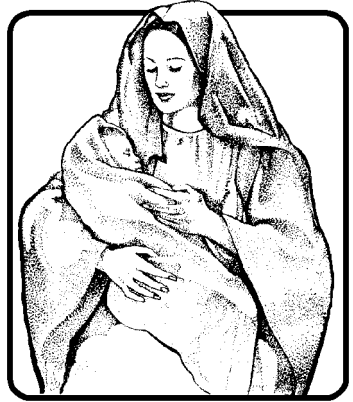


The following material is fiction based on Luke 2.8-20. To be prepared for class, you will want to read both the scripture and this story. Before your class session, compare the story with the scriptures and reflect on both the similarities and the differences.



Session Two

The Shy Shepherd

Today, I work in a shop near the center of Jerusalem but, when I was a much younger man, I worked as a shepherd in the valley between here and the village of Bethlehem. The valley spans an area of four or five miles between the city and the village and it is still called Shepherd's Field because it is always sprinkled white with grazing sheep.

My name is Judah. I was named that in memory of Judah, the fourth son of our great ancestor, Jacob. Judah was also the name of the tribe that originally settled the area around Bethlehem where I was born. It used to be called Judah, after the tribe, but now the Romans call it Judea. Of course, because of this, Judah is one of the most popular names around — almost as popular as David, who was also born in Bethlehem — and it seems like every other man you meet is named either David or Judah. I'm proud of my name but sometimes I wish I had been named Ahud or Hashub or another of the less popular Jewish names so I could stand out more and be less shy.

But, I've always been shy. When I was a shepherd, I used to like tak-

ing the night watch because I could stay out in the valley with the sheep and let my mind wander without having to talk to anyone. Of course, there were others on watch at the same time but, because I was one of the youngest, I usually had to take the “sheepfold seat” at night

The sheepfold was a stone corral with an open doorway into which the sheep were herded at night where they were easier to watch and safer from predatory animals. When you were assigned the “sheepfold seat” it meant that you had to sit or lie down at the doorway so the sheep would stay in the fold. The sheep would not step over you or go past you while you were there.

The sheepfold seat was considered the worst job on night watch because the others got to sit or sleep around the campfire where it was warmer. It also smelled better where they slept because it was several feet upwind of the fold. But, I sort of liked the sheepfold seat because I could sit quietly, watch the stars, and let my mind wander. Sometimes I would think about girls and about who I would marry and about what it would be like to make babies. Other times I would think about my future, whether I would always be a shepherd or whether I would move away to the city. And, sometimes I would think about God and all the religious rules we had to follow.

I also liked being alone because I didn’t have to worry about getting picked on by Noah, the big shepherd from the Zechariah family who made life miserable for those of us who weren’t as strong as he was. Whenever I was together with the group, he seemed to focus most of his meanness on me, probably because I was the smallest and didn’t talk to the others much.

I especially want to share with you about what happened one night when I was about fifteen and on watch at the sheepfold. It was in the middle of winter and it was cold. In fact, early in the night a little snow had fallen, just enough to lighten the ground for a few minutes and then melt away. That’s about as much snow as we ever got there in the valley. Nothing like the winter snowfalls we get sometimes up here in Jerusalem.

I was sitting with a blanket wrapped around me and my friend, a little goat that I called Joshua because he always tried to attack things. Even though he was the smallest goat anybody had seen, kind of a runt, he was so brave that he tried to butt any person or animal that came around me. Once when Noah was pushing me toward the water, Joshua ran at him with his head bowed low and hit Joshua so hard on one knee that he fell

into a muddy area beside the stream. I was terrified that Noah would cut Joshua's throat but he didn't.

Joshua had been given to me as a pet by old Simon, the leader of our group of shepherds. He told me the goat was such a runt that he wasn't worth anything so I might as well have him. But, I think Simon really just thought I needed a friend. Joshua was the only thing in the world that was truly mine. On that cold night, he was snuggled against me under the blanket and I was rubbing his ears and thinking how much I loved him.

Around midnight, the sky cleared and the stars and moon made the night so bright that you could see all over the valley. Campfires flickered across the landscape as far as you could see. Each represented a cluster of shepherds on night watch near their sheepfolds. You see, this valley was a very special place for sheep production. In addition to providing wool and mutton throughout the year, it was the primary source of the spring lambs that were sold in the Temple in Jerusalem for Passover. They had to be perfect lambs, without any blemishes, so that when they were sacrificed in the Temple and eaten at Seder meals, they would be the most pleasant to God.

Away in the distance, across on the other side of the valley, you could see the outline of Jerusalem sitting on the top of the mount. The lights of the city sparkled softly like a lot of little coals in a dying fire and the two Temple towers filled with burning oil looked like two bonfires on the edge of the night sky.

I was still leaning against the wall of the sheepfold, dozing in and out of sleep and nuzzling Joshua, when there was a burst of great light in the sky. It was so bright that it hurt my eyes. It was yellow and red and white and blue and — well, it seemed as if it was every color I had ever known! I thought maybe I was dreaming but the rest of the shepherds came running from the campfire to help protect the sheep from whatever it was. They were frightened and shouting and most had their swords and cudgels out ready to fight.

Only old Simon was calm. He said to the others, "Listen! Listen! That's not an enemy. We don't have to be afraid. Listen to the sounds."

We all quieted down some and, sure enough, from the middle of the burst of light there were sounds like a bunch of people singing. No, I'm not joking, it sounded like people singing, like a huge choir backed up by harps and trumpets and drums! We were still terrified but, gradually, all of the weapons were eased back into their sheaths or laid on the ground.

Only old Simon seemed at peace. He sat down on a big rock with a broad smile on his face like this was an everyday occurrence. His eyes were wet and said, "It's a choir of angels and they are saying that the Messiah has been born right here in this valley, tonight."

"Simon, you old crazy!" said Noah bar Zechariah. "I see a light and I can hear something that sounds a little like music but I think you are beginning to show your age! Angels can come to people in the Temple over there in Jerusalem but they don't visit poor shepherds out here in this valley."

"Noah, if you had as much faith as you have bluster, you could hear them too," said Simon. "The voices are saying that a baby has been born over there near Bethlehem and he will be the Savior of the world."

"And, I'm going to be the next king of Judea!" shouted Noah as he threw a stone in old Simon's direction.

"Well, Noah, you can stay here and watch the sheep while the rest of us go and greet the Messiah."

We all sat for a few minutes and admired the beauty of the light and the sounds although I admit I never did hear any of the voices that old Simon had heard. The old man was strange and he often got off on religious tangents, telling us all how much better our lives would be if we spent more time studying the scriptures and less time thinking about ourselves and our women.

Finally, after a few minutes, the light and sounds subsided. With that, Simon pulled himself up with the help of his staff and started walking up the valley toward Bethlehem. I didn't know what I should do but, Noah, grumbling about old Simon, walked over and plopped himself down at the doorway of the sheepfold. The others were pouring water on the campfire and gathering up their things so I decided we were all going to Bethlehem to greet the Messiah!

I wasn't going to leave Joshua there alone with Noah so I put a rope around his neck to keep him from butting everybody and we set out. After walking for about an hour, we came to the hill on which Bethlehem sat. The side of the hill that overlooked the valley was sprinkled with caves from the time when a great river had flowed through and carved them out of the hillside. Most of the caves had been turned into shelters for animals that belonged to the houses and businesses in Bethlehem on the top of the hill.

This seemed a strange place for the birth of the Messiah so I assumed

that we would be going on up the path into the town someplace. But, old Simon seemed to know exactly where we were headed and it wasn't into the town.

After a few more minutes, we walked straight up to a cave with a crowd of people around it and Simon asked a fancy dressed woman who was kneeling like she was praying, "Woman, is this where the new baby is?"

She nodded and pointed, "He's in there. But, you shepherds are pretty grimy to be greeting God's anointed! You smell bad and you should bathe and change clothes before going in."

Simon answered her, "If this baby is the Messiah, he will like my clothes covered with dung just as much as yours covered with perfume." He boldly moved straight toward the mouth of the cave with the rest of us following. After the woman's comment, I didn't know what to do with Joshua. I didn't want to leave him outside where he might be stolen and butchered but I didn't think I should take him inside either.

Simon looked at me as if he could read my mind and said, "Judah, bring that ornery goat of yours right in with you. This cave is the stable for the hotel up in town and there will be lots of smelly animals inside, some probably just as cantankerous as yours.

So, Simon, three other shepherds from the group that had seen the light on the hillside, and I all walked through the doorway into the cave. As Joshua smelled the insides of the cave, he pulled back on the rope not wanting to go in but a couple of scratches behind his ears and he was ready. Inside the cave there were lots of people crowded around. Many of them were dressed like rich people from the city. There were some foreigners from the east with more elaborate clothing than anything I had ever seen before. There were merchants from up in the town and a lot of people that I didn't recognize. I even saw some Sadducees and Pharisees, probably from Jerusalem, who stood out because of their strange religious clothing.

Everyone was looking toward a spot against one wall where a man stood with his arm around a girl not much older than me. She was seated in the straw and had tears in her eyes. But, even with tears sliding down her cheeks, she was smiling softly and gazing at a baby that was suckling at her breast.

The room was quiet except for sounds that some of the animals were making in the background. One by one, the people walked up to the girl

holding the baby. Each one bowed down and placed a gift in front of her. And, what magnificent gifts they were! Some were bags of coins. Others were elaborately decorated chests of gold and jars of perfume and expensive oils. The gifts of the three foreigners were the biggest and most elaborate of all.

When it came our turn, Simon led the way. He bowed down and uttered a prayer of thanksgiving about this being the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ who had come as Savior to the world. It was the most beautiful poem I had ever heard. The girl with the baby smiled at him as she reached out and put her hand on his head. Simon reached into his girdle for his purse. He opened it to take out a few coins but then closed it tight and laid the full purse on the ground in front of him.

I was next and suddenly I knew that I was truly in front of the Messiah, the Son of God, and that it was really something special to be able to be in his presence. I didn't know any beautiful poems. I didn't even have a purse let alone any gold coins. My clothes were ragged and smelled of sheep and goats and dung. But, when I walked up to her, the girl smiled tenderly at me as she moved the baby boy away from her breast and covered herself. She held the baby out toward me and as I touched his cheek with the back of my hand I felt a strange surge of warmth and power flow through me.

I tied Joshua's rope to the manger beside the girl and slowly backed out of the cave, filled with a joy like nothing I had ever felt before.

Reflection Questions

- 1. Luke's account of the Christmas miracle may well be the most familiar piece of scripture in the Bible. And, yet, because of its poetic brevity, the details of what happened that night are left largely to our imaginations. Does this very human story of a shepherd boy's encounter with the Christ enhance or detract from the majesty of the original story for you?*
- 2. The appearance of the host of angels to the shepherds is endearing and beautiful but it is also one of the more difficult things for rational moderns to accept. What does the appearance of the angels in Luke's story say to you about the meaning of Jesus' birth?*
- 3. There are no references to Jesus' birth anywhere else in the New Testament. Why do you think the only place the birth of Jesus is mentioned is in Luke and Matthew?*