MY SAVIOR YET LIVES!

By Lillian C. Hancock

A story for Christmas
- and Easter -
for we wouldn't have reason
to celebrate one
without the other.

PREFACE

This is a story about
Lamenic,
who lived in the Land of Bountiful,
and Rebecca,
who lived in the Land of Israel,
many, many years ago.
Although they lived a world apart,
they shared the two most miraculous
events in history.

Christmas

I am Lamenic. I am seven years old, and I have an important job in my family. My brother, Terman, and I tend the sheep of my father. We also shepherd for several neighbors, who have no children of their own. Each morning we rise early and herd our sheep toward the green hills. I used to think the trail was long, for I had a hard time keeping up with Terman's longer strides. Now that I am older, I realize it is only a short walk. On our way to the grazing lands, the other flocks join ours.

We have done this every day - except on the Sabbath, of course - for several years, and the sheep know our voices. They come when we call and know the path to the good pastures. Each evening, as we make our way home, the sheep know where to turn to enter into their own stables.

For as long as I can remember, we have cared for the sheep. Terman also spends time learning to read and write and figure numbers. Father often sends sheepskins, carefully tanned, on which he has written stories of our family, recorded scriptures, or tallied a season's earnings. Someday, says father, Terman may have to keep the record of our family, and so he must know how. I spend my days playing with the lambs, and mending clothing mother has sent in our pouch, or weaving baskets. I'm not sure why, but it seems like we never have enough baskets.

But my favorite job is just to be with the sheep. I like them best in winter, when their coats are thick. I can hardly get my arms around the older rams, and they are always warm and wooly. They have a musky smell, and when it blends with the grass after an afternoon rain, I think there is no other scent quite so wonderful. When spring arrives, the sheep are relieved of their winter coats at the shearing pens. The poor things shiver in the early morning cold, and I always feel so sorry for them.

After the shearing, I must spend many days at home with mother. We wash, card and comb the wool. Sometimes Mother dyes the bundles of wool in large pots. She tells me that the natural black wool matches the long braid of my hair, and we always laugh about how glad mother is she does not have to card and comb my hair each morning. Later, I help while mother spins the long fibers into fine threads. I feel confined in the house, and prefer being outside with the lambs rather than inside, working with the yarns.

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Many years ago I learned to play the fine music that makes our clothing. The shuttle whooshes back and forth, and my feet keep the rhythm on the pedals. Chong. Clonk. Whoosh. Thunk. The music of the loom sings to me. Today it sings a lullaby.

I am Rebecca. The wool I work with today is very special. I have combed it carefully, and made sure the threads were very fine. The cloth I weave today must be very soft. Soft enough to wrap a newborn child in warmth and comfort. These swaddling clothes must not chafe the delicate skin of the child soon to come to my home. I sing the lullaby of my heart to the music of my loom.

As I work, I hear many sounds from the window nearby. My young neighbor, John, cannot decide if the price asked on a mule is fair. I can hear John and the seller bartering, each trying for the best price. The poor mule quietly stands as he is glorified by one, and disparaged by the other. I smile to myself, for I know John would pay nearly any price for such a good animal, and much of the bidding is being done merely to show off his bargaining prowess to his new wife.

I catch the spicy scent of meat being prepared for dinner. Curry and pepper mingle on the fresh spring breeze as it slowly travels through the village. As it wafts by, it picks up the aromas of fresh bread, tangy fruits and just a hint of mint. The combination delights my nose. I must soon think about putting the threads away and begin concentrating on dinner for myself and my husband.

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Trajedy has struck our herd. Several men came upon us, yelling at us and scattering our sheep. The evil men killed many of our animals. When they came running out from the trees where they had been hiding, Terman grabbed my arm and we ran for our lives. God was with us and we made it safely home. Terman told Father what had happened. A short time later, Father, Terman, and some of the other men of our village went back to the pastures to gather and bring home what remained of our flocks. I feared to leave my mother's side. The Evil Ones have been coming around more and more often. Always before they have only yelled at us, calling us names and deriding us for our religious beliefs. Today they were bold enough to attack our flock. Once I even overheard them threatening to kill all who believe in the Christ. They mock us, saying we wait for someone who will not come. Mother says I must not worry, but I know she is afraid, as well. Father only tells us to be faithful, and trust in God.

Father has told us of the Christ. The time for the sign of his birth is very near and we wonder every morning if this will be the day. I will not be allowed to go with the sheep for a few days. How I dislike sweeping floors and shelling beans!

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I saw her across the highway, sitting quietly, uncomfortably, on the small donkey. Her husband had left her, trying to find a room, but the city is very crowded, and most inns were filled earlier in the day. The call to pay taxes had brought more travelers than the local lodges and taverns could accommodate. I tried to find other things to do to keep myself busy, but my eyes kept going back to her. I could see she was pale and very tired. Even from this short distance, the dark rings under her eyes were easy to detect. It was plain that her time of delivery was very near. I knew, for my time was also close at hand.

I pulled the window closed, hoping to shut out the thought of her, as well. I tried to concentrate on my sewing, but her pallid face haunted my mind. I struggled with my thoughts, then finally sighed defeat, reopened the window and looked across the road. They had no extra packaging along. Without realizing what I was doing, I reached over and pulled the carefully prepared swaddling clothes from their waiting place, and held them to my heart, caressing their softness as I watched her.

Her child would not have anything so soft or warm. I could see the cloak she wore was rough and thick. Perhaps I should . . .No! I pushed the urge away. I had worked hard weaving this cloth, and would rightly reserve it for my child. It was not my care who she was, or what she did not possess. Had she not had time to prepare for the child, just as I? With great resolve, I shut the window again and went back to work at my loom.

The sunshine had left my room - and my soul.

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Today Terman and I came to the pasture with no lunch. It was decided at dinner last night that today we will fast and pray to God. Tomorrow the non-believers will put to death anyone who believes in Jesus Christ. The sign has not come and they are angry with us, for we still watch for His coming.

Father and Mother, Terman and I decided we must trust in the Lord. We will fast and pray that our lives may be spared, and that the sign of the birth of our redeemer will come. It will be a long day, with no lunch.

Terman comforts me and has promised to tell me, once again, the stories recorded by Lehi and Nephi, as well as Isaiah, Jacob and Benjamin. These are the stories I love best, for they foretell the coming of Christ, and the miracles he will bring to the world.

Somewhere during the stories I fell asleep, and dreamt. At first, I wandered, lost in a vast blackness, stumbling and falling. Briars clutched at my clothes and scratched my arms and feet. I could not find my mother and wondered if I would ever feel safe again. At the moment I felt panic taking over my heart, I heard a voice. It was a soft and quiet voice, that called to me. I turned and walked toward the voice, knowing there would be safety for me when I found its source. I followed the voice, until I found Him. He reached out for me, grasping my small hands. When I looked up, I saw a wonderful face. His vividly blue eyes were full of love, and the words he spoke filled my heart with joy.

When I awoke, I had forgotten His words, but I would never forget His face. I tried to share my dream with Terman, but I could not find a way to describe the feelings embedded in my heart.

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My husband thinks I have turned mad. Since he returned from the field, I could think of nothing but the woman I saw. Her face haunts me. As soon as supper was done, I insisted Thomas find her. I had described them well, but he did not think it possible to find one couple and one donkey in the midst of the crowds coming into the city. Although he argued, I insisted he go in search of them. He doubted my sanity the whole while, but when Thomas finally realized my urgency, he agreed to the search, if only to placate me. He arrived home late and made me wait impatiently as he slowly, in his own way, recounted his search.

He had first crossed the highway, to the inn where I had first seen her. The woman at the door, amazingly, remembered them well. She had just let her last room, and felt sorry to have to turn them away. The woman had watched the man explain to his wife, who simply nodded and gently urged the donkey to begin moving. The Innkeeper had watched them plodding their way down the road, turning in at the next gate of another inn along the way. She added that somehow she felt - bereft - at having to dismiss them from her lodge.

Thomas had followed along, stopping at each inn. The master of each house remembered them. Each had to turn them away, and the desperate,

pleading look in the man's eyes was etched in their memories. Three inns later, Thomas finally located them. This innkeeper had no room inside the house, but felt moved to give them leave to sleep in his stable. The quiet man was grateful for such humble shelter, and turned his donkey towards the small room. The woman, the innkeeper felt sure, had reached her time. He said he had heard muffled cries coming from the stable.

My husband had found the couple. As Thomas rounded the small shelter behind the inn, he saw the man pacing in front of the stable's closed door. Thomas suddenly felt foolish in front of the stranger. He looked at the carefully wrapped bundle that I had insisted he take to them, then hurriedly pushed the package into the man's hands. He quickly muttered that his wife had sent a present for the babe, and made a fast exit.

"From the shadow of the house, I looked back," Thomas told me, "and saw him opening the package." The man pulled the cloth from the paper. He felt it with his work-worn hands, then buried his face in the blanket's softness. "He knelt in prayer," ended Thomas, "before going in to her, and as I turned to leave, I heard the cry of a child, newborn."

My heart was at rest. She would have the soft swaddling clothes for her babe. And what, then, for my child? "Well," I told myself, "there is my old cloak . . ."

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The sign has been given! The awe and marveling can be heard in reverent whispers from all over the village. The sun went down, as it does every day, but the darkness of night did not come. Those who prepared to take our lives have fallen to the ground in humility and repentance. As I gently rock my own baby sister, so newly come to us from heaven, I think of that newborn child, who will become King and Savior to the world. I quietly listen as Father and Mother speak with wonder of the new star that has appeared in the sky. Father has instructed Terman to find the finest skin in the tannery. On this skin, Father will record this remarkable event.

Easter

For these many years, I have worked at my loom, singing to the rhythm of my work. Sometimes my song was joyous, filled with thankfulness of God's many blessings to my home. Oft times, my song was full of sorrow. Such was the song after I laid my only child in his grave, taken

from my arms only hours after his arrival. Wrapped in my old cloak, re-cut into swaddling clothes, the small, imperfect body was placed in the rough box made by Thomas.

My husband was never quite the same after the loss of our babe. His laughter came less seldom, and the sparkle in his eye dimmed. No other children came to bless our home. Thomas and I have spent these many years working and helping each other. In all we do, we search for something we don't have. We don't quite know what it is, but we both know something is missing in our lives. Thinking we might find it somewhere beyond Bethlehem's borders, we have moved north several times during the years. We now live near the Sea of Galilee. Thomas was born here, and he feels he has come home. Perhaps here we will be able to fill the unnamed need in our hearts.

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I am grown into a woman, yet feel much like a child, as I still live in my father's house. I daily work along side my mother, keeping the house clean and preparing meals. In addition to helping in the family garden, I have a small plot of my own, behind the house, and I retreat there as often as possible. I love to feel the warm earth in my hands. The smells of the earth comfort me. I am a woman in need of comfort. I long for the love from a husband and children. I wish for my own home, where I brush away the cobwebs; where I choose the menu for dinner. But these things do not seem to be in my future.

I try to fill my life with many other things, and have found that giving to others is the best way to lessen the loneliness of my heart. I do not mean the giving of worldly things, for I do not have much in the way of material goods. But I can give of myself and my talents freely, wherever the needs arise. It is easy to find children to tend, while mothers take a needed break. There are many older women who need my energy.

Each season brings its own work to keep my hands busy. Mother has taught me to use the loom. Now I help keep us in clothing. I've also made several fine rugs for sale in the marketplace. Father always gets good prices on my work, for the color patterns are precise and sometimes complicated. Terman's wife, I must admit, does not understand how I can keep such designs straight in my head, but I find it an easy task, and give my Heavenly Father credit for the talents I've been blessed with.

Whenever possible, I escape to the mountain, to sit with the grazing sheep, listening to their teeth cropping the grass. Their musky smell is like a

comforting blanket, surrounding me. I feel the cool breeze tugging at my braids, and long to loose my tresses, as I had as a child. On the mountain I can be as young as I like, with no adult cares, no grown-up worries.

I don't get to the mountain nearly as often as I would like.

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Thomas came home one evening last week with a strange and wonderful tale. He had heard a man preaching a new way of life. It did away with the old laws of Moses and taught love and brotherhood amongst men. My Thomas does not think too much of religion, but he listened and found himself drawn to the man. New light shines in my husband's eyes. His step is lighter and lines that deepened his forehead have gone away.

Since he first met the man called Jesus, Thomas and I have gone often to listen to him teach. There is something in his serene face that reminds me of someone, a shadowy, nagging thought that I should know him, but who he reminds me of, I cannot decide. However, the emptiness in our hearts has been filled with his words of eternal life and salvation.

There are many disciples, and each day there are more who are drawn to him. We listen, enthralled, as he speaks of the New and Everlasting Gospel. Our hearts burn within, knowing he speaks of eternal truths.

A strange thing happened at one of the first meetings I went to. Jesus introduced me to a lovely woman. She was small and delicate and in her youth would have been a beauty. Jesus introduced her, with reverence and love in his voice, as Mary, his mother.

Later, after Jesus had talked to the crowd, I saw him leaning down to speak with her, whispering in her ear and caused me some consternation when he pointed in my direction and she looked at me, a surprised look on her face. I watched as she walked over to Thomas, and spoke to him for a short moment. I saw Thomas nod in the affirmative, before his attention was caught by a man in the crowd. I was even more curious when Mary looked my way again and wiped tears from her eyes.

On our way home, I could not contain my questions. I begged Thomas to tell me what Mary has said to him. "It was only a question", he said, unable to understand my anxiety. "She asked me if you knew how to weave."

I could not understand why such an innocent question caused such queer feelings of disquiet in my mind.

Today I had a glorious feeling course through my veins when Jesus taught that we will have our dead returned to us. I know that someday I will greet my son again, and he will be whole and healthy. My heart rejoices at the thought that he will also know me, and call me 'Mother.'

Jesus has called upon Thomas to be his apostle, to teach the people and administer to their needs. Thomas is no longer a young man, and doubts he will be able to do such a tremendous thing, but I know my Thomas, and I know his strength. Surely, we have been richly blessed. My loom has again played the songs of joy and hope.

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My orderly, controlled world is in turmoil. Thirty-three years have passed since we had the sign of the birth of Jesus Christ. And now, as prophesied, the signs of his death have come to us who live on the isles of the sea. There was a great and terrible storm. Blowing wind and torrents of rain pelted our roof. The earth began to shake and our village was torn apart. But the worst part was yet to come. The lights of the sky went out. Blackness was so thick, I could actually feel it, like fog from the river. No lights could be lit. Candles would not burn. Fires could not be kindled. Fear was as thick as the darkness. Mother and Father depended on me to find what they could not. Weeping and wailing could be heard from every part of the village. People begging for help were crying out, hoping someone would find and help them in the dense night.

For three days, three long days that seemed more like weeks, I wandered from home to home, caring for those who were hurt. Finding food for the children, water for the old, bandages for the bleeding. I cannot tell you how many cried in my arms when told their loved ones were dead.

And then we heard the voice from the skies. It was loud, and yet it was not the timbre of the voice that penetrated the blackness of the air, but the power behind the voice. It was the voice of Christ, telling of the destruction of our cities. The desolation was caused by the iniquity of the people. They did not listen to the prophets. They did not heed the warnings of the scriptures. They were wicked and delighted in their wickedness.

The voice carried such strength that the cries and lamenting of the people ceased. Afterward, there was a great silence in the land for many hours. And then we heard the voice of God again, saying many things to us who did not perish.

After three days, the earth stopped shaking and rocks ceased to fall. The village no longer fell apart and the lights in the sky were restored. I could feel the thick darkness lift from the earth. Many of the people of my village were dead, and we worked unceasingly to bury them and try to put our lives back together.

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Our Lord has been crucified. We have gone through these last few days as though it was a dream. We followed the soldiers as they forced Him, and then Simon, to carry the cross to Calvary, not wanting to follow, but unable to stop ourselves. We could do nothing to stop the whipping or scourging. The nails driven into His hands and feet felt like knives thrust into our own hearts. We could not stop the horrible deed, but stood by in agony as He hung and slowly, painfully, died. I stood with His mother, both of us pleading for mercy from the soldiers who stood about. Our words fell on deaf ears, and we could only weep for ourselves and loved ones. I could not bear to watch it all, and finally broke away and went home to mourn. As I often had in the past, I turned to my loom. I worked as though possessed, wanting to complete the fine sheeting set on the warp. I could not sing. I could not concentrate on any thought. I only knew I had to finish the weave with great haste.

Shortly before sunset, the sheer material was off the loom. I had, with long practiced hands, quickly sewed the rolled hem at each end, completing what I now knew would be the shroud for the crucified Christ, my gift to him. I sent the carefully folded bundle with Thomas when he went to help with the burial, and finally, felt at peace.

Curiously, my mind went back to a place long ago and far away. It was over thirty years ago, in Bethlehem. It was springtime then, too. I could hear the birds singing through the open window. She was there, sitting on her donkey, waiting to bear her child. I watched her. The small, delicate hands. Her pale face. Her eyes were . . . Cold realization hit me. Her eyes were . . . Mary's eyes. The color was . . . the color of Jesus' eyes.

I remembered the swaddling clothes, wrapped and delivered by Thomas.

"Does your wife know how to weave?"

Fresh tears rolled down my cheeks.

When Thomas finally returned from his sad errand, we sat in the darkness and pondered the horrible deeds we had witnessed that day. The words of Christ came back to my mind and comfort filled my heart. Though blackness enveloped my world, the Light so often spoken of by Jesus entered

my mind. I shared my thoughts with Thomas. Jesus had taught us that we would live again. I knew all would be well. I knew someday I would see those eyes again. I knew I would hear his voice and look up into His loving face. I would waste no more tears grieving. Let Thomas doubt, for I knew - I KNEW!

My Savior yet lives!

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I cannot express the joy in my heart this day. He lives! The Christ lives, and has returned to us. We had gone to the marketplace to choose foods for supper. Father wanted to stop at the temple, to talk with the other men of the village, who had gathered on the steps. We were to finish our shopping, then meet him at the temple. As I stood amid the fruit, smelling their sweetness, I thought I heard a voice, but could not understand the words. Mother was talking with the vendor, trying to get a better price on the melons.

I made my way to the edge of the market, towards the open plaza. I heard the voice again, but still could not understand the words being spoken. But even though my ears could not hear, my heart did, for the sound filled me with a great peace and calmness. For the third time, the words came, and this time, I lifted my face to the sky, from whence the voice came. I heard and understood the words. The words were from God, our Heavenly Father. They spoke of His Holy Son, and desired us to listen to the risen Christ. The people of the marketplace surrounded me, and as one, we moved toward the temple, drawn by the voice.

Mother and Father found me there, on the temple steps. We listened to the Savior's words and when he bid us come and feel of his wounds, Father guided my arm in the crowd, until I was in front of Him. I reached out and touched his palm, my finger circling the wound left by the spike that had cruelly nailed Him to the cross. I felt where the sword cleft His side. I could feel His eyes on me, felt His love reaching into my heart. I longed to ask a blessing of Him, but the words would not come. Suddenly embarrassed, I began to move back, but Jesus caught hold of my hand and pulled me closer to Him. I felt his hands touch my face and listened as His words commanded my blind eyes to see.

I slowly opened my eyes, almost afraid that the darkness I had always known would still be there. I looked up. For the first time in my life, I saw light. I saw color.

I saw His face. I knew His face. It was the face from my dream, so long ago. I suddenly remembered the words he had spoken: "Behold, I am the light and the life of the world."

My Savior yet lives!

End

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