

A UU Nativity Story: Which Character Are You?

By Darrah Dunn

DARRAH: When we watch a good movie at our house, or sometimes when we read a particularly thrilling bedtime story, my daughter Addi Jo invariably asks me, "Who are you?" She loves to recast the movie or the story with familiar faces. I think it is her way of making sense out of stereotypes and preconceived notions about gender, roles, and personality types. She almost always claims for herself the choice part. She casts herself as the hero or heroine, endlessly suffering through the machinations of every Disney villain. She routinely goes over the rainbow as Dorothy. She intuitively knows that in any good story, it is the youngest and most adorable character that gets the audiences' attention, and quite appropriately, these are the characters with which she identifies. She usually casts me in solid male supporting parts. I get to be singing, dancing scarecrows or, more often than not, the DAD.

I understand Addi's tendency to assign the roles in stories to herself and to those around her. No doubt, we all see bits and pieces of ourselves in art of all kinds. This is the point and purpose of art---to reflect and interpret and give new meanings, or at least to reinforce old ones.

Our story of the hour---that of a Divine Child coming down to a cold and lonely world and changing the course of mankind---is filled with interesting characters which we have all known and loved our entire lives, whether we've considered it or not. And somewhere within this story is the character with whom you personally identify, and who makes the story somehow relevant for you.

Before we actually hear this beloved and age-old tale, let's take a few minutes to explore the particulars of the story: its characters and the dynamics of the plot.

On a cold December night in an obscure village, a heavenly messenger suddenly appears with a glorious chorus of angels, singing in jubilant exaltation that the hope of the world lies just over the hill. It is a fantastic announcement, hardly believable, yet everyone rushes to see if it can possibly be true. Eventually, a diverse little crowd gathers in a stable and kneels before a feeding trough, in mutual adoration of the newborn lying within it.

Let's zoom in and examine these characters a little more closely, imagining ourselves in the various roles as we go along.

PENNY: Here we have a shepherd---a herder of sheep. He is the quintessential workaday Joe. He is humble, hardworking, and more than rough around the edges. He stays awake all night protecting some of the most unintelligent animals in the world, so that more privileged people can get a good night's sleep. He has no higher education and has little influence over the world at large. Perhaps his shepherd wife and shepherd children answer to him. Or maybe he answers to them. In any case, his tiny little life is of no consequence. Except to the sheep. And yet, in this story, it is to these contract laborers---there are usually several of them in a well-done pageant---to which the heavenly messenger first appears. And the message seems so important, so critical, so compelling, that these icons of committed servitude drop everything and run to Bethlehem to worship the newborn king.

Are you right for this part? Can you convincingly portray a poor shepherd, blindly inspired to accept a fantastic revelation as the most inherent truth ever revealed to you. Can you take such a leap of faith?

JAN: Next we have the three kings. Or the magi as they are sometimes called. The Wise Men. These are important people. They are not day laborers. They don't pump gas. They don't watch Survivor. They don't read People magazine. They have important social positions. They are active civic leaders. They read text books and Pulitzer prize winning novels. They have PhDs. These people are the nobility, privileged by birth or, more likely, by personal achievement. When they get the news about a Divine Child being born half-way around the world they make a carefully considered decision to explore this idea, to focus on it and to support it by making sizable contributions in the forms of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They pack up these gifts into their camel caravan and start off on a long journey, following a star until it stops above the stable, where they then present their expensive packages and join with the lowly shepherds in bowing before a peasant family's newborn baby.

Can we cast you as a Wise Man? Does your moment of glorious revelation happen only after a long and calculated journey? Is your inherent truth something you have searched for with dedication and diligence? And when you finally find it, is it so radiantly beautiful that you lay out your riches in humble gratitude as you reflect on your newfound treasure?

DIANNA: This is Joseph. He's not exactly the hero of the story. He is not a common man, like the shepherds, nor is he a person of privilege. He is a skilled craftsman and he has worked hard to hone his talents and make a decent living. By society's standards he is ready to settle down and start raising a family. He has done everything correctly, according to expectation. He is on the path he has always planned to be on. Except for one BIG thing. His fiancée, the beautiful young woman poised to take her place as the wife of the newly established neighborhood carpenter, is having someone else's baby. And not just any someone's. Uh-oh. Oh boy. What to do? If you're Joseph, you freak out for a while, then you pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get on with it. You realize that life doesn't go as planned, that not everything is perfect, and that you aren't going to call all the shots.

If you get cast as Joseph, you are a person who gets done what needs to be done. In the middle of the worst crisis of your life you pack your troubled little family up and travel by donkey to make sure you pay your taxes on time. You understand that by accepting what you cannot change you can be transformed in miraculous ways. By loving others before yourself, your moment of truth washes around you in quiet and lovely serenity, and with humble reverence you bow and let it happen.

ANABELLE: Okay. This is the Virgin Mary. She isn't very old. Probably a young teenager. And even though she doesn't deserve it, her reputation is in trouble. People are talking about her behind her back, but she believes without question that she has been chosen by God to give birth to the Savior of the World, so she bravely keeps her chin up and begins planning her new life as a wife and mother. She has a great new husband who will do anything in the world for her, so she knows she is safe. But still, it's pretty scary to be so young and having a baby. It's really scary for her to know she's been chosen by God to help change the world. I mean, everyone's counting on her. She has a lot to live up to. Will she be good enough? Can she do the job? Her life is completely out of her own control. It belongs to someone else now. But she is willing. She surrenders herself completely to this higher calling. With unimaginable faith, she becomes the mother of the newborn son of God. That takes guts.

This is the hardest part in the show. It's a lot easier to play a bad guy, or a funny guy. It's not easy to be the innocent vessel of the most high. It pays off though. Some people still pray to her on a daily basis. She symbolizes what it means to be totally selfless. She is completely humble and willing to serve a higher purpose and to accept an incredibly difficult challenge for the benefit of others. Not many people have to be Virgin Marys, but every once in a while, someone is called to step up the plate and do something no one would ever want to do, so life is better for everyone. If you were asked to play Mary, could you? Would you?

ALEX: This is the Baby Jesus. He is the hero of the story. He's the one they've all come to see. He is the hope of the world. His love and kindness will change everything when he grows up. He doesn't know this yet, though. Right now he is just a baby. He just sleeps while everyone bows down and worships him. He is brand new, ready to start growing and learning. He has no idea how hard life will be. He's just a baby. He's not thinking about anything. He's just lying in that warm little manger and knowing that everyone around him is good and that they love him.
He's at the beginning.

DARRAH: Any of us here could play the Baby Jesus, if we can just remember how. If we could only find that ancient trust in the goodness of others. If we could recall how it feels to be still, and warm, and know that we are loved. Any of us could help change the world, if we can remember how to portray that. We are all capable of radiating Divine Light. We are love come down. May it be so.