

We Saw His Sermon on the Mount

A Play in One Act

by
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DEDICATION

For our nephew, Noah, with prayers for his healing.

STORY OF THE PLAY

In this play, six witnesses to the Sermon on the Mount recreate the experience for the early assemblies of Christians. In their recreation, witnesses take turns acting as Jesus, audience members, and narrators of the story. Though much more entertaining and humorous than most translations of the Sermon, Jesus's words in this version follow the original Greek word-for-word as much as possible so we can hear Jesus's words in the order that He spoke them. This word order demonstrates the warmth and cleverness that Jesus used to draw people into His message. To capture the feeling of being at the Sermon, the play uses terms that replicate what listeners of Jesus's era would have heard. This allows audiences today to hear these words in an exciting new way. The play uses many devices from classical Greek drama, but it is designed to be fun both for experienced actors and novices since the characters are, for the most part, novice actors themselves.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 m, 3 w)

TAMAR (W): The organizer of the group, a middle-aged Judean woman with a wealthy father living in Tiberias. She was an unmarried spinster at the time of the Sermon.

EZRA (M): A grey-haired leader of a community in a Judean sect called the Watchers (the Essenes).

DEMAS (M): A middle-aged Judean trained as a lawyer but coming from a family of tradesmen. He is a new member of the Distinguished (Pharisee) class.

ULLA (W): An older fisherwoman. She is widowed and lives in a fishing village. She provides the perspective of the Judean working class.

FESTUS (M): A young Greek, from a family in Decapolis, the non-Judean cities of the Galilee region.

PISCA (W): A young woman from a Judean shepherd tribe. She was a child and an outcast at the time of the Sermon.

CHILD: Small enough to lift. Optional audience volunteer.

NOTE ON CASTING

The play's characters are themselves amateur actors who take turns portraying Jesus and audience members. Since each character plays dozens of roles, including themselves and Jesus, each part has a lot of range for invention. In each scene, their roles change. Character names without a hyphen (EZRA, ULLA, etc.) are narrators. Those with a hyphen (EZRA/Jesus, ULLA/Spectator, etc.) are playing other characters at the Sermon.

Narrators and /Jesus are always onstage. Others move about the stage and audience as noted.

Cast playing spectators, disciples, and narrators should always encourage the audience to join them in laughter, applause, and chanting.

SETTING

The setting is an assembly of early Christians. The audience is Greek-speaking, but not Judean. Events occur approximately seven years after the resurrection.

STAGE, COSTUMES & PROPS

Stage is bare with front steps that audience members mount to be seen. Since characters play many roles, costumes and props are used to identify reoccurring characters and specific types of characters: sash/Jesus, white caps/the Distinguished, hoods/disciples, veil and pillow/Pisca's mother, red head-scarf/militant, club/guard, animal skins/ascetics, other head covers/other named sub-characters. Other props are a rock, a flower, a bread basket, loaves of pita, a wineskin, a large doll, sores (adhesive red rings), a pregnancy pillow, money bag with pennies, a tunic (shirt), a cup, vial of oil, cloth, a toy snake, and a pile of sand.

BACKGROUND

The actual words of the Sermon are only tantalizingly familiar. They are based on a new word-for-word translation from the original Greek of Matthew. This translation uses each Greek word's primary meaning at the time and, as much as possible, puts them in their original word order. The play reveals dimensions of Jesus's meaning lost in regular biblical translation. For more detailed information please visit: www.ChristsWords.com.

Scene 1

(EZRA and TAMAR on stage. OTHERS in shadows behind.)

EZRA: You have heard the words of the Sermon on the Mount, but do you know what happened there?

TAMAR: Over our years of travels, we witnesses have heard some fantastic tales: that the Teacher controlled the weather, conjured snakes, and raised a storm.

EZRA: These stories are all exaggerations of what happened, but let us start by introducing ourselves. First, the woman who started our group of witnesses, Tamar.

TAMAR: Why is the Sermon our most complete copy of the Teacher's lessons? Because my father hired court recorders to come with us that day to write down his words. After the Master's death and resurrection, my father and I began reading his words at assemblies like yours. My father wanted to make more copies of the Sermon, so he found Ezra.

EZRA: I was the leader of a Judean sect that copies our ancient texts. Tamar's father hired us to copy the Sermon, but he also needed someone to travel with his spinster daughter since he had grown too ill to do so. Since I had also witnessed the Sermon, I offered to accompany her myself and add my testimony to hers. As we travelled through Galilee, we met other witnesses to the Sermon *(Indicating those behind them.)* who became part of our group. *(Other ACTORS wave.)* They will introduce themselves as we proceed. One of those witnesses was *(With disgust.)* an actor!

TAMAR: This actor, Festus, *(FESTUS bows in background.)* is a Greek, not a Judean. He suggested that we could recreate the Sermon like a play instead of just describing it.

EZRA: In reading the Nazarene's words, you might think that he was giving a speech, a monologue. But mostly he was answering people's questions and reacting to what people said and events that happened.

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TAMAR: But my father's recorders just wrote down the Teacher's words. As witnesses, we try to recreate the entire event, what others said and did to create the context for those words.

EZRA: We each take turns explaining what was happening as the Master spoke and the reactions of the crowd.

TAMAR: We recite the Nazarene's words, and the words of the audience members who asked him questions.

EZRA: We also repeat our own words, since most of us spoke with the Nazarene during the Sermon.

TAMAR: For this recreation to work, we ask you to play the part of the crowd that heard him speak.

EZRA: Chanting, laughing, applauding. We laughed a lot that day. And we hope everyone here will laugh as well. It was such a fun day!

TAMAR: Since none of us can really capture the Teacher, we take turns reciting his words and imitating his actions.

EZRA: The Nazarene was an everyman, average height, looks, and clothes, but so full of joy that it was infectious.

TAMAR: And so clever and entertaining! He never just said a word when he could act it out.

EZRA: What we lack in individual skill to portray him, we make up for in our numbers. We each will give you our version of the man's words and actions.

TAMAR: (*Holds up the sash.*) Since we take turns, we wear this brightly colored sash when we recite the Teacher's words.

EZRA: We will also wear different hats (*Showing hats.*) when portraying others who were there that day.

TAMAR: So, join us as we travel back to that day at Seven Springs.

End of Scene

Scene 2

(LIGHTS up. TAMAR is alone onstage.)

TAMAR: Seven Springs is a hillside along the Galilee with rocks *(Places rock on stage.)*, wildflowers *(Places flower.)*, sandy soil *(Dumps pile of sand.)*, and scrubby little bushes. A well-known meeting site, the Teacher's heralds had spread the word that he would be speaking there. My father and I arrived early and saved space for the court recorders whom he had hired. Another of our witnesses, Demas, also arrived early with a mission.

DEMAS: *(ENTERS stage.)* I was sent out as a new member of a group called the Distinguished. In our language, the word for "distinguished" is "pharisee." We opposed the Nazarene and came to challenge his teaching or get him to say something against the Romans or the Tetrarch. I arrived early. My job was to save some good seats. I paid some beggars, widows, and orphans to hold this area right up front for us. *(Goes into front row, pretends to pay people including FESTUS.)*

TAMAR: The day was warm but overcast, with lots of clouds. People arrived steadily, reclining on the hillsides around the flat speaking area. However, one of our witnesses, Pisca, arrived more secretly.

(PISCA enters the stage far right with ULLA hidden in veil.)

PISCA: Hi. I am Pisca. I was just a child of ten at the time of the Sermon. One of the Master's students saw my mother and I standing off at a safe distance.

(EZRA in hood enters stage left and sees them. PISCA and ULLA cringe.)

PISCA: *(Cont'd.)* Instead of chasing us away, he brought us to a hidden place behind the speaking area.

End of Freeview

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