

MARY

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

MARY - a young woman

ANNA - Mary's Mother

BENJAMIN - Mary's little brother

REBECCA - Mary's nurse

ZACHARIAS - an old rabbi

NEIGHBOR 1

MIDWIFE

JOSEPH - Mary's promised husband

JACOB - Mary's father

TERAH - Mary's sister

REUBEN - Zachariah's student

ELIZABETH - an older woman, Mary's kinswoman

NEIGHBOR 2

(The set is two rooms side by side, with a door in the wall between them. Action takes place in one room or another, and occasionally in both, with the characters unable to hear what's happening in the next room. In both Mary's home and Elizabeth's home, one side serves as the main family room and the other serves as the bedroom. Change bedcover & décor to differentiate between homes.)

SCENE 1

(In MARY's home. JACOB is sitting at the table in the main room. ANNA is bustling around, preparing a meal. MARY and REBECCA are in the bedroom.)

ANNA: Where is that girl? Mary, come out here! I want your help.

JACOB: She'll be along. *(ANNA hmphs, and continues her work)*

REBECCA: You've got to tell them. They're your parents.

MARY: I will, I will. I was just waiting to be sure.

REBECCA: Well, I'd say it's sure.

MARY: Rebecca, don't use that tone. I haven't done anything wrong, I told you.

REBECCA: *(fixes Mary's headcloth)* I mind my own business. Always have.

ANNA: Mary! Where are you?

MARY: *(standing)* Please, Rebecca, stand by me in this or I'll never be able to tell them.

REBECCA: You don't see me heading for the hills, do you? *(they enter the main room)*

JACOB: There's my little girl! Come give Papa a hug.

MARY: *(hugs him)* Good evening, Papa.

JACOB: What's the matter, my daughter? You look tired.

MARY: I, uh... didn't sleep well.

JACOB: You didn't? Did you give her something, Rebecca? Can't have my little rose... *(pats her cheek)...* looking wilted.

(BENJAMIN runs in, screaming continuously in a shrill voice, TERAH in close pursuit. They make two circuits of the table before ANNA and MARY manage to grab them.)

ANNA: Children, stop it! Benjamin, stop that screaming.

BEN: She's gonna kill me! She's gonna kill me!

MARY: Don't be silly, Ben. Of course Terah's not going to kill you.

TERAH: *(struggling to get free)* Oh, yes I am!

ANNA: What's going on? Who started this?

TERAH: Ben did, Mama. He told Malachi I liked him, that I was gonna ask Papa to...

BEN: Well, she does like him.

MARY: Ben...

TERAH: I do not like him, I hate him!

JACOB: You do? Oh, that's a great pity, because I did speak to Malachi's papa just this morning, and we are meeting in a few days to set the dowry.

TERAH: *(suddenly all smiles)* You did? Oh, Papa! *(she flings herself on him, hugging)*

BEN: See? I told you.

ANNA: Benjamin, go sweep out the goatshed at once. Maybe the goats will teach you some manners.

BEN: But I'm hungry.

ANNA: Now, Benjamin.

BEN: Awww... *(exits)*

MARY: Oh, Mama, he was just teasing.

ANNA: When you have children, you can raise them as you wish.

MARY: *(feeling her stomach)* When I have children...

ANNA: Take your place, Terah, we're going to eat now.

MARY: Mother, I need to talk to you.

ANNA: Certainly, dear. After supper.

MARY: *(near tears)* Please, Mama, I need to talk to you *now!*

ANNA: *(startled by the tears)* All right, Mary, all right. The rest of you go ahead and start. We'll be right back. *(MARY and ANNA pass into bedroom)*

JACOB: What's all this about? *(looks questioningly at REBECCA, who turns away)*

REBECCA: I mind my own business. Always have.

(lights out)

SCENE 2

(MARY is in her room, playing with TERAH and BENJAMIN. REBECCA is seated off to the side, engaged in some sewing. JOSEPH enters.)

Terah & Benjamin: Joseph! Joseph! *(they run to him, TERAH trying to hug, BEN trying to climb)*

BEN: What'd you bring me?

JOSEPH: What did I bring you? Why would I bring anything to a little boy who spits like a camel and leaves his muddy clothes on the floor for others to pick up?

BEN: Aw, you been talking to Mama.

JOSEPH: Indeed I have. *(reaches into his pocket)* Are you going to try to do better?

BEN: *(watching the movement greedily)* Yes.

JOSEPH: *(pulls out a carved wooden donkey)* Then I guess you can have this after all.

BEN: A donkey! Thank you, Joseph. I will name him after you. *(takes toy to show to TERAH)*

JOSEPH: *(crossing to MARY)* Thank you. I think. Hello, Mary. How are you today?

Mary: Well enough. I have something important to tell you, though. Leave us, children.

Terah & Benjamin: Aww-www--

Joseph: We'll play later. Go on now. *(Children go through other room and exit)* What do you have to tell me? Does it explain why your father won't even look at me?

Mary: It does. The most wonderful, amazing thing has happened, but... please be patient until I tell you all of it. *(She gestures to a chair, and JOSEPH sits while she remains pacing before him.)* I had a vision some months ago, while you were in Jerusalem. An angel of the Lord came to me, and told me that I had found favor with God. He told me I would bear a son. I am to name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. Believe me, I know how this sounds---

Joseph: *(pleased but incredulous)* Well, it sounds like a lot for the son of a carpenter. Are you sure? I'd settle for just the son part.

Mary: The words are not mine, but God's. I must believe what He said to me. But Joseph...

Joseph: Well, never mind, never mind. You grew up serving in the Temple. Visions and dreams are commonplace things to you, no doubt. But I am a simple man. It is enough for now to know that he will be great... and that he will be ours. David was only a shepherd boy, and he became a king. I will try to accept---

Mary: Joseph---

Joseph: (*excited*) I will speak to your father. There's no need to wait any longer. We'll be married as soon as possible. Whether our son follows some great path, or not, I want to see him. I am old, Mary. Let's marry soon, and hasten his coming. (*tries to put his arms around her*)

Mary: (*pushing him away*) Joseph, listen to me!

Joseph: You mean there's more?

Mary: (*throwing a panic-stricken glance at Rebecca*) Marrying you will not hasten his coming, Joseph. (*She places a hand on her belly*) He is already here.

Joseph: What are you saying?

Mary: I am with child, Joseph. At this moment, I bear the Son of God in my womb.

Joseph: You can't be serious. (*looks at REBECCA for confirmation*) Is this true?

Rebecca: (*Stiffly, noncommittal*) She is with child.

Joseph: (*sinks back in his chair and puts his hands over his face*) Oh, my God...

Mary: Joseph---

Joseph: (*through his hands*) Who was it?

Mary: There was no one, my husband. I am still virgin. But I am pregnant.

Joseph: (*lifting his face and shouting*) By yourself?? Tell me now, Mary, WHO WAS IT??

Mary: No one! I am telling you, it was a miracle from God.

Joseph: Oh, please! Every faithless woman has her own excuse, but you outdo them all.

Mary: (*furiously*) Do you say that I'm lying?

Joseph: What else can I think? Trying to soften the news by ranting of greatness, as if pre-destined sin was somehow less sinful. That tactic, at least I can understand. But to say that no one came to you... with child but yet virgin... if it weren't so disgraceful, I would laugh.

Mary: It is true. When the angel left me, I fell into a deep sleep. When I awoke---

Joseph: Spare me the details. Just tell me, what else did this--- angel---tell you? I assume he was *male*.

Mary: He said the Holy Spirit would come upon me and the power of the Most High would overshadow me, and for that reason the holy offspring would be called the Son of God.

Joseph: Knowing that you were unwed? That makes no sense. How could He think such a child could be anything, disgraced by such a birth?

Mary: (*taken aback*) You are of the lineage of David as well as I. I suppose He thought that you...

Joseph: That I would take your shame to myself?? That I would disgrace my family, my father's memory? Do you realize what you've done? Do you know the penalty for this under our laws? I could stone you here and now!

Mary: *(furiously)* You already have! If you have no more stones to throw, then leave. I can say nothing more to convince you.

(There is a silence)

Joseph: Mary, you know I have loved you since you were too young to know what love was. You were such a beautiful girl, so full of the joy of the Lord. When your father agreed that you should become my wife, I couldn't believe that God would bless me so. But I could never have taken you if I thought it would make you unhappy. If you didn't want me... there was no need for this.

Mary: Stop it! *(collects herself)* You were my promised husband, and I was content. But He is my Creator! How could I deny Him?

(Joseph stands and starts to leave. At the door, he hesitates.)

Joseph: I will speak to your father in a few days. We will handle things quietly. He is my friend. I could not bear to bring him more humiliation.

Mary: *(stiffly)* Thank you.

(Joseph tries to say something else, then exits)

Mary: No one believes me. Not even you. You all think I'm lying.

Rebecca: Child, I don't think that you're lying... but could you possibly be mistaken?

Mary: *(looks at her stomach, then Rebecca)* Foolish me, you are right. It's not a baby, it's indigestion.

Rebecca: No, now listen---

(Terah & Benjamin enter)

TERAH: Mary, what's happened?

BENJAMIN: Joseph's gone away. He was mad. He told Mama that you...

TERAH: Hush, Ben. Joseph said that he couldn't marry you. Oh, Mary, did you quarrel?

BENJAMIN: He said you lied to him. Did you lie to him?

TERAH: Ben!

MARY: No, I didn't lie to him. He just won't believe me.

TERAH: I knew it. I knew you wouldn't lie.

BENJAMIN: Well, I knew it, too! I said so to Joseph, didn't I, Terah? But he's gone. I don't want him to be gone. He wouldn't look at us. Doesn't he like us anymore?

TERAH: He said we had to choose. Why do we have to choose?

MARY: You don't have to choose, Terah. Rebecca, go and speak to Mother. We'll have to send back his bride-price, and his gifts. *(She unhooks the beads from her neck and holds them out to Rebecca)*

BENJAMIN: *(clutches his wooden toy)* Do I have to give back my donkey?

TERAH: Maybe when he thinks about it, he'll know you didn't lie. Maybe you should wait awhile.

BENJAMIN: *(wails)* I wanna keep my donkey!

TERAH: Oh, Ben, forget your stupid donkey.

(ANNA enters.)

ANNA: Terah, go and attend to the linens. Take Benjamin with you. *(Children exit)* Mary, you know our kinswoman Elizabeth is expecting her firstborn soon. She wrote and requested that I come and be with her. I cannot leave Jacob during this time, so I am going to send you.

MARY: What? Oh, Mother, I've never even met her.

ANNA: You have had little exposure to the conditions of pregnancy and childbearing, so you will learn from her what you have chosen to undertake. Elizabeth has no woman kin living close to her and it is right that someone from the family go to her.

MARY: I can't go among strangers at this time... I just can't! Why can't you go?

ANNA: You will do as your father and I tell you.

MARY: Papa... is sending me away?

ANNA: You father shamelessly indulges you in all things, and now he has seen where such indulgence leads. You will go.

MARY: Mother, please don't make me go! Let me remain quietly here. I won't leave this room, I promise. If my own mother and father don't believe me, what must I face from strangers and neighbors? Let me go to Papa. Let me ask him---

ANNA: You will let him alone! You have broken his heart and his honor and you ask why I can't leave him now? You want to know what you will face from the neighbors? I can tell you what they say; I've had an earful of it already. Believe me, by sending you away I am doing you a kindness. Elizabeth is a good woman; she will welcome you.

MARY: *(whispers)* Please...

ANNA: No more. You will go as soon as preparations can be made. Rebecca, will you accompany her?

REBECCA: As if I would leave her.

ANNA: Good. *(nods to REBECCA and exits)*

MARY: I can't endure this. How could God ask it?

REBECCA: And I ask again, how can you be sure He did ask it?

MARY: I don't understand.

REBECCA: You are young and beautiful, Mary. I have been in this world long enough to know that some men would go to any lengths to be with one like you. How can you be sure that the one who came to you was not such a man?

MARY: *(rising up and pacing)* What you are suggesting is horrible beyond belief.

REBECCA: Horrible, but not impossible---

MARY: *(shouting)* It was no man, I tell you!

REBECCA: How do you know? What did he look like?

MARY: In form he was like a man, yes, but he... shone, his presence was...

REBECCA: There are potions which can induce such perceptions.

MARY: No!

REBECCA: You said you fell asleep. Is that normal? If an angel came into *my* bedchamber, you would not find me sleeping through it.

MARY: I didn't sleep through it!

REBECCA: No, but you accepted everything this-- visitor -- said without doubt or question.

MARY: My father teaches in the Temple day and night about submission to the Will of God. Whenever anything happens around here that looks like simple circumstance to me, he sighs and says "It was the Will of God". No one questions, no one doubts. Yet I have seen an *angel*, and you expect both questions and doubts from me. Don't you believe what you see? *(the two women stand facing each other tensely in silence for a moment)*

REBECCA: *(softly)* I see the daughter of my heart submitting herself to a deceiver, and by her own trust continuing that submission for the rest of her life, to the eternal shame of her family, and breaking the heart of a fine man who loves her.

MARY: *(breaks into a wail of anguish)* Ah, I don't know, I don't know what to do!

REBECCA: *(catches MARY and holds her as she sinks to the floor)* Listen, little one, it may not be too late. There are potions for many things, including women in your condition. Almost every midwife knows of them. It is risky, and you will be very ill, but then--

MARY: *(sobbing)* Stop it!

REBECCA: Joseph loves you, he will take you back. People will forget... it will be like it never happened...

MARY: NO! Go away, leave me alone.

REBECCA: *(lets Mary go, and stands to leave)* Well, I'll go. I mind my own business. Always have. Take time to think, but not too much. The danger to you grows with time. I will see a midwife and get what you need. I love you, Mary. I just want to see you happy again. *(exits)*

(music up; scene change)

SCENE 3

(In ZACHARIAS's home. MARY and REBECCA enter. REUBEN is seated, reading a scroll. He starts up as they pass.)

REUBEN: Ah, excuse me... excuse me! Do you have business here?

REBECCA: We have - business, as you say - with Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth.

REUBEN: The Rabbi is a very busy and important man. Tell me your business and I'll see if he can spare you a moment.

REBECCA: Well, of all the... this is Mary, kinswoman to Elizabeth. We are expected.

REUBEN: Oh! *(Looks Mary over)* That one. Wait here. *(Exits)*

REBECCA: That officious oaf! Come, child. We will leave at once.

MARY: *(dully)* Never mind. I'd better get used to it.

(ELIZABETH enters, followed by a protesting REUBEN. She is very pregnant.)

REUBEN: But you've heard what she is! You can't mean to lay our best before...

ELIZ: *Our* best?

REUBEN: Well... your best, of course.

ELIZ: Just do as you're told, Reuben.

REUBEN: I will speak to the Rabbi.

ELIZ: *(Laughs and pats his cheek)* I doubt he'll have anything to say. *(to MARY & REBECCA)* Don't mind Reuben, my dears. He's merely a student of my husband's, with great pretensions.

REUBEN: And this is Elizabeth, who thinks she rules the Rabbi simply because he cannot speak for himself. Don't take seriously anything she says.

ELIZ: *(embraces MARY)* Blessed are you, child, and blessed is the child you carry. To think that the mother of my Lord would honor us with her presence. *(REUBEN rolls his eyes)*

MARY: Kinswoman... *(looks at REUBEN, who circles his forefinger around his ear)* You believe... or are you making fun of me?

ELIZ: *(takes both of Mary's hands)* Mary, the child within me leapt for joy when you arrived. The child everyone said I couldn't have. My child is a miracle, too.

MARY: *(Uncertainly)* Yes. *(looks at Elizabeth, then hugs her fiercely)* Yes! You understand. Oh, my soul rejoices in God! He looked kindly on even me. People will call me blessed for the Mighty One has done great things for me.

REUBEN: Great. Now there's two of them.

MARY: Most people think I'm lying. They say terrible things---

ELIZ: It's all *right*, dear. We'll talk of it later. Meanwhile... oh, you look so much like your mother *(hugs MARY, then reaches out a hand to greet REBECCA)* It's been a long time, Rebecca.

REBECCA: Yes.

ELIZ: My husband will be along directly. He tends to forget anything that isn't scribed on his hand, but I reminded him of your coming at least a dozen times today so I think I made a small impression. He's coming.

REBECCA: To throw us out of the house, if that Reuben has his way.

ELIZ: Don't you worry. There was never a girl created that couldn't wrap Zacharias around her little finger. Reuben's the youngest son of parents that desire the status of having a rabbi in the family, but can't afford a teacher with a tongue.

REUBEN: *(overriding her)* My parents wanted to assist their old friend Zacharias in his affliction.

ELIZ: You know that my husband can't speak, don't you?

REBECCA: We'd heard something to that effect.

ELIZ: He's been that way through my entire pregnancy. *(ZACH enters, a small elderly man dressed in a shabby, ink-spotted robe. ELIZABETH lowers her voice)* Best nine months of my marriage... Ah, there you are, dear! Come greet our guests.

(ZACH shuffles to MARY, and takes her hands with a smile. MARY smiles back and he nods approvingly.)

ELIZ: *(examining ZACH's robe)* My dear, most scholars limit the application of ink to the end of their pen. Didn't I ask you to put on your best robe?

(ZACH gestures and makes a face)

MARY: *(giggles)* I believe he's saying that *is* his best robe.

(ZACH puts his finger alongside his nose, then points it at her)

ELIZ: His best robe is blue. *(to ZACH)* You forgot she was coming, didn't you?

(ZACH looks innocent, mimes putting on a fine robe, preening himself, knocking something over on his robe, messing it up, then shrugs)

ELIZ: *(sighs dramatically)* There he is, my lord and master. As wise as Solomon. And, like Solomon, has an answer for everything.

REBECCA: May we ask how the Rabbi lost his power of speech?

ELIZ: The Almighty God struck him dumb for refusing to believe when he was told that I was to bear a son at my age. Zacharias just laughed. We'd tried to have children for so many years. Frankly, my dear, I was laughing, too. But as a woman I am accustomed to keep my opinions to myself, so I did not fall under the punishment.

(ZACH snorts derisively)

ELIZ: *(turns to look at ZACH coolly)* Something to say?

(ZACH spreads his hands and looks innocent)

REUBEN: Do you see how she belittles him? *(ZACH goes to stand behind REUBEN and nods his head, looking aggrieved. REUBEN glances back at ZACH and, encouraged, continues)* You see how she usurps his God-given authority? *(ZACH strikes a melodramatic pose)* You see how she strips him of his manhood and reduces him to a subservient object of mockery? *(ZACH breaks off and looks at REUBEN angrily)*

ELIZ: *(to ZACH)* See what happens when you encourage him? *(to MARY)* We're making a wonderful dinner to celebrate your arrival. We'll eat and drink and you will tell us all the news of your family. I haven't seen

dear Anna in so many years. I remember her as a girl, so shy... like a little mouse. You must write her, husband, and tell her Mary has arrived safely. Now don't forget. *(ZACH has been scribbling on a slate)*

MARY: *(ZACH hands slate to ELIZ)* What does he say?

ELIZ: *(laughing)* He likes you. He wants me to bring out my special fig cakes. *(gives slate back to ZACH)* No, dear. You know what figs do to you.

REBECCA: You can read, Elizabeth?

ELIZ: Oh, yes. My husband insists on eating more figs than is good for him. He was having... digestive difficulties, and it took me days to decipher his signs and get him relief. Afterwards, he insisted that I learn. *(Z is making wild signs)* See, now how would you interpret that? I thought he was referring to Noah and the Great Flood. *(She reads his slate)* Now, don't start in on Solomon. *(to MARY)* Whenever he doesn't get his way, he always invokes Solomon. *(To ZACH)* I've told you before, when you're as rich as Solomon you can have all the figs you want. *(to M&R)* Come along, now. I'll show you to your room. *(to ZACH)* And don't sulk. I'm sure Solomon never sulked. *(All exit)*

SCENE 4

(ELIZ & MARY sit talking in family room)

MARY: ---and no one believed me, not even Joseph. He wants nothing to do with me.

ELIZ: Perhaps he needs some time.

MARY: I thought, when I agreed to what God asked of me, that everything would work out. I thought my father would be so proud, to have God choose our family. I never thought I'd have to go through all this, this shame and rejection. It scares me, makes me feel like I must have been wrong somehow. I mean, it is ridiculous to think of God choosing me. I'm nobody special.

ELIZ: I think you're very special.

MARY: Right now, the only things keeping me going are your kindness and my memory of that night. If you hadn't believed me---

ELIZ: Mary, my belief is not going to be enough to see you through this...ah, Zacharias. *(ZACH enters, followed by REUBEN)* Have you written to Anna yet? *(ZACH slaps his head in frustration)* Well, do it now while you're thinking about it. *(ZACH makes a note on his slate)* Tell her that my pregnancy is going well and we expect the baby any day. *(ZACH makes a note and starts to walk away)* Oh, and tell her about Aunt Miriam. *(another note)* Don't forget to ask them to spend next Passover with us. And put in the story about Ben's letting the chickens into your nephew's vineyard... *(ZACH thrusts the slate at her)* Don't be silly, dear, I have perfect confidence in you. *(ZACH starts to exit again)* Just make sure Reuben cleans your pen first. *(ZACH stops with a look of cross-eyed frustration, then grabs REUBEN's arm and pulls him out after him.)*

ELIZ: Just remember when you have a husband... *(notices Mary's look of pain)* Oh, you will have a husband... oh dear... *(looks startled)* Oh dear!

MARY: What is it?

ELIZ: OH-h-h-h, um. *(makes a face of pain)* I think it's time. Oh, dear.

MARY: Oh. OH!! *(gets up in a panic)* I'll get the midwife. Stay right there.

ELIZ: No, dear, this is *not* a good place. Help me to bed.

MARY: Oh. Right. *(helps ELIZ up and into bedroom, calling over her shoulder)* Zacharias!

ELIZ: Whoo! Here we go.

(lights out)

SCENE 5

(Lights are out. In the darkness a baby cries. Slowly lights come up on ELIZABETH's room. She is in bed. REBECCA and MIDWIFE, holding baby, stand beside her. MARY runs in, dragging ZACH with her. REUBEN and neighbors follow.)

MARY: See, Rabbi? It is a boy, a beautiful boy. *(ZACH takes baby, beaming with delight)*

MIDWIFE: Oh, look at the little prince. You gave us a rough time, didn't you?

NEIGHBOR 1: *(doing inventory)* Oh yes, him's got two arms, and two legs, and two little feet...

NEIGHBOR 2: He's definitely the son of his father. He looks like you, Zach.

NEIGHBOR 1: Indeed. Red-faced and wrinkly. *(general laugh)*

REUBEN: God has truly blessed our house, Rabbi. Little Zacharias may be late in coming, but he--

ELIZABETH: His name is John.

REUBEN: What!?

NEIGHBOR 1: John!

NEIGHBOR 2: None of your family relatives bears that name, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: His name is John.

NEIGHBOR 2: But why?

REUBEN: I've had just about enough of your whims. *(ZACH gives baby to ELIZ)* Just because the Rabbi cannot speak for himself, you think you can deny him the comfort of his old age, a son to carry his name into the next generation. *(ZACH grabs REUBEN's arm, REUBEN shrugs free, ZACH takes his tablet, starts writing)* Well, maybe he hasn't the courage to stand up to you, but he has friends who will defend him, friends who will speak for him, and they say... *(looks at tablet as ZACH sticks it in his face)* ...his name is John. *(Everyone laughs. REUBEN looks dismayed.)* But, Rabbi, why? Why do you give this woman her way in everything? *(ZACH looks furious, starts to rub out his tablet and write)*

MIDWIFE: Look, boy, why don't you stay out of their business for once?

REUBEN: It's the father's right to name the child, everyone knows that! *(Losing patience, ZACH starts to make incomprehensible gestures)*

MIDWIFE: After all she went through to deliver him, the least you can do is let her name him.

REUBEN: That doesn't matter. Scripture says---

MIDWIFE: It doesn't *matter*? *(ZACH tries to separate them, she shrugs him off)* Listen, you insufferable little locust---

REUBEN: *(to NEIGHBORS)* Somebody back me up here.

NEIGHBOR 2: *(to REUBEN)* I think you're marching around Jericho without a trumpet, son.

ZACH: *(throwing his tablet on the floor)* HIS NAME IS JOHN!! *(Suddenly realizes he is talking, looks surprised, works his jaw)*

MARY: *(gasps)* Rabbi!

NEIGHBOR 1: He's talking!

ZACH: *(filled with the Spirit)* Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David, as He spoke by the prophets of old. *(to baby)* You, John, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins. Blessed be God. *(bows his head, spent, while the neighbors look at one another in bemusement)*

NEIGHBOR 1: Now that is one proud papa.

(lights go down, music up; scene change only in family room)

SCENE 6

(Lights up on family room only in MARY's home. ANNA is sitting by the table, sewing. JOSEPH is in another chair, holding a sleeping BEN on his lap. JACOB enters.)

JACOB: Well, I've gotten TERAH into bed. Now it's Ben's turn.

JOSEPH: *(tightening his arms around the boy)* Oh, Jake, he's just gone to sleep. Don't disturb him. You know how lightly he sleeps.

JACOB: *(looks at JOSEPH with pity)* Very well. Hold him for awhile. *(ANNA makes a noise of frustration, gets up and leaves the room)*

JOSEPH: *(looking after ANNA)* She wishes I would take myself off home, eh?

JACOB: You are my friend, Joseph. You are always welcome in my home. But... your presence hurts Anna, hurts all of us. I myself don't understand why you torment yourself with these visits.

JOSEPH: *(heavily)* I know. It's selfish of me. I'm just prolonging the inevitable. But, Jacob, have you ever had a dream that was so beautiful that even when you awoke and knew it to be only a dream, you couldn't get out of bed, but lay there vainly trying to recapture it?

JACOB: *(after a long pause)* Joseph... what if she's telling the truth?

JOSEPH: *(after an even longer pause)* If I could know that, I would endure the censure of the entire Sanhedrin to be with her.

JACOB: *(gets up)* I must go to Anna. Stay as long as you like, my friend. *(slowly exits)*

(Light slowly dim. JOSEPH sits quietly, head bowed over BEN. Music up. After a while, a Light comes up on his face. Slowly, JOSEPH raises his head and stares into the Light. Hold tableau. Lights out.)

(music up; scene change in family room only)

___INTERMISSION___?

SCENE 7

(ELIZABETH is in bed, holding her baby. ZACH is sitting beside her. MARY enters the family room with REBECCA close behind. REBECCA is holding out a small ceramic bottle.)

REBECCA: I told you I'd get it for you. Now at least consider it. A miscarriage, some sickness... then we will all be at peace again.

MARY: I can't. I have to know. I have to be sure.

REBECCA: I have cared for you all your life. I love you more than anything on earth. And I tell you, I am sure.

MARY: Elizabeth said---

REBECCA: Elizabeth was pregnant and everyone knows pregnant women get fancies. Elizabeth's pregnancy was nothing short of miraculous in itself. But even her 'miraculous' pregnancy took a *man's* participation.

MARY: *(stubbornly but weakly)* There was no man.

REBECCA: *(sadly holding out the bottle)* Just keep it. You will change your mind. Keep it. For me.

(MARY slowly takes the bottle. She crosses to the bedroom. REBECCA exits.)

ELIZ: *(greets MARY as she enters)* Well, it's happened, Mary. Just like God told my wise-as-Solomon husband. Beyond all probability, we have a son.

MARY: Your pregnancy was merely improbable. Mine is impossible. There is no word from my family. My memory of that night is fading. What is there for me to hold onto? What if no one ever believes me?

(ZACH snorts and gets up)

ELIZ: Going somewhere, dear?

ZACH: Uh, excuse me. *(exits)*

ELIZ: I wish I could help you more.

MARY: I don't see how anyone can. Eventually, I must go home, my belly will swell, I'll spend months hiding from the neighbors. They won't call me blessed, they'll call me whore. Then the baby will come... and what then?

ELIZ: *(gives baby to Mary)* I suspect *that* problem will resolve itself.

(There is whispering offstage, a squeal and giggle. REBECCA scurries onstage, into bedroom and crosses to the window, taking hold of the curtain. REUBEN is pushed into family room by ZACH. We only see ZACH's head.)

ZACH: Now you! Get in there and make whooshing noises.

REUBEN: Why? *(ELIZ and MARY look at each other in question)*

ZACH: Because I tell you to. I am the teacher, you are the student.

REUBEN: What am I supposed to be learning from this?

ZACH: *(furious stage whisper)* You-are-learning-to-make-whooshing-noises!!

MARY: What's going on?

ELIZ: I don't think I want to know.

REUBEN: *(entering bedroom and looking bored)* Woosh. Woosh.

ZACH: *(loudly)* You obviously need lessons in this skill. Whoosh louder. Like the wind.

REUBEN: (wind sound) Whoooosh... whoooosh...

(ZACH enters, wrapped in white sheets, with his arms draped like wings and an embroidery hoop on his head. REBECCA flaps the curtain, making the lights flash.)

ZACH: *(intoning dramatically)* I...am the angel Gabriel. I have come down from Heaven, left my duties and my place at my Lord's side to visit you again, O Favored One.

(ELIZ puts her face in her hands; MARY is laughing)

ZACH: Aren't you going to ask me why I have come?

MARY: *(between giggles)* Why have you come?

ZACH: *(intones dramatically)* I have come to tell you everything I told you the last time only this time pay attention so you'll believe it.

REUBEN: This is really stupid... *(ZACH glares at him)*...whoosh...

ZACH: I will leave you now. *Don't* make me do this again. *(swishes dramatically out, with REUBEN in tow. REBECCA is still enthusiastically at work.)*

ZACH: *(from offstage)* Rebecca!

REBECCA: Oh! *(exits hurriedly)*

ZACH: *(re-entering in his own clothes, mouth full and chewing)* Better go to the market, I just ate the last of the figs. What did I miss?

MARY: Oh, Rabbi, don't be silly. Of course we knew it was you.

ZACH: You did? Hrmph! Musta been Reuben's whooshing. He definitely needs practice.

ELIZ: That's all right, dear, I think you made your point.

ZACH: Did I? I wonder. She's been moping around ever since she came, 'cause she says God talked to her and nobody believes her. I could tell her I believed her, but what good would that do? She's so sweet, I'd believe her if she said Caesar had decided to give Jerusalem back. *(to ELIZ)* You believe her because your heart's roughly the size of Judea; even Reuben's starting to believe her because she's the only one around here who doesn't laugh at him. But what's that got to do with the truth? What does she herself believe?

ELIZ: That's the problem, isn't it?

ZACH: Somebody has put a baby in this girl, if the revolting noises I hear in the morning are any indication. *(MARY hides her face in her hands)*

ELIZ: Husband, perhaps you'd better let me handle this---your manners are appalling.

ZACH: *(pounds his knee and yells)* You been doing all the talking for months, woman, now it's my turn! *(ELIZABETH starts to protest, Zach holds up a finger)* Not one word.

ZACH: *(to MARY)* Do you believe that you shamed your family?

MARY: *(from behind her hands, muffled)* No.

ZACH: When, you had your mysterious visitor, did you feel woozy, drugged?

MARY: I never was more clearheaded in my life.

ZACH: Was his appearance, his manner, his form, something that could have been duplicated by any man living?

MARY: I don't see how.

ZACH: And when he left, you fell asleep.

MARY: Yes, but-- *(ZACH holds up a hand)*

ZACH: Leading some to believe that it was a delusion or dream. Yet your body shows physical evidence of pregnancy?

MARY: *(awkwardly)* Yes.

ZACH: No one else saw, no one else was there?

MARY: No.

ZACH: *(shouting)* Then, in the name of all that's holy, why are you letting *them* tell you what happened?

MARY: Then you believe me, Rabbi?

ZACH: *(impatiently)* What difference does it make what I think? God hasn't discussed the matter with me! Are we to go around taking a poll of everyone we know and the truth is whatever the majority say it is?

MARY: But what should I do?

ELIZ: Our great King David was told he would be king 20 years before it actually happened. He spent the intervening time hiding in caves while the old king tried to kill him. Not all God's promises fulfill overnight.

ZACH: When God told Noah to build the Ark, Noah didn't worry about what the neighbors thought. He simply obeyed. He believed God. That was where I made my mistake and I had to live with it a long time before I was able to say I was wrong. *(ELIZABETH pats his hand)*

MARY: *(getting up suddenly)* Excuse me... there's something I have to do. *(She runs into the next room. ZACH turns back to ELIZ, miming someone throwing up, she nods understandingly, and lights go down on their set.)*

(MARY pulls out Rebecca's bottle. Music begins 'Breath of Heaven'. Spotlight comes up on MARY.)

MARY: Joseph loves you, he will take you back... it will be like it never happened... Oh, Rebecca, that's the first time you ever lied to me. *(walks to center and begins to pray)* Holy Father, You have never lied. You are all the truth that there is, and I *must* believe You. I must believe that You wouldn't allow me to be deceived into sin, and then condemn me, when all I ever wanted in life was to obey You. *(She clutches the bottle for another moment, then shatters it on the floor, and sits down with her hands clasped in her lap, staring upward into the light. Lights and music out.)*

SCENE 8

(ZACHARIAS is sitting at table. REUBEN enters)

ZACH: Is everything ready for Mary's departure?

REUBEN: Yes.

ZACH: I'm glad her family sent for her, it's a hopeful sign. But I'm sure sorry to see her go.

REUBEN: Do you think Joseph has changed his mind?

ZACH: I have no idea. I only hope.

REUBEN: You know, if he hasn't, if she needs someone—for the baby...

ZACH: Am I to understand you're *volunteering*?

REUBEN: Well, I just thought...

ZACH: That's good of you, son. Frighteningly out of character, but good.

REUBEN: Will you speak to her family?

ZACH: *(kindly)* Go see to the baggage, Reuben. And don't forget to practice your wooshing.

(REUBEN enters bedroom, picks up bundle from bed and carries it into main room. ELIZABETH, MARY & REBECCA enter from outside.)

ELIZ: Now, Reuben, be careful with that.

REUBEN: I will, I will. *(Starts toward door, walks into Mary, they both duck upstage and collide again, dodge downstage, finally he gets around her and exits)*

MARY: I guess this is goodbye. I can't thank you enough for your hospitality. And your kindness.

ELIZ: We loved having you.

ZACH: You're welcome here anytime.

ELIZ: Zacharias asked Reuben to escort you home.

ZACH: I did?

ELIZ: *(dismayed)* Didn't you?

ZACH: I forgot.

ELIZ: Oh, no. Reuben!

REUBEN: *(entering)* Yes, yes, everything's ready. Let's go.

ELIZ: You're taking them home, right?

REUBEN: *(stiffly)* Of course. I do as the Rabbi instructs. *(takes bundle from REBECCA's hand and exits)*

ELIZ: *(confused)* Zacharias...

ZACH: *(shrugs)* I guess I forgot I remembered.

ELIZ: *(throws up her hands)* He'll be the death of me... *(to MARY & REBECCA)* Don't worry, dears, he's not really senile. It's just a pretense.

ZACH: *(offended)* Who's pretending?

ELIZ: Oh, I'm sorry. My mistake. It *is* real. *(exits into bedroom, humming happily)*

MARY: I can't believe you walked blindly into that.

ZACH: *(smiles knowingly)* I'm not blind, little girl. And she'll be happy for the rest of the day.

MARY: *(laughs fondly)* I love you. You remind me of my father. I'm going to miss you. *(ELIZ. reenters main room with another bundle which she hands to REUBEN just as he comes back in. REUBEN gives a martyred sigh, takes it and exits.)*

ZACH: I'm going to miss you too. I wish you didn't have to leave. If only we could find some way to keep you around. We should find you a husband nearby. I do know several young men... And there's always Reuben.

ELIZ: Reuben?!? What would make you think Reuben? He's been nothing but rude to Mary since she came.

Zach: Just leave it to me. I'll have a talk with him. *(MARY looks horrified and tugs on ELIZABETH's sleeve)*

ELIZ: Don't trouble yourself, husband. *(to Mary)* It's all right, dear, he's harmless.

ZACH: *(insulted)* Harmless! What are you talking about? I have power. I have influence! If I give the word Reuben will marry her—and think it's his own idea.

ELIZ: *(stage whisper to Mary)* Don't worry. By tomorrow he won't even remember this conversation. *(Mary sighs relief)* Come. I'll see you out and we'll say our goodbyes. *(guides MARY and REBECCA offstage)*

ZACH: *(sulkily)* Harmless... hmp! *(yells after them)* Bet Solomon never got called 'harmless'.

(Lights out. Music up; scene change)

SCENE 9

(Back in Mary's home. ANNA, JACOB and MARY are sitting around the table.)

MARY: Oh, it's so good to be home again.

ANNA: Wasn't Elizabeth good to you?

MARY: She was better than good. And the baby is a little piece of Heaven. But I missed you so much, and Papa, and Terah and Ben, and the goats...

ANNA: What about Joseph?

MARY: *(uncomfortably)* What about him?

ANNA: Mary, things have changed. He wants you back.

JACOB: He thinks you're telling the truth now.

MARY: *(with Elizabeth's serenity)* It doesn't matter anymore what he thinks.

JACOB: What?

MARY: I said it doesn't matter what he thinks.

JACOB: What??

MARY: Poor Papa. I know these things can happen, but I didn't expect it so soon.

JACOB: What do you mean?

MARY: *(sympathetically)* Your hearing fails, your mind loses its focus...

JACOB: Whose mind? Why, you young... *(notices that ANNA is trying to stifle laughter)*

MARY: Don't worry, Papa, I will clean up after you when the time comes.

JACOB: *(to ANNA)* This is Elizabeth's doing. I told you we should have sent Mary to my mother's.

MARY: All I'm saying, Papa, is that God knows I was telling the truth. I don't feel like I need to convince anyone else. I'll let God take care of that.

ANNA: Well, He seems to have done something about it.

MARY: He has? *(Joseph enters)*

JOSEPH: Peace be to this house. *(MARY takes one startled look at him, then turns and goes into the bedroom, sitting down on the bed)*

JACOB: Welcome my friend. Sit down.

ANNA: Ah... excuse me. *(follows MARY)*

JOSEPH: I guess I came too soon.

JACOB: Let's wait and see. I'll get you some refreshment, since Anna is otherwise occupied.

ANNA: *(sits down by MARY)* What is it, daughter?

MARY: *(wails)* He called me a liar! *(buries her face in ANNA's shoulder)*

ANNA: *(absently patting her)* Well, so much for 'it doesn't matter what he thinks'.

JACOB: *(serving JOSEPH)* Here you are.

JOSEPH: Didn't you tell her that I believe her now?

JACOB: Well, yes.

JOSEPH: So what's the problem?

JACOB: *(shrugs)* Women.

ANNA: Come, child. Elizabeth has taught you a lot. She must have taught you this: You must always give him a chance to fix it. *(she stands MARY up, primps her a bit)*

JACOB: *(trying to make conversation)* So... going to the chariot races tomorrow?

JOSEPH: No, I have too much work to do.

(ANNA and MARY enter.)

ANNA: *(brightly)* Well, here we are.

JACOB: Good, good. Let's sit down and talk this out like reasonable people. *(Everyone sits. After a long, uncomfortable pause...)*

JACOB: Well, I have to go milk the goat.

ANNA: *(hurriedly)* I'll help you. *(They flee.)*

JOSEPH: *(after another long silence)* I missed you.

MARY: *(flatly, not looking at him)* Oh.

JOSEPH: I ate too much. I always overeat when I'm feeling bad.

MARY: I threw up a lot.

JOSEPH: This has been a hard time for you.

MARY: I don't need your sympathy.

JOSEPH: *(sighs, tries different approach)* I saw an angel, too, you know.

MARY: You did?

JOSEPH: A few weeks ago. It was amazing. I never thought such a thing would happen to me. He told me you were right. About the child and all.

MARY: Oh. I see. So now you believe me.

JOSEPH: Yes. I'm sorry I didn't before.

MARY: I'm glad the angel was more persuasive than I.

JOSEPH: Well, you have to admit, it was a lot to believe. Would you have accepted someone's word for such a thing?

MARY: Maybe not, if it was anyone off the streets of Jerusalem. But this was *me*!

JOSEPH: *(raising his voice)* I *said* I was sorry. How many more times do I have to say it?

MARY: *(yelling back)* I don't *know*. Just keep saying it and I'll tell you when to stop.

(an angry pause)

JOSEPH: *(still loud)* Mary, you have to marry me now.

MARY: Have to?

JOSEPH: Of course. After what has happened I will never dare to disbelieve a thing you say. How can you let such an opportunity pass you by?

(MARY stares, then bursts into laughter. There is another pause. JOSEPH moves a little closer to MARY)

JOSEPH: Will you forgive me?

MARY: If it had happened to someone else, I don't suppose I would have believed it, either. At times, I've even doubted myself. But then I remember the messenger, his voice... his face.

JOSEPH: I remember.

MARY: *(after a pause)* Did... your angel... have gold tips on his wings?

JOSEPH: Yes! And a gold belt around a robe so white--

MARY: *(turning to him)* Mine too! Did you notice...

(They continue ad lib angel comparisons while the lights go down.)

END

CHARACTERS

ANNA: Mary's mother. Severe, and very conscious of what the neighbors think, but also capable and loyal to her family.

JACOB: Mary's indulgent father.

REBECCA: A 'poor relation', living with the family and acting as Mary's nursemaid. Brusque, opinionated, devoted to the family.

MARY: Daughter of Jacob and Anna, very much Daddy's girl, somewhat timid, dreamy.

TERAH: Mary's younger sister, 12-13 years old. Sweet and goodnatured, except when Ben is driving her crazy. Just getting old enough to be betrothed; and just old enough to be interested in the procedure.

BENJAMIN: Mary's little brother, 7-10 years of age (the younger, the better). Chiefly required is an ability to emit a continuous high, shrill scream, and to lay comatose in someone's lap for extended periods.

JOSEPH: Older man, lonely. He is a carpenter, with no living family of his own. Having become Jacob's friend, he 'adopts' Jacob's family, treating Terah and Benjamin as his own children, and eventually asking for Mary's hand in marriage.

REUBEN: A wit. Born to poor parents who want him to be a rabbi, Reuben has been placed with Zachariah as his student. He is painfully aware that a mute rabbi was all the teacher his parents could afford, and tries to bolster his self-esteem by airs and pompous behavior, in spite of Elizabeth's continual put-downs. These he greatly resents and wishes Zachariah would keep her under better control.

ELIZABETH: Being wife to Zachariah for many decades has sharpened both Elizabeth's wit, and her sense of humor. These traits have helped her through many years of childlessness, and spared her much of the treatment a barren woman of those times was generally accorded. A greater contrast to Zach can hardly be imagined. She is poised, serene. Gracefully old, with a voice that has not yet cracked with age.

ZACHARIAH: A rabbi and teacher, Zach lost his voice when Elizabeth's pregnancy was prophecied, and so was unable to speak to his congregation. Being much loved by them, he is supported by them and by teaching the Law to private students. He has a keen and open mind, and a very soft heart.