



The Shepherds Story

From Luke 2, by Dr. Christine Taylor

[Please click here for the recording.](#)

My prayer is that the recording and the text will greatly bless you this Christmastide.

“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.”

They were not well thought of these shepherds. Sheep were the basis of the national economy. Milk, cheese, mutton, wool – a man and his family could live off a few sheep and the Temple’s sacrifices depended on a never-ending supply. The smaller flocks were looked after the owner and his sons, but the larger flocks were looked after by hired shepherds.

And these hired shepherds weren’t like the Christmas cards. It was the hired shepherds people couldn’t stand. Dirty and smelly from spending months in the grazing hills; rough, poor men who couldn’t find better work; cowards who all too often ran from the predators that threatened the sheep. These were the shepherds.

That night they split the watch with some sleeping while others watched. The half-wild dogs that accompanied the flock and drove away the predators slept uneasily nearby and stirred and stared every time one of the shepherds moved. Occasionally a sheep would start to wander at which point a shepherd would call its name and it would return. The sheep all had names, even the ones who were going to be sent to the Temple for sacrifice.

“An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”

Suddenly the surrounding hills burst into flame against the black night and roared with sound! This was *doxa*, the very radiance of heaven, the light of the face of God that kills any who look up it. Did not Moses and Ezekiel speak of this very thing? The shepherds thought they were dead and so did the animals – men screamed and shouted, sheep bleated loudly in terror, dogs barked wildly and snarled at the light.

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.’”

But then a great Voice sounded like a mighty bell. “Do not be afraid!” There was more than comfort in his words to break through their fear, for the power of God was with the great Angel and overlay the hillside. The men stopped shouting and stared, the sheep went quiet, the dogs sat down on their haunches and waited. And the Angel told them the Good News that was their joy, their delight and what would be their eternal song.

And what was the good news? That a baby has been born into the world, *born to you!* Born to these poor and reviled men; born to the sheep who had names and were doomed to die on the altar; born to the half-starved sheep dogs. He is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord – the *kurios*, the *adanoi*; great master of all the earth and sea and sky; ruler of the living and the dead.

“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

The angel didn't leave it at that. He gave them a sign: that a newborn is wrapped in the swaddling clothes of the newly born and is lying in an animal's feeding trough. Every one of those poor men could picture this since their own poor children may well have been born so. Already they knew the Lord, the Messiah, the glory of God; had not been born into a palace but was like one of them!

“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God, and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’”

Now the flames on the hillside and in the sky grew clearer and they were granted true sight: what looked like fire was thousands of angels glowing with the light of God; the angel army told in Joshua, in 2 Kings, in Psalms – and now witnessed by the poor rough men. That great heavenly army praised God in never-ending chants of praise, in the Great Song that was sung before our world began.

The shepherds’ hearts were filled with the glory of God! Every fiber of their being joined in the Great Song and sang with the angels. But now they realized that the words were not only the glory of God but something else, something else... God’s favor on them, the ragtag bunch of shepherds and sheep with their overgrown wool and the scrappy sheep dogs. God’s favor rested on *them* and on those like them in all the world.

“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ So, they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.”

One thing about poor men – they don’t feel a big need to impress anyone. They didn’t care if someone thought they were crazy. What they did care about was not leaving their sheep and dogs, partly because the dogs may have eaten the sheep! The shepherds called the sheep’s names and roused the dogs, not that the dogs needed the reminder. They were somersaulting with excitement. The whole kit and caboodle streamed down the hillside, the shepherds leading the flocks.

They got to Bethlehem, which lay at the bottom of the hill and hurried through the dark, narrow streets. Mighty Jerusalem was just 6 miles away and had stone streets but not little backwater Bethlehem. These men were from here and they knew where the stables were in town. Men and flock and dogs rushed up and down the little streets like a rising tide. Lanterns would have been lit from inside the dark little houses and confused voices called out. Did they think it was the Roman soldiers? But the shepherds did not stop, not until they found the stable they were searching for. They recognized it right away because it seemed to them that the glory they had seen in earth and sky was burning out of the small stable – a fire that did not burn but warmed them against the cold. They

would have entered a few men at a time, there wasn't room for more. Maybe they didn't mean to wake up the baby but couldn't help telling Joseph and Mary what they had seen in a babble of voices. "And then, and then, and then!" Something about angels and burning skies and armies and a song. And a Lord, and a Messiah, and a Savior – and a Shepherd born.

And the flock and dogs waiting outside? Some of the sheep may have followed their shepherds in. And I like to think that the dogs may have crept in too and slid close to the manger. Maybe the Holy Babe got a sloppy dog kiss that very night.

“When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.”

The shepherds didn't come or leave quietly. They didn't sneak in and out of town. Instead, the shepherds and their flocks and their dogs ran back through town again, not to search for the Child but to shout what had happened. Some people in the houses who had thought the shepherds were soldiers now listened to them with confusion and disbelief... after all, they were shepherds! They were drunk! What a disgrace! But others... did others believe? Did others creep through the night to the stable and see for themselves?

“But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”

She was just a teenaged girl. There was so much. There was the mighty Gabriel who had visited her and told her she would bear Messiah, God's own child. There was her terror at how to tell Joseph and his great hurt, and then the dreams that told him to marry her anyway. Her cousin Elizabeth bearing a child when she was old, and Elizabeth's husband being struck mute and then prophesying over that baby born. And the trip to Bethlehem and no room at the inn and bearing the baby in a stable and a whole bunch of excited shepherds babbling about angels and burning hillsides and Great Songs... so much. And God gave her the grace to bear it all.

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”

The shepherds returned to their lives, to their hills where they watched their flocks and flung food to their dogs. But they were changed, changed forever, changed by and to the glory of God – God the Father reigning in heaven, God the Son lying in a tiny manger, God the Spirit assuring them that even rude shepherds were made worthy to be friends of God.

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times....
He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.”
(Micah 5:2-3)*

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I'm so grateful that you listened to the recording and downloaded this PDF.

I first wrote “The Shepherds’ Story” as a Christmas cantata for my small church choir. The choir (me included) sang Christmas hymns between the sections.

I can't reproduce that, but I can bless others with the powerful and true Nativity story.

I would love you to join me in my Facebook group, [The Adventurous Christian Life](#). Adventure is out there! Join us!