

By David Takle

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I have always enjoyed reading the Christmas story as told by Luke. One of the things that makes it fascinating is that he has so many details in there that no one would have known except Mary. We get to hear very personal interactions between her and Elizabeth, the details surrounding the birth of John, and the extraordinary experience that was related to her by the shepherds. No one other than Mary could have known these things. And she either shared them with Luke personally when he was doing research for his book, or else she told these stories to the disciples and they gave them to Luke.

In reading the story again this year I was really captivated by all the drama that surrounded people who otherwise would have continued to lead rather quiet lives. But as I thought about all that transpired there, one thing in particular kept coming to the forefront.

Why shepherds?

Why are there shepherds in the story at all? At first take they seem rather out of place. I mean, do they really belong there? Are they only included to show us how God cares about marginalized people? Seems like there has to be more to it than that. Why would God go to so much trouble to make sure shepherds were included in the story?

If we back away a little to gain some perspective, the first thing we might notice is that these were no ordinary shepherds. As it turns out, the shepherds that lived and worked near Bethlehem actually had a very important job. You see, Bethlehem was only about five miles from Jerusalem. That is less than a two hour walk for an old guy like me. So it's not that far away. And what's more, the shepherds in that area raised the sheep that were used in the Temple.

What all of that means is that these shepherds were not just trying to make a living out in the hills around the city. They were well trained in how to take special care of the sheep and how to spot any blemishes and how to confirm which were the best sheep for the Temple priests to examine. Which means they were really an integral part of the whole process of atonement that was needed in order to maintain the covenant between God and the nation of Israel.

But there is even more here. These shepherds were also very close to an incredibly important part of their nation's history. And to make this point, I invite you to enter the story with me to see how this history might have played out on the hills around Bethlehem, over and over throughout the years.

Imagine if you will a campfire. The sheep have mostly settled down for the night, and the shepherds are all sitting around the fire, sharing their bread and tea and talking about their day. Then when things start to get really quiet, one of the younger shepherd boys asks, "Grandpa, tell us some stories about David!"

All eyes turn to the older man, anticipating a good heart-warming tale, as the shepherd is well-known for his ability to tell stories. He waits for just the right moment, looks slowly around the circle and says, "About 1,000 years ago, before he ever became king of Israel, David was a shepherd boy just like you. In fact," pointing to one of the younger boys, "he probably sat right where you are sitting, watching his father's sheep. It's true. And sometimes at night when everything was done for the day, he would pull out his little stringed instrument and write songs that we still sing to this day."

"I know, I know!" says the younger lad. "The Lord is my Shepherd! That's my favorite."

"That's right," says the older man. And they all begin to sing together in that slow, solemn way of the Jewish songs, "The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. Even if I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil. For You are with me. Your rod and staff comfort me ..."

After a few minutes of silence, the old man continues. "Of course we know that David also grew up to be the greatest King that Israel ever had. He was a good man and very fair. He cared for the nation just like he cared for the sheep when he was a boy. And you know what? The story doesn't end there does it? Because some day ... one of David's descendants will be born right here in Bethlehem ... and he will grow up ... and he will become Messiah, a new King over all of God's people."

At this point, the tension is getting to be too much for the young shepherd boy, and he cannot help himself. He interrupts the old man again and says, "Tell us again what Micah said about the new King!"

Now I know it is fashionable to think of these shepherds as ignorant and simple folk. But we forget that they had a very strong oral culture, and even the lowliest among them could probably recite far more scripture from memory than most people today. And for these shepherds, nothing spoke more directly to their hopes and dreams than the prophet Micah. For that reason alone, it is not much of a stretch to believe they knew most of that book by heart. So when the young shepherd boy asked the old man to tell them about the King that would one day come to them, he was referring to a passage that was near and dear to each one of them. So the old man begins to recite the well-known prophecies ...

"As for you, Bethlehem, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth from Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity. Then the remainder of His brethren will return to the sons of Israel. And He will arise and shepherd His flock In the strength of

the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God. And they will remain, because at that time He will be great To the ends of the earth.”

“Tell us about the tower! Don't forget the tower!” The young shepherd can hardly contain himself.

Because from where they were sitting, they could probably see the famous tower, a well-known landmark on the road toward Jerusalem, about one mile outside of Bethlehem. In Hebrew it was called, Migdol Eder, literally, “tower of the flock.” Perhaps there was a tiny light in the upper story that could be seen a long distance away in the dark of night. But again, this was no ordinary tower. As the old man continued to recite from Micah, the wonder of it all must have gripped everyone who listened.

“As for you, tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, To you it will come, even the former dominion will be restored, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem.”

At this point I imagine the group fell silent, the hope of a new King left ringing in their ears and in their hearts. Wondering when that might be, and whether they would be the ones to see it some day.

This is why the shepherds who lived around Bethlehem were a lot more than just representatives of the downtrodden and poor. They grew up hearing rich stories about their hero David, who was once a shepherd himself. They dreamed of a future King who would come from the town they could see from where they sat. And every day they worked among sheep who would soon become the means by which the people would be cleansed and receive new life.

So by the time we get to the story of Christmas, Bethlehem is a major icon on God's desktop. If you open this folder, all kinds of things come spilling out, like drama, metaphors of shepherds and sheep, full of meaning and hope. We have David who grew up there and became the prototype of a shepherd-king. The sheep in this folder provide cleansing atonement that brings people back into a covenant relationship with God. Bethlehem is so brim-full of meaning, it would truly be impossible to have a Christmas story *without* the shepherds! They are actually the *most* qualified of anyone to carry these images forward into the new era that is about to unfold.

And on this one very special night, as they sit around the campfire drinking olive leaf tea to keep warm, and tell stories of kings and towers and Micah's hope, the entire sky suddenly splits wide open, and angels show up by the thousands, telling them the most amazing thing they have ever heard:

*“Born this day in the city of David is a Savior, who is Messiah, the Lord.”*

This is right out of Micah! This is it! This is exactly what they were just talking about! We would be hard pressed to imagine how excited that little band must have been. And for all we know, they might have

headed straight for Migdol Eder as the first place to look. It would have been an obvious choice. There certainly would have been a manger in the lower level, and it was mentioned by name in Micah's prophecy. I don't know if they found Jesus there or had to keep looking. But when they found Him, they had quite a story to tell Mary and Joseph!

You gotta love the drama here! Maybe the shepherds even told Mary and Joseph what they knew about Micah's prophecy and how the angels made it all come alive when they announced the birth of their Messiah. And I cannot imagine what the shepherds must have thought about the setting, as they looked upon the new Shepherd-King laying there in a feeding trough.

Stepping back for a moment away from the story, we can find a great many passages in the Old Testament in which God's people are referred to as sheep or a flock. And when we get to the New Testament, Jesus Himself is referred to as both Lamb and Shepherd, and again, the people of God as His sheep.

Now God could have chosen any one of a thousand metaphors to describe His people. So why sheep? Mostly I have thought of sheep as fairly dumb, and in that sense the term seems rather demeaning. But then I have to ask if God could have really meant for this to be some kind of put-down. And given that Jesus was also called a lamb, that can't be what God had in mind.

I think the answer must be in some of the other main characteristics of sheep. They are in a word, needy. They are by nature weak and vulnerable creatures. They tend to wander ... are easily led astray ... have difficulty telling safe pasture from a dangerous surrounding. Without a shepherd they are totally defenseless. And when a wolf eyes a lone sheep, he thinks "lamb chops for dinner." Sheep truly depend on their shepherd for everything: food, water, and life itself.

We see this image especially in the passage where Jesus looked on the crowds with compassion, because "they were like sheep without a shepherd, distressed and miserable." We need Him for everything. And without Him we are nothing.

Yet the whole world is trying as hard as it can to be anything *but* a sheep! We strive for independence and autonomy. We hear about the importance of self-actualization and looking out for number one. But the truth is that all of this focus on what we can achieve by self-effort is diametrically opposed to our true nature. You see, we were *designed* to be dependent! It is our very nature to need someone bigger and stronger and wiser to depend on. It is in our very DNA. We need a Shepherd!

I mean, what sane person would go out into a flock of sheep and yell, "Shoo! Go do your own thing! Find your own path! Make something of yourself! Stand on your own two ... four feet!"

Truly it would be the death of any poor creature who followed that advice. The only meaningful choice for us is to get as close to the Shepherd as we possibly can! The best thing we can do is find ways to encourage and strengthen our *total dependence* on Jesus!

See, we often think of surrender as a really hard thing in which we have to give up something of ourselves in order to submit to God. But that's not it at all! To surrender is to become our true self, to embrace who we really were designed to be – totally dependent on God for food, water, and life itself. Surrender is the only meaningful way for a sheep to deal with who they really are. And once we “get” this, we are liberated in ways we cannot imagine while trying to be something other than a sheep.

### **Some final thoughts**

Just take a good look at the *other* sheep in the story. There is Zachariah who was struck mute because he could not believe Gabriel's words. We have his wife Elizabeth who was old and barren and ashamed of who she was in the community. There is Mary who was a teenager from a backwater town in Galilee which seemed to have had a bad reputation of sorts. And then we have a bunch of shepherds living a semi-nomadic lifestyle with nothing to show for it other than a few stories that were centuries old.

If anything, this tells us that we are *all* sheep. But the good news is that this is not an indictment. It is just simply who we are. And every day, we need to say out loud, “Today, Jesus, I want to be closer to You, my Shepherd.”

And miracle of miracles, God even asks us to help others get closer to our Shepherd as well. One of the things I love about Healing Center International is that everyone here is dedicated to getting closer to Jesus and more dependent upon Him, as well as helping others to get to know the Shepherd, too, learning how to lie down in green pastures and drink from quiet waters.

The whole reason for Christmas is that the Good Shepherd has come out of Bethlehem and calls us to be His own. Let me close with a passage from John 10: “I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep; and they will hear My voice, and they will become one flock with one Shepherd.”

My hope for this Christmas season is that we will truly accept how utterly vulnerable, needy, and prone to wander we really are. And that we will do whatever it takes to be closer to our Shepherd in the days to come.