



# The Noel Stories

## The First Christmas



Let's begin where all Christmas began – in Bethlehem. The First Christmas is a simple but imaginative retelling of the Nativity story. This story was first told in the Bible by the apostles, Matthew and Luke, but it has been told again and again ever since.



I like the way that Anne Adeney gives an important part to the animals in her version. They keep still so that they don't frighten the baby, and the heat from their bodies helps keep him warm on a chilly night.



I expect that everyone knows about the oxen and the donkeys, but this writer gives us fleas as well. Let's hope that they were as considerate as the other creatures and just tickled the baby's toes instead of biting him.



It came to pass that the emperor, Caesar Augustus, ordered a census to be taken throughout the Roman Empire.

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Joseph, a carpenter, from Nazareth, belonged to a royal bloodline. He was descended from the great King David, whose home had been the town of Bethlehem in order to register.



His new wife, Mary, had to go with him, even though it was nearly time for her baby to be born. Nine months before, an angel had appeared to Mary and told her that she would have a baby by the Holy Spirit. That baby would be the Son of God.





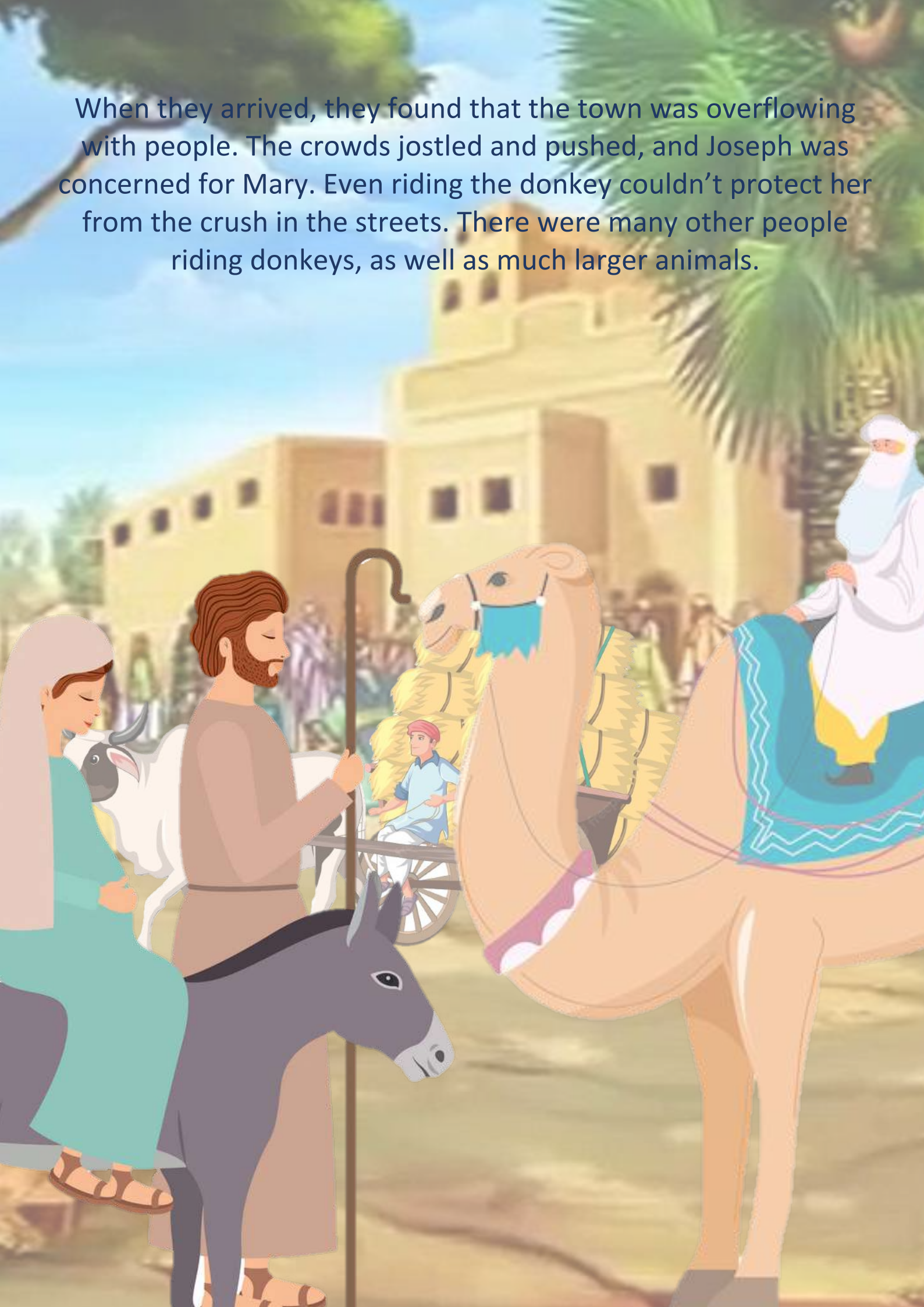
It was 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem – a long journey. It was winter, so the days were wet and chilly, and the nights were bitterly cold. As her donkey trudged down the rocky path, Mary hunched her shoulders against the biting wind and drew her headdress closer to her face.



There was danger too, from bandits during the day, and wolves or other wild animals at night. But there were many families traveling south through the Jordan Valley to be registered. Mary and Joseph always kept close to the other travellers and eventually reached Bethlehem and safely.



When they arrived, they found that the town was overflowing with people. The crowds jostled and pushed, and Joseph was concerned for Mary. Even riding the donkey couldn't protect her from the crush in the streets. There were many other people riding donkeys, as well as much larger animals.



The enormous camels of the rich merchants loped through the streets and oxen pulled wooden carts loaded with firewood or goods to sell. There were even a few people on horseback, jostling anyone in their path as they passed.

“We’ll find somewhere to stay right away,” said Joseph.



He pushed his way through the crowded streets, holding the donkey's bridle. The townspeople were going about their business. Many worked just outside their homes. Some were making pottery, while others wove baskets and sandals.



Mary and Joseph passed through the marketplace, which was buzzing with people buying and selling their wares, gossiping and arguing. The couple also saw several Roman centurions on horseback. They kept order in the throng of people who had already lined up to give their details to the census taker.



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Dotted along the roadside were families grouped around cooking fires, recovering from their long walk. But Joseph was determined to find somewhere warm and sheltered for Mary.

Although Joseph was only a poor carpenter, he had enough money saved to afford a night in a good lodging house. The holy baby deserved that at least.





With his staff he knocked on the door of the first respectable place that he found. It was an impressive stone building with a wide wooden door.



“We need a room for the night,” said Joseph when the door opened, the wonderful smell of rich food wafting out. The innkeeper was nearly as wide as the doorway. His handsome red robe stretched tightly across his great belly, which wobbled as he spoke.



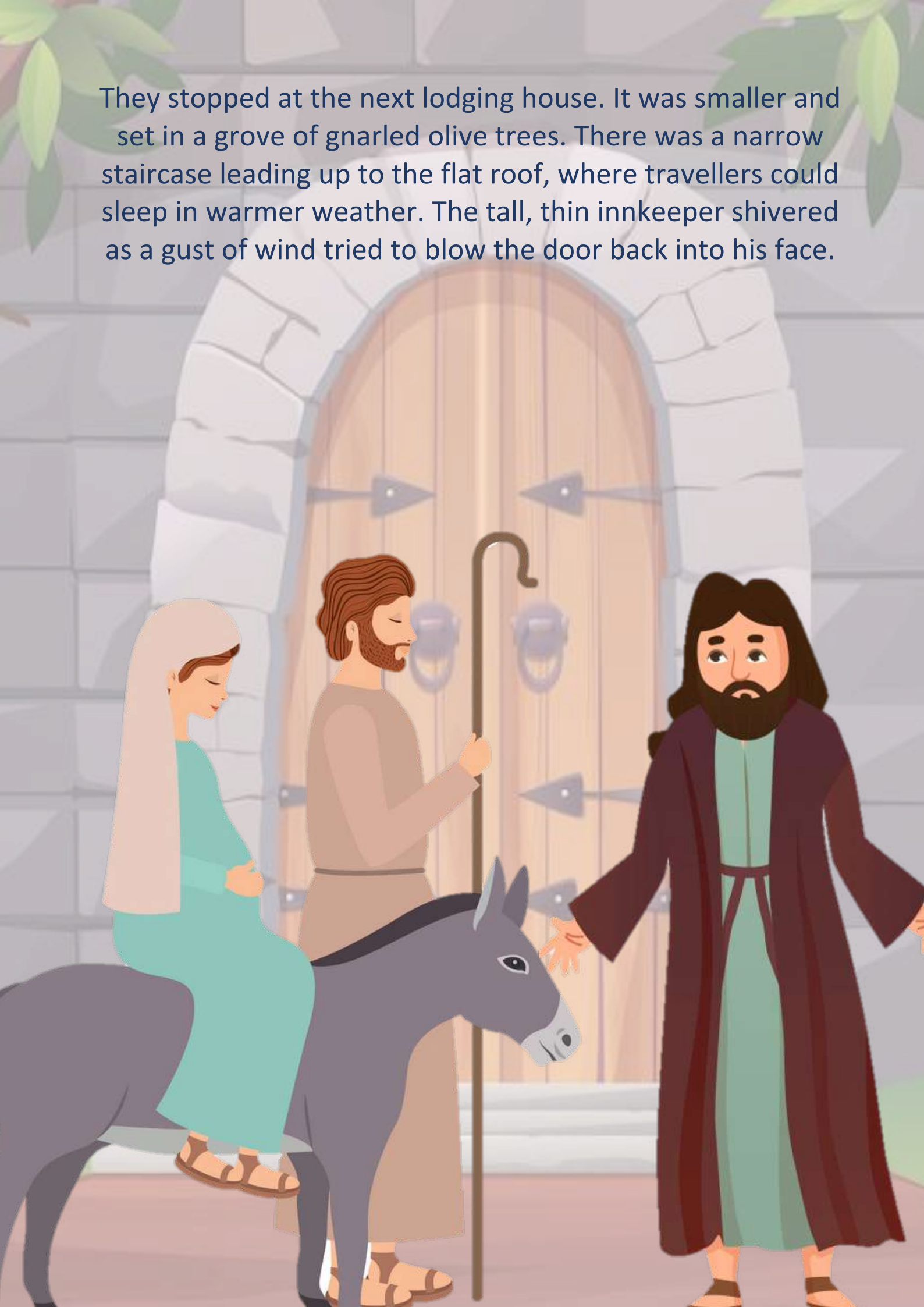
“A room in Bethlehem, tonight?” he scoffed. “You must be joking!

Don’t you know that there’s a census going on? I have no room left.”

“We’ll try another place,” Joseph said to Mary. “We’re sure to find somewhere soon.”



They stopped at the next lodging house. It was smaller and set in a grove of gnarled olive trees. There was a narrow staircase leading up to the flat roof, where travellers could sleep in warmer weather. The tall, thin innkeeper shivered as a gust of wind tried to blow the door back into his face.



“Have you a room for us?” asked Joseph.

The innkeeper shook his head.

“Or even the corner of a room, out of this wind?” Joseph asked hopefully.

“We have travelled such a long way and we’re cold and tired.”

“I’m sorry, we have no room,” said the innkeeper. “I doubt you’ll find an empty space in all of Bethlehem.”.



Despite these words, Joseph kept trying. He led Mary from place to place, searching for anywhere that had room for two weary travellers. But there was no room to be found. It was getting dark, and Mary knew the baby was about to arrive.



Desperate now, they came to the last building on the edge of the town. The small house was made of grey stone that was so old that it was crumbling around the edges. They could hear many voices murmuring inside.

“Is this an inn?” asked Mary.

“I’m not sure,” said Joseph, “but I’ll try here anyway. We must get you out of the cold before the baby comes.”



“We have no room,” said a voice, before Joseph could even open his mouth to ask. The short, bald man could barely open the door, there were so many people inside.

“We even sent all the children to stay with their grandmother to make a little more space. But now we’re full.”





“Are you sure?” asked Joseph. “Forget about me, just find a place for Mary here. She really needs shelter.”

“It’s so crowded in here that even the fleas have left and gone down to the stable,” the innkeeper said with a chuckle.

Joseph’s eyes lit up. “Did you say you had a stable?”

The innkeeper took a pity on them and led them to his stable.



It was full of donkeys whose owners were lodged at the inn. There was even an enormous ox. Joseph put down fresh straw for Mary and made her a bed in the corner.



Soon after, Mary gave birth to her son and wrapped him in the swaddling clothes that she had brought with her. The animals stayed calm and still, even when Joseph put clean hay in the manger so it could be used as a bed for the baby. The animals' large, gentle eyes watched Mary and the baby intently. Their dusty bodies, all shades of brown and grey, gave off a heat that warmed and comforted the little family.



“We’ll call him Jesus,” said Mary contentedly, as she laid the baby in the manger.

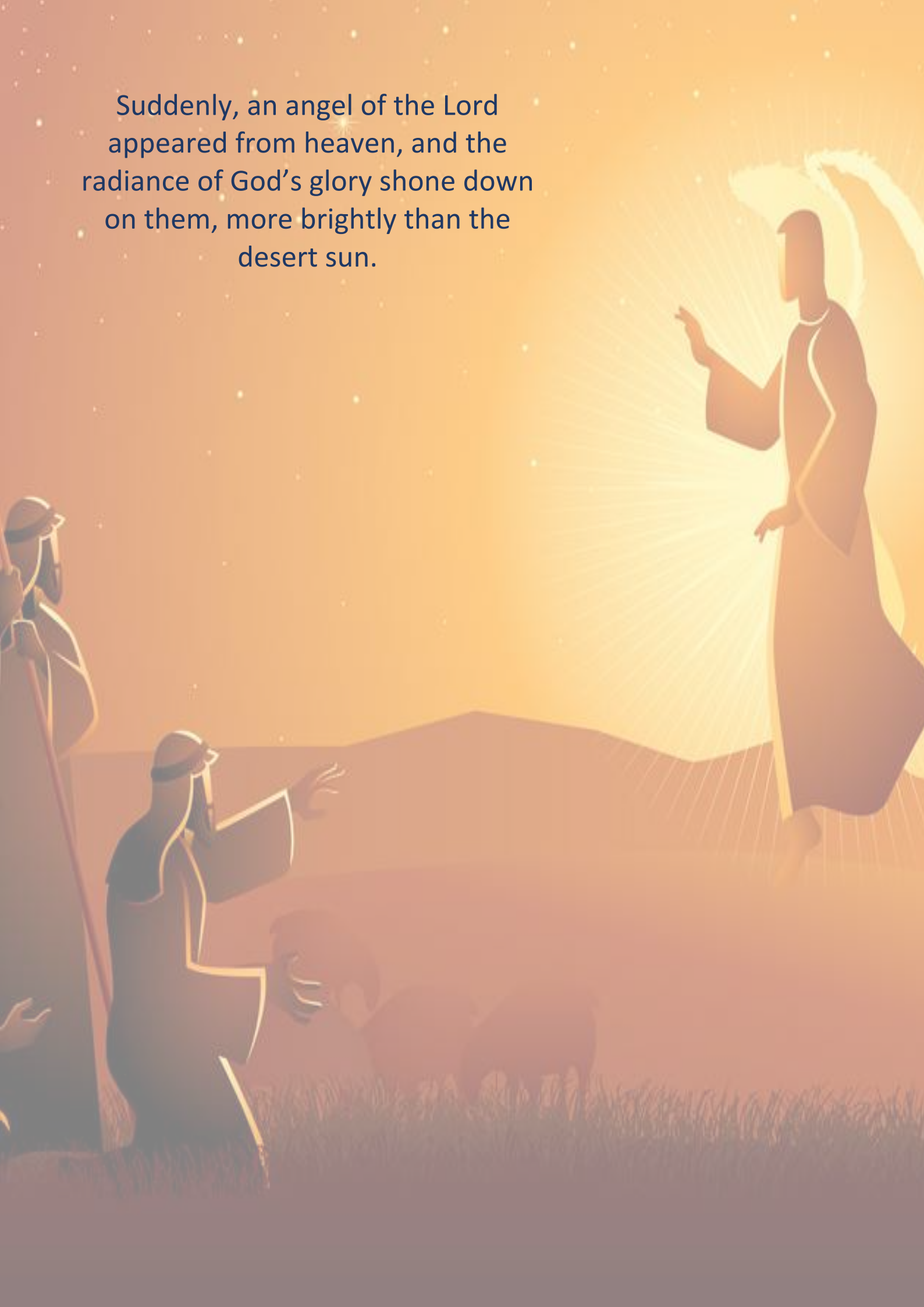
“Just as the angel told me to.”



Outside Bethlehem some shepherds had gathered their sheep together for the night. Now that darkness had fallen like a blanket over the hills, most of them had settled down to sleep. They wrapped their sheepskin robes tightly around themselves to keep out the freezing cold. A few stayed awake, as usual, to guard the flock from wolves and mountain lions.



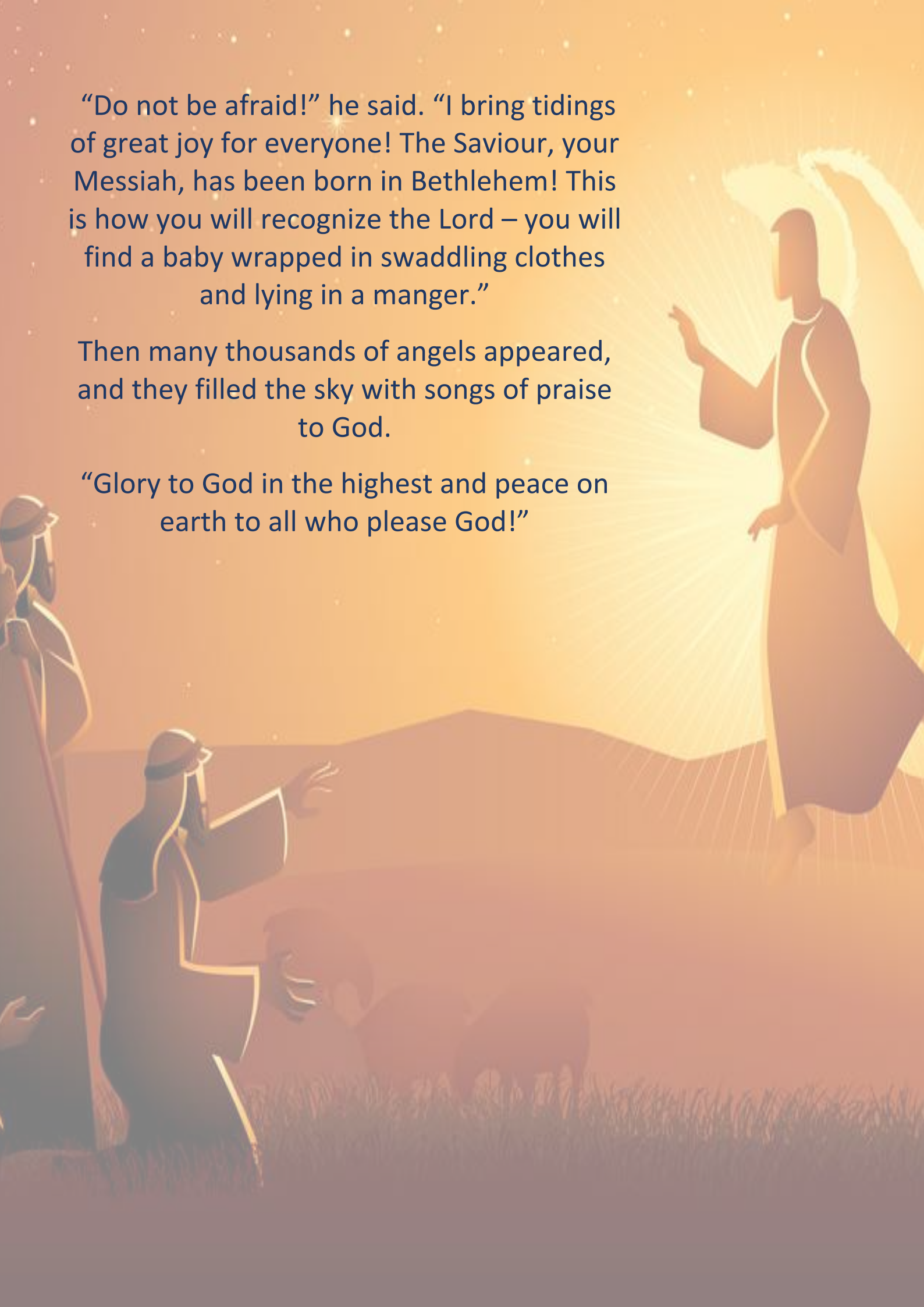
Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared from heaven, and the radiance of God's glory shone down on them, more brightly than the desert sun.



“Do not be afraid!” he said. “I bring tidings of great joy for everyone! The Saviour, your Messiah, has been born in Bethlehem! This is how you will recognize the Lord – you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”

Then many thousands of angels appeared, and they filled the sky with songs of praise to God.

“Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to all who please God!”



When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds could not wait to find this holy baby.

“Let’s go to Bethlehem!” said their leader. “The Lord has sent us news about this wonderful event, but let’s go and see it for ourselves!”





They ran all the way to the town and soon found Mary and Joseph in the stable. And there was the baby in the manger, just as the angel had told them.



The tiny baby slept peacefully, with Mary and Joseph and the animals watching over him. Looking down at her baby son, Mary radiated a joy that outshone the moon and the stars above them.



Then the shepherds excitedly told them what the angels had said, proud that they had been the first ones to see the Messiah, the Saviour of their people. Mary quietly treasured their words in her heart.



The innkeeper came down to see what all the commotion was about. Hearing the story, he ran to fetch the rest of the people in his house. All who heard about it were astonished. The shepherds glorified and praised God as they repeated the story to everyone who would listen.



But at last, the shepherds went back to find all their sheep still safe on the hillside, and Mary and Joseph settled down to sleep besides their precious baby.



This was the first Christmas.





# THINK

DIGITAL ACADEMY

