

Oil
OF
Joy

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Joy

ELIZABETH HILL CUTTING



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“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me...
to grant to those who mourn...
the oil of gladness instead of mourning ...
—Isa. 61:1,3.

Dedication

To my mother, Anna Elizabeth Viehweg Hill.

She has been an inspiration to me, and to others,
because of her abiding faith in God's leading in her life.

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CHAPTER ONE

Anticipation

“I hope Mary knows what she’s doing. My Nathan says she’s being very foolish to go to Jerusalem right now.”

As Mary approached the small stream where the village women did their laundry, she heard Judith, one of her neighbors, speak these words. She stopped, hoping Judith would elaborate on Nathan’s statement.

“I know,” agreed another voice, which Mary also recognized. It was Rebekah, wife of the innkeeper and someone she always considered a friend. “We had a caravan from that direction stop by the inn last night. They wanted to get to Zippori before evening, but it got too late. They had to settle for little old Nazareth. But anyway, where was I? Oh yes, Zadok had asked one of the men about Jesus, as he does every time anyone comes into town. He was always fond of him and likes to know where he is and what he’s doing. He’s so ashamed that Jesus can’t feel welcome and comfortable in his own hometown anymore, to

say nothing of wishing he could see him again himself and talk with him as he used to do until three years ago.”

Judith, impatient that Rebekah might ramble away from the subject as she was prone to do, demanded, “What did he say—this man from Jerusalem?”

“He hadn’t seen him. Jesus doesn’t stay anywhere for long, you know. But he certainly had heard some strange things. It seems Jesus has got the whole Sanhedrin in a dither. One of the drivers told Zadok all kinds of things that he’s heard about a man named Jesus.”

“What kinds of things?” Judith asked.

“It seems he’s causing the temple authorities problems over matters like working on the Sabbath, forgiving sins, religious authority—things like that. You know Jesus’ reputation for healing people. Sometimes it happens to be a Sabbath day when he heals. That’s upsetting in itself to the scribes and Pharisees. Even worse, though, according to this driver, Jesus has been heard to tell people their sins have been forgiven. And as if that isn’t bad enough—this may not have been true since the caravaneer had been drinking much wine and could have been addle-headed...”

“What, what?” Judith grew impatient with Rebekah’s conversational side trips.

“Sorry. The caravaneer said something about Jesus raising a man from the dead, a man who had been in his tomb already several days.”

“Oh, my! That must be what Nathan was thinking about. When he came back from Jerusalem last week, he said that Jesus had gone too far. The chief priests and the Pharisees have decided something drastic needs to be done before he causes real damage. They are afraid people will reject their faith to follow a magician who can take away all their troubles in some strange and supernatural way.”

Mary could stand it no longer. “Good morning, Judith, Rebekah.”

She walked toward the water and thumped her clothes basket down on the ground. As she dipped a garment into the water and began vigorously rubbing it, she asked, “How does Nathan know of this decision?”

Rebekah and Judith looked at each other sheepishly.

Eyes downcast, Judith said, “Mary, I’m sorry. We didn’t know you were there.”

“I’m sure of that, and I know you both well enough to know that you are only concerned for me. But I mean to go to Jerusalem tomorrow. It is too important to me to stay home because of a few rumors.”

“Well, maybe it is just rumors,” Judith conceded.

“I am positive that’s all it is,” Mary stated vehemently.

She continued, “I still want to know what makes Nathan so sure the things he heard are truth and not rumor, that the chief priests want to take measures against Jesus. What authority do those have who told him this?”

Judith responded. “When Nathan finished selling his loomed linen cloth in the bazaar, he went to the temple as usual. It’s such an exciting place for him, so different from quiet little Nazareth—so many people coming and going—so much happening there all the time, and news from all over. Anyway, he walked over to the Royal Porch so he could listen to the rabbis teaching. On the other side of one of the columns he heard some Pharisees talking and stopped when he heard Jesus’ name. Even though they tried to control their voices, he could still hear the agitation. And they said these things—that something had to be done about Jesus.”

“Well, maybe it’s all just talk,” Rebekah offered. “After all, what can they do but reprimand him if they think he’s gone beyond the bounds of religious acceptability? He hasn’t done anything that would deserve punishment, I’m sure. He isn’t

a murderer or a blasphemer. He's done only good things that help people. The problem is, though, that our religious leaders do have the last word, and they obviously consider his behavior improper."

"Do you think he behaves improperly?" Mary directed her gaze first at the one, then the other, watching their faces for any flicker of the real truth of what they thought.

Judith and Rebekah were obviously uncomfortable. Mary knew they wished they hadn't been so outspoken in such a public place, and that they didn't want to hurt her feelings, especially not Rebekah. She and Zadok had been very good to her family following Joseph's death. Zadok had taken upon himself a measure of responsibility for Jesus, who as a teenager had suddenly found himself head of a household. Zadok's counsel had been welcome as well as helpful.

"Well, we've never seen him do any of these things we hear about," Judith hedged, "so maybe it's just exaggeration by people who are jealous of his popularity. We can't really judge for ourselves because here in Nazareth we have only what he said in synagogue when he visited that once..." Her voice trailed off to nothing because she had said too much once again. Inadvertently she had brought up a subject that would be painful to Mary.

"Yes," Mary murmured mournfully. "That's all we in Nazareth have." She thought, *Jesus was right when he said, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country." Everywhere else the wonders of his special work are known, people are healed, but not here in Nazareth.*

Rebekah and Judith had finished their laundry. Mary knelt, vehemently beating a garment with a small laundering club. She rid herself of the anger and frustration that had been rising within her even more than she rid the cloth of any dirt that might lurk there. Rebekah walked over to Mary, took her elbow, and lifted her to her feet. Embracing her, she said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all that you have endured, and I'm sorry for any additional

pain I may have caused you. Go in peace to Jerusalem, and God go with you.” As she spoke, she tightened her hug.

Mary responded to the embrace, saying with tears in her voice, “Thank you, Rebekah. And don’t fret; all will be well. I know it in my heart.”

Judith joined them, saying, “You are fortunate to be celebrating Passover in Jerusalem. I too am sorry for my rash words. Please forgive me, and go in peace.” Then the two women left Mary alone with the remainder of her laundry and her troubled thoughts.

Mary mentally rehashed all that had just been said, all that she had heard before, and all that she herself knew to be true. She realized that whatever anyone said, there was truth in all of it. The chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees were unhappy, no doubt about it. But she could give no place to fear because Jesus was doing what he had been born to do. What a pity that the Nazarenes could not have experienced Jesus’ healing and teaching.

They had nothing except Jesus’ words, the words he used to proclaim that God had sent him to them. Who could forget those words? Everyone was so proud of Jesus in that moment, a young man from their own hometown, called by God to care for them—to heal them, to aid the poor among them, to release them from the bondage of Rome. What a glorious moment. Then in an instant Jesus turned it all upside down. His next words implied that the Gentiles would receive these gifts.

The congregation understood that the Jews were in covenant with God. If any people should have God’s blessings, it was the Jews—not the pagan Gentiles. The healing ministry of the anointed one was for them. Isaiah couldn’t have meant anything else. It was such abomination to all the people gathered there that they turned against him in hot anger. They would have killed him had he not miraculously escaped from their grasp as they pushed him toward the brow of a steep hill.

The memory of those awful moments rekindled the fear and the sorrow that she felt at that time. It had not been easy living in Nazareth these three years, knowing what the villagers had tried to do to Jesus. She had done her best to heed her son's advice to forgive those who hurt her. At the same time she appreciated those who had remained loyal to her family, especially Judith and Nathan, Rebekah and Zadok.

Because of that day, she thought, Jesus has not been back to Nazareth to do any of his wonderful works among those who watched him grow up, watched him become a fine young man. How sad this is for all of us.

Mary labored on, soaping her clothes, beating them, rinsing them, expelling anger along with the soil. As she worked, she felt calmer. Her thoughts turned to that day long ago before she was even married. She knew she had more than mere words. She had a promise, a promise from God himself. Gabriel, angel of the Lord God, had come to her to tell her she was to have his Son, a special child to whom the Lord would give the throne of his ancestor David, and he would reign forever. She wasn't sure how Jesus' work and the throne of David had anything to do with each other. But she knew the angel was truthful, and she knew God would keep his word. He would not let anything happen to Jesus. No matter what anyone said or believed, Jesus could not be prevented from doing the work God sent him to do, not even by the Sanhedrin itself.

Having completed her task, Mary picked up the basket, heavier now than when she had come to the stream, but her footsteps were as light as they had been before she overheard Rebekah and Judith. She was not going to let their idle gossip, derived from rumors, spoil her anticipation of what lay ahead.

When Mary reached home, she hurried up the outside steps to the roof and hung her clean laundry over the wall to dry. She knew it would take less than an hour, and then she could pack it away for her journey. She hurried downstairs and put into the

oven the loaves she had set to rise early that morning, then set about gathering the food that she would take to eat along with her bread—dried fruit, olives, cheese, and some thin wine in a leather wineskin.

As she put it all into a small covered basket, she thought about how she would pass the remainder of the day. She knew she would have to rest in the afternoon. She would be tired from the morning's work. Besides, she could accomplish nothing in the midday heat. After her rest she would see Jonathan to find out exactly what time he intended to leave the following morning and to pay him the final amount owed for the journey.

Then she would go to James' house where all the other children and their families would be gathered to share the evening meal together, to wish her a safe journey, and to plead with her one more time not to go. Yes, that would be part of it because they had not lost any opportunity to try to dissuade her from the journey. That thought brought a pang of pain back into her heart. It wasn't just other people in Nazareth who had rejected Jesus; it was also his own family. She knew he had been painfully aware of that fact because when he said a prophet wasn't honored in his own country, he had also added, not even in his own home.

James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, and their sisters had been embarrassed by Jesus' reputation and had reacted negatively in varying degrees. They had tried, especially James, to reason with him, to badger him, somehow to get him to give up his wanderings, his itinerant teaching. They too had heard the rumors from the south and were quite certain that Jesus was moving toward his own destruction. If Mary, their mother, went to Jerusalem and joined him there, she would also be in danger.

But I can't give it up, she thought. I have planned this for so long. I want nothing more than to be able to spend a little time with my eldest son whom I see too seldom. No, no matter what they say, I will not be put off.

She had no way to know of the terror she would face in one week's time.