

YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND FOREVER



MARIA VON TRAPP



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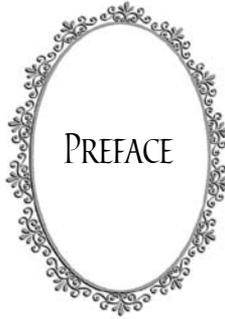
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HOW IT HAPPENED

It was in Italian South Tyrol in a primitive little country inn on the edge of a lovely village in the mountains. The year was 1938, and this was the first station on our flight from Nazi-invaded Austria. We, that is Father Wasner, my husband, and I, and nine children with the tenth on the way, had just barely arrived at this peaceful little place when it happened. With a terrific wail, Lorli, aged six, discovered that we had forgotten her favorite toy, a worn-out, shapeless, hairless something, formerly a teddy bear.

The grief of a child is always terrible. It is bottomless, without hope. A child has no past and no future. It just lives in the present moment — wholeheartedly. If the present moment spells disaster, the child suffers it with his whole heart, his whole soul, his whole strength, and his whole little being. Because a child is so helpless in his grief, we should never take it lightly, but drop all we are doing at the moment and come to his aid.

I remember the situation so well, the glassed-in veranda in which we were standing, and me looking for a cookie or a candy, and there was none. Had I forgotten that we were refugees now, and luxuries like candies were things of the past? But even if the hands of a mother are empty, her mind and heart must never be. Taking the sobbing little girl on my lap, I said: "Come, Lorli, Mother is going to tell you a story."

That had always worked; but now it only brought forth new tears, and violently shaking her little head with its mop of dark curls, she shrieked, "I don't want to hear about Cinderella or Snow White — I want. . . ."

"Oh no, Lorli," I said, "I'm not going to tell you one of those stories; but if you will listen to me, I will tell you the story of another child like you to whom the same thing happened — oh, a wonderful story!" And as I said this, I had no idea of what I was going to tell.

"Once upon a time," I began, "there was a mother, a father, and a little child."

"A girl?" Lorli managed to ask between sobs.

"No, a boy," I said.

At this very moment I saw them right before me, the holy family on their way to Egypt. For the first time, however, I didn't think of them the way the holy cards pictured them — Mary in blue, Joseph in brown, the little child in pink, each one with a golden hem on his garment — riding complacently on a neat donkey through a beautiful countryside full of date palms. For the first time it dawned on me that they were really refugees like millions of people nowadays; like ourselves, for instance.

"Flee," said the angel to Joseph, "flee into Egypt, for Herod will seek the child to destroy Him."

Wasn't the fright which must have chilled Joseph's blood at the moment the same fright which we had experienced so often when we heard the cruel stories of how the Gestapo was on somebody's heels, how they had dragged away fathers or brothers from families we knew? Wasn't it the same fright which had finally gotten us across the border? The angel had not announced to Joseph just exactly what Herod intended to do, but Joseph knew that Herod's Gestapo worked fast, and that his reputation for

cruelty was unequalled. If the parents wanted to save the child, they had to hurry to get away from Herod. And while I told my little girl the story of the flight into Egypt, I listened to it myself. It was so new, so not at all holy-card-wise. It was so excitingly modern; the story of refugees, who, after having reached the goal, Egypt, became displaced persons — D.P.s. It was a story full of anxiety and homesickness, but also full of trust in the Heavenly Father, who in His own good time, provides a home for all refugees.

Lorli had long since stopped crying. In rapt attention she listened to my description of the dangers of the flight. I told about the wild animals and robbers, the terrific heat at noon and the cold at night on that dangerous passage through the desert, which even the Roman soldiers dreaded, and how the little boy did not make any fuss over a missing a toy, not once.

Then the angel of the Lord appeared again to Joseph, in my story, and bade him to return home.

“Will an angel tell our father, too, when we can go back to Salzburg?” asked Lorli eagerly.

“Yes,” I said without the slightest hesitation, and a happy little girl glided down from my lap and ran off to Stefan, the innkeeper’s little boy, to tell him this, her newest story.

Some of the older children had moved over from the other side of the veranda during the story. “Mother, that was really exciting,” they said. I was completely taken with it myself. During the telling it had become clearer in my own mind: this story isn’t over yet. All this is still going on.

“Children,” I said, “I feel as though we are at the beginning of a great discovery. It seems as if Herod isn’t really dead. He keeps living under different names, like Saul and Nero, or Hitler and Stalin. He still seeks the child to destroy Him.” How close Our Lord and His family had become all of a sudden when we met them as fellow refugees!

That was a big discovery, and it came to us on the very threshold of a new life when we had joined the millions of refugees on the highways and byways of Europe in search of a new home. But I have told about all this in another book, *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers*, and I don’t want to repeat any of it here. This is

to be simply the story of how “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8) — and how He finally became a member of our family.

In that summer of our flight through Europe we had another startling experience. It was a few weeks after the incident on the glassed-in veranda. One of our sons was engaged to be married, and his bride-to-be spent several weeks with us in Holland. One day she came to me and said, “Mother, can you tell me what he was like when he was a baby? He has told me everything about his life as far as he can remember, but — I want to know all.”

That hit me right between the eyes. Reading the Gospels together and searching in them for more modern stories like the one of the flight into Egypt had become a family hobby by then. Merely by doing it we had found out how little we knew about our Lord and His family, His country, and His times. Aside from stating the fact, we hadn’t done anything about it. Then came this girl who went out of her way to find out every detail about the one whom she loved because — “she had to know all.” This did something to us.

“How can we pretend to love our Lord,” we said to ourselves, “if we don’t want to know all about Him as well?”

On that same evening during night prayer it occurred to me that Mary, the mother of Christ, was a mother like me. Perhaps she would be just as pleased about the questioning as I had been, so I turned to God and said, “Father, there is so little written in the Gospels about your Son when He was a Child and while He was growing up. How was it in Nazareth, in Bethlehem, in Egypt? Was He lively or was He rather quiet? What did He eat, what did He wear? What did He do all day long, and what about Joseph?”

I don’t believe in chances and coincidences. It must have been she who gave two friends of ours, independently of each other, the idea to present us with books: *The life of Our Lord Jesus Christ* by the German Jesuit Maurice Meschler, and *Life of Jesus* by Francois Mauriac.¹ There could hardly be found a greater contrast than between those two works on the same subject. That was the beginning of a very helpful little library of our own. After we had finished these two books, we wanted to know more. And more. And more. God has never stopped answering our questions. Besides

helping us find the right books, He also helped us remember what we had once learned in history, geography, archaeology, and religion. He drew our attention to the fact that besides the four canonical Gospels there is something else which we can almost regard as a “fifth Gospel,” so much a source of information it is: the Holy Land itself. Very much of it is still exactly the same as it was in His time. There we started getting interested in maps of the modern and ancient Holy Land.

Many years have passed since. After we had shared with Him the anxiety of the flight, we lived through years of the “hidden life,” and then through the excitement of the “public life.” Many notebooks have been filled with information which we drew out of different books, which seem to complement each other. Pictures of the Holy Land have been cut out of magazines throughout the years, and postcards sent to us from there by friends have been collected. Putting all these different pieces together is like assembling a crèche.

Every time we say the Creed, we say toward the end that we believe in the communion of saints.

Of the Early Church it is said, “The multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul: neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things common” (Acts 4:32; NKJV). That did not refer only to money and the things money can buy, but also and foremost to spiritual goods. We know from the Acts and Epistles of the Apostles and the writings of the early fathers that this was true. Haven’t we moved far away from those times? While we still might share our earthly possessions and contribute to collections, we certainly are not in the habit of sharing our spiritual goods any more. This is our innermost private life, and what I learned this morning in meditation or what occurred to me during reading is nobody’s business. This is the spirit of “I-me-myself,” whereas the right spirit is always “we-our,” as we find in the liturgy, in the prayers of the Church. This would make the difference between a family and a group of people living together under one roof.

It is in this spirit that we want to share with you our great discovery — the bringing of the Holy Scriptures to life for us, and,

by watching Him, learning to imitate Him, learning how to live, how to love, how to die. In the world situation of today it may look like five minutes to twelve, but if we Christians would wake up to the meaning of our name and become “other Christs,” we might bring about what was promised only to men of good will: peace on earth.

PART ONE



YESTERDAY



"IN THOSE DAYS"

Whenever we read the life story of one of the great ones, be it Washington, Lincoln, Napoleon, or Julius Caesar, we always find that the biographer takes pains to picture for us the time in which his hero lived, thus helping us to understand certain features of his character and certain happenings of his age. So Luke, the biographer of Christ's childhood, does the same. "In those days," he says, "a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled" (Luke 2:1).

"In those days." That means the time when in Rome the nephew of the great Julius Caesar had become emperor. His real name had been Octavius, but his soldiers hailed him as "Augustus." In those days the Roman troops had been victorious almost to the ends of the then-known world. They had invaded country after country in many bloody wars, but now the whole empire was at peace. Before Augustus came into power, terrible civil wars had raged. These and all the invasions had exhausted the finances of the empire, and so Caesar Augustus used this new peace to think

of new means to fill the coffers of the state. His new idea was to get every single one of his subjects, without exception to make a contribution. To help the publicans, or tax collectors, in their business, he ordered now, like the owner of a big department store, an inventory to be made.

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled” (Luke 2:1).

“All the world” — what a proud phrase! But these were almost the facts. Almost all of what was then known of the world was ruled by Roman governors according to Roman law, and the Roman legions watched on the borders.

In those days one of the most important provinces was Syria, and the official in charge of the census in this province was Quirinius. Tucked away in one corner of his province was a tiny little kingdom of Judea, with Herod as its king.

When Caesar Augustus decided on the census, messengers on horseback galloped along the famous Roman highways carrying the new law north and south. At the same time, fast galleys left the Roman ports to take the message across the seas. One of them would arrive in Syria, and Quirinius would sub-delegate King Herod to carry out the census in his land. Herod, who owed his kingship to the Romans, would be only too eager to oblige.

These enrollments were usually made in the places where the people lived. But the Jews had a different custom, and it had always been the policy of the Romans to respect the local habits and customs of conquered nations. Since ancient times the Jews had been divided into tribes. To each tribe belonged a certain county of Judea/Samaria with a family headquarters.

Joseph belonged to the tribe of Judah and to the house and family of David. The place where David the king had been born and raised was Bethlehem, which later became the headquarters of the House of David. When, therefore, on a certain winter day a messenger came to Nazareth, the little town of Galilee, reading aloud to all the men the imperial decree, “all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child” (Luke 2:3–5).