struck for a small dowry.
But, Lord, I being more than ready,
Took no note of the small print
On what was to come after.
Yet even had I been able,
Even had I foreseen her too-soon pregnancy
And my more long, labored pain,
I would not have even then withdrawn,
For I was blindly happy
Before I saw at all
What love required of me.

That was the wager you won, O Holy One.
But it was a hard thing you put on me.

Before our marriage, or the birth,
Oh I remember well, O Lord,
That season of giggles and silliness,
Of a sky full of stars, a heart full of song,
How we danced and sighed the scent of lavender,
Were folded in silence, wakened in laughter
And lived in each other's eyes.

Oh, I felt young and it was lovely.

Lovely, lovely before she said,
"I am going to have a child."

**There was no laughter in her voice then Lord,
Only sober truth, and secrets.
Secrets she could not fully tell,
For she did not fully know.**

**So unflinching as she was, telling me her news,
All other sound was walled away,
All light snuffed out,
And I felt suddenly as old
As I'd felt young but hours before.**

**Then came this gorging bitterness,
This humiliating loneliness,
This deathly sense of nothingness.
I knew the child she carried was not mine.**

**Whose then? Whose then? Whose then?
I gagged on those words.
I thought to walk away,
Leave her to her shame.
I thought to take her by the throat,
Choke from her the name
Then go and kill the man.
But none of that would change the shock
Of being caught between my dream
And this betrayal.**

**Mary said she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit.
What was I to think at such an outrageous claim?
You have to forgive me, Lord,
My doubt that You were the one,
The Father of the child rooted in her womb.
However much she may have wished it so
To spare her innocence, to preserve our vow,
My part was simply to provide what was necessary.**

**But, Lord, do you engage so often in such begetting
That doubt of it should NOT enter my mind?**

**To ask you to forgive me that
Seems to be asking very little.**

Then came the enrollment demand
And off to Bethlehem we went. I got us safely there,
But scarcely there and bedded in a barn,
When her waters broke and he was born,
Landing like Noah after the flood.

Lord, what I remember of that night. . . .
Was the cold. It got inside me, and stayed,
Clanking like rocks, like stones,
Flaying my heart to pieces.

What I remember was Mary's eyes,
They never strayed from Jesus.
He was all she could see,
All that mattered to her in the least.
And that was it.
I was only useful.
I wrapped Mary and the babe in my cloak,
Found old skins in corners to cover them,
Heaped straw around Mary's feet
And with my body shielded them from the wind.

Oh, there were songs that night,
Eerie in the wind. I heard them dimly.
Splinters of words about peace on earth, and joy.

For me those things were as far away
As where the singing came from.
I was exiled in usefulness.

Jesus is gone now, Lord.
As usual these days, they are off somewhere,
My wife, Mary, and Jesus, her son,
And those who follow him.

They tell me I'm too old and too forgetful
To go along. But not in my heart.
There I follow him.

Before he left this last time,
Knowing we'd not see each other again,
Time having traction and running out,
He said, "Listen to the song of things.
Listen when the shavings sing.
They will sing to you what you long to know."

**One night as I was using the plane on the last board for this,
Fitting it making a rough place smooth,
I listened to the shavings
As they peeled away and fell.
I listened. . . and the shavings sang.
The sound was very like that night when he was born.**

**“shoosh....shoosh....shoosh,”
“He is not yours . . . not yours . . . not yours.”
“You are his . . . are his. . . are his.”
“Be at peace . . . at peace. . . at peace.”**

**I did not expect the singing.
That first time when he was born
Or this time from the shavings.
I did not expect Mary’s son
To be of the Holy Spirit.
I did not expect a Messiah.
I did not expect You.**

**Who deserves it? None.
Who is it for? All.**

**I am part of this mystery
As these shavings are part of this altar I made for you.
Bit by bit it took my life to build it.
It is my gift, my thanks, my praise to you
For my life, and for the joy,
While there is still time to offer it
To You...His father...and mine.**

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