

LMBC Choir reading Dec 2017

### [Jonah's Remarkable Christmas Journeys]

This is a story--in three parts—about a boy named Jonah and his remarkable Christmas journeys. It could have been about a boy named Finley or Eliot or Oswin because those are also some of my favourite names for boys. Or of course it could have been about a girl, perhaps a very special girl I know named Zuri... but I decided to make it about Jonah just because.

Some parts of the story haven't actually happened... yet... so I think that the story may be set a few years in the future... and it's also set in the past because it's about First Christmas ... and it has to be about the present, because everyone likes a present at Christmas. [That was kind of a joke.]

Jonah liked numbers... big! numbers... and he wasn't spoiled, but he did want numbers and things and events to be correct!... arranged the **right** way... which—usually—meant **his** way. He liked to learn new powerful words and he was curious and he liked to think about how things fit together—sometimes in very surprising ways. And he had a strong imagination.

One December, Jonah's class in Sunday school was given two assignments for the Sunday school church service. One assignment was to dress up like angels and shepherds and wise men and Mary and Joseph and a camel for a short pageant. The other was to memorize a prophecy about Jesus from the book of Isaiah. Everyone had a couple of lines to recite.

Jonah was to be a wise man and he had to start bugging Mom and scrounging around the house for something to wear so that he could look like a wise man. "What's a wise man? What'd they look like? What'd they wear? What'd they do?"

"They studied the stars. Hold still!" Mom said. Jonah was wearing one of her old bathrobes and she was trying to fix it somehow so it would fit.

“Arthur’s a shepherd and he’s wearing a bathrobe too. Did everybody in the Bible wear bathrobes?”

“Not angels. They wore white cotton smocks and tinsel on their heads. There. Go memorize your lines.”

Because he was a wise man now with his own faded red bathrobe, Jonah started to get curious about stars and space... about the universe. He wanted to get a better look at the universe—at the stars—so he decided to take a trip. He took the ETS to the airport—called EIA and sometimes YEG—and Jonah flew to Florida... Orlando—he knew where to go because his grandma and grandpa had gone to Florida once and they met a real astronaut at Cape Canaveral. Cool! But... when he arrived in Orlando, Jonah almost chose to go to Walt Disney World instead—it was a very difficult decision—but he explained to himself that he was in Florida to see real things... so he remained true to his mission and went to Cape Canaveral.

Jonah needed to catch a ride on a freight rocket up to the International Space Station. He was counting on his cute smile to get him what he needed. It always worked on Grandma and it worked in Cape Canaveral as well. The blast-off and journey to outer space were quite routine and he arrived safely at the space station. Before he left home, Jonah had told his parents where he was going so they wouldn’t worry. As he walked out the front door his dad called out to him, “Don’t forget to contemplate as you circulate!” But the first thing that he did up in the station was to look out the window to find Edmonton. “There! That must be Edmonton!” A Russian astronaut did a lazy double backflip over to Jonah’s window. “Da. Ed-mon-ton. 99, 97.” And he chuckled. Jonah had to think about those numbers for a little while. On the next orbit Jonah looked for Calgary. “Cal-ga-ry. Nyet,” said the Russian. It was true. Calgary and Vancouver and all of British Columbia, in fact, were covered by a soggy blanket of drizzle and smog. “Ohh... that’s **really** too bad!” said Jonah’s grandpa when he heard about it later, because he was a kind man who wanted everybody to live a happy sunny life even if they cheer for the Flames or talk as if BC is the only place in Canada where you can live contentedly. Grandpa felt strongly about some things.

Jonah did remember to contemplate. He contemplated the moon and Venus and Mars and Saturn (I think) and the Milky Way. He tried to count the stars but there were just too many. It was all very cool! ("You could say *majestic* or *awe-inspiring* if your Language Arts teacher makes you write about your trip after Christmas," Jonah's mom advised.)

Jonah got back home from outer space just in time for the Sunday school program. He stood up on the platform at the front of the church in his mom's bathrobe along with other members of his class in their bathrobes. Even the camel looked bathrobey. It was time to recite the prophecy:

Isaiah 9:6-7

<sup>6</sup>For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.

**[Now came Jonah's lines.]**

And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

[The others continued.]

<sup>7</sup>Of the greatness of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.  
The zeal of the LORD Almighty  
will accomplish this.



Jonah enthusiastically discussed his outer space adventure with family and friends and anyone else who would listen. But something was missing. "It felt cool...awe-inspiring up in space. But I couldn't count the stars. I want to know exactly how many." "Research!" said Mom, who spent most of her life researching things.

Jonah went online to get the newest numbers about the stars and visited several sites just to make sure (just like Mom told him to). Sometimes he got confused by numbers written in ways that he didn't recognize... but finally he was ready. He got a stack of paper from Mom's study downstairs and a black marker from a drawer in the kitchen. On the first sheet of paper he put a big ONE for the number of stars in the solar system—just one. Then he started to add zeros for all the other stars in our galaxy—the Milky Way. Two more zeros on the first page—one hundred stars. Three more zeros on the second sheet—one hundred thousand stars. Three more zeros on the third sheet—one hundred million stars. He wasn't done yet. Fourth sheet—three more zeros—one hundred billion stars in the Milky Way!

Jonah stopped to take a breath and looked back at the notes that he had made... and saw that instead of just 100 billion there might be 200 billion or 400 billion or even 500 billion stars in the Milky Way. Jonah made a face, but he didn't go back and change the number on his sheets; he just went on with the rest of the universe. If each galaxy has about 100 billion stars and there are one hundred billion galaxies.... This was tougher than math at school. In the end he just added the number of zeros that the net told him to add—he had a ONE followed by 22 zeros on eight sheets of paper.

"Dad, one site says that I should have 24 zeros. What's the difference?" (Dad's a teacher.)

"I guess not even astronomers know the number of stars for sure. But those zeros do make a difference. Like if you ask Grandma how many cookies you can

have on Christmas day, and she says, 'No more than ten (one zero)... or a hundred (two zeros)... or a thousand (three zeros).'"

"Grandma would give me a thousand!" Jonah said. "Grandpa would give me ten... and he'd eat most of them...."

"But he'd say it was for your own good," Dad said. Dad knew Grandpa pretty well.

Then Dad made a rare mistake. (At least Mom thought so.) He told Jonah that some astronomers and physicists think that there may be more than one universe—lots of universes. Jonah got angry and threw his marker on the floor and started to tear up the sheets of paper with his numbers on them. "Whoa... whoa. It's okay," said Dad to Jonah (and to Mom). "Pick up the marker and get the scotch tape. Why are you so angry?" (But Dad could guess.)

"How many universes are there? I'll NEVER get the right number of stars!" Jonah whined, almost in tears.

"You'd better talk to Grandpa about it. Now he's retired he can watch programs about the universe and even read books—all words, no pictures."

"But he can't explain them afterwards," said Mom (which was mostly true, but not mostly nice). "He says so himself," added Mom when Dad gave her a look.

Jonah facetimed Grandpa. "Well, there may be other reasons for some astronomers to look for other universes, but I think that the big reason is that this one works so well. Why is that a problem?" he went on before Jonah could ask. "You see, some people think that for this universe to work so well there must be lots and lots—and lots!—of other universes that don't work well." Jonah was beginning to think that Mom was right about Grandpa not being a very good explainer.

"Anyway, don't worry about those other universes," Grandpa said. No one knows for sure about them. Oh, and some other people think it is highly probable that our universe works because it's one humungus video game.... I don't think much

of that idea myself... but if it turns out to be correct, then when you grow up you can figure out who designed the game and ask the designers who designed them.”

“Thanks, Grandpa...”

“One more thing for you to research.... We’re really proud of the research that you’ve done so far. But see if you can find out... *Are there more stars in the heavens above than grains of sand on all the shores of all the seven seas on Earth below?*” Grandpa’s voice was getting kind of sing-songy and dreamy.

“Grandpa, it’s getting close to Christmas and I’m going on another trip and I have to get ready,” and Jonah said goodbye before Grandpa could ask any questions or explain anything else or assign any more homework.

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After the Christmas Eve service at church, Jonah was ready to start his journey to First Christmas in Bethlehem. A donkey or camel would have been helpful, but Jonah didn’t know where to borrow or rent a donkey or camel—he had checked the zoo website—no. So he had to walk to First Christmas... and because of that he was a little late. It was still dark, but just light enough so that Jonah could see house shapes and what was that big, humpy shape parked outside the stable? He knocked on the stable door. Jonah felt rather shy now that he had arrived.

After a minute or maybe more a man opened the door and a woman called, “Who’s there now, Joseph?” Joseph! Jonah’s friend next door was Joseph in a play at school and had to learn about him. He said that nowadays Joseph has to look after all the Catholics in Canada! Jonah didn’t attend a Catholic church, but he very respectfully shook Joseph’s hand and—with a little bow—greeted this good, important man: “How’s it goin’ eh?” Jonah asked very slowly and clearly... so that Joseph could learn how to talk to Canadians in the future.

Inside the stable there were cows and a donkey and, by the light of one lantern, Jonah saw a wise man who had rushed ahead to be first. (“A Type-A wise man,” Dad explained later, which stood for astronomer or astrologer, Jonah thought.) The wise man knelt beside the manger. His head was stiffly tilted far back from looking up at the stars so much (Jonah thought they could have an interesting conversation later on) but the wise man leaned forward with his eyes on the manger.

In the next stall, beside a lying down cow, knelt a left-over, lingering shepherd (“Still drunk on wonder”—that was Dad’s later-on version. He read poems and even tried to write poems sometimes—“Bedazzled by angelic might and light and message.”) Jonah asked the shepherd about angels. .. because angels! Real ones! The shepherd muttered, “Multitude... multitude,” but he too kept his eyes on the manger.

Jonah knew how Mary would look because he had seen many pictures—paintings mostly—of Mary in a book at Grandpa’s. He looked around to see if there were any painters in the stable yet. He knew that Mary wouldn’t look cross or upset like some moms get sometimes—“Did she look calm and serene, perhaps?” asked Mom in a calm, serene voice.

“Well, she looked... serene... but way tireder”—“More tired” Mom corrected, “and extremely exhausted.”

“Serene, but way more tired than the paintings show.”

With Joseph’s help Mary struggled up from the straw where she was lying and started to rearrange some cloths in the manger.

Jonah looked towards Joseph for permission and then stepped forward in the empty stall toward the manger... and looked inside at the newborn baby. Mary paused in what she was doing with the cloths and Jonah saw a wrinkly red face, two cloudy dark eyes and one baby hand sticking out from the wrappings. Jonah wondered, *Could that small hand hold all the stars that he had found online?.... Could all those stars with all those zeros rest in this one baby hand?* And before

turning to go back home for Christmas morning, he reached out without thinking if it was okay... and he put his finger into the newborn hand. The baby grabbed his finger and held on—tight!—until it was time for Jonah to leave. (“It’s what babies do,” explained Mom.)

Later, when they arrived at Grandma and Grandpa’s home in the country for Christmas dinner, Jonah ran up the hillside flight of stairs to the front door, threw it open and shouted, “Merry Christmas, Grandpa! Grandma (he took a deep breath) Grandma, the Bethlehem baby held my hand!”

Richard Epp

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