

The Shepherds' Surprise: Christmas Day 2011 John Marcon

Isaiah 9: 2 – 3a, 6 – 7. Titus 2: 11 – 14. Luke 2: 1 - 14

You'd expect it from those religious types – all that hymn singing and stuff – all those hallelujahs and prayer meetings. As for all those folks in charge like Bishops and Rabbis, like Saints and religious old ladies - well if something was gonna arrive from heaven - wouldn't they be first in line – wouldn't they get a jump-start on the likes of us? I can tell you – some weren't happy when we got the message first, that's for sure – but I'll say this for them – when they looked into it they agreed that we were right.

Y'see, I'm a shepherd – as in 1st Century Israel. Now you might think that's a fine trade – caring for all those cuddly lambs 'n all - well maybe one day it will be but not now. The day-time shepherds are mostly old men and boys but - y'see we shepherds on the night shift – well we're the misfits and the outcasts – we're a bit strange and we've got a somewhat dubious reputation.

Regular folks don't admit to being our friends.

We keep unsociable hours; we have a tough and dangerous job nobody wants and because we have no land or proper trade we can't earn an ordinary living so we aren't too loved by the locals.

Shepherding at night is one of the few jobs on offer.

Take these hands – well they're more used to being fists – or holding a jug of cheap grog, fighting off wild animals and beating up sheep-stealers - that's what they're familiar with - rather than prayin' and all that stuff. So here we were out on a cold, clear star-studded night huddled around the fire.

We had the sheep rounded up and locked away in the pen but we couldn't really relax – a half starved fox or a gang of thieves could sneak up silent as the night itself.

We'd had so many nights like it - forgettable in the numbing cold or hard driving rain but we were about to have the most amazing experience of our lives - one we would never forget; one that would change us forever.

There was a sudden, blinding light in the sky. We all shook with fright, stunned and frozen to the spot. My mate Obed called out to me - "God, Jacob - what did you put in my wine!"

That was funny later but right then we were all terrified. Y'see - we're not a bunch that scares easily but we were paralyzed with fear – it seemed that the heavens had opened as if God were coming down to see us personally – we suddenly felt like confessing a very long list of sins - but all of a sudden we were interrupted.

A really extraordinary voice called out with great authority ...

"Don't be afraid!" - the voice came from an amazing heavenly being - an angel I guess – it spoke with such reassurance and hope that he really did take our fear away - we were just spell-bound with the wonder of it all. His cry rang out again echoing across the heavens like mighty thunder before a storm.

"Good News!"; his voice rang out. We didn't hear good news too often I can tell you –

"Good News! To you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour, Christ the Lord. This is how you will know. You will find a babe lying in a feed-trough."

Then a massed choir appeared and sang praises to God – a superb harmonious concert of a kind we could not have dreamed of and it filled the whole sky.

“Glory to God in the Highest”, they sang, “and peace to all people on Earth!”

Just as quickly it was all over and the stars and the bone-chilling darkness returned. We didn't know much about glory or peace. We tried to settle down again but we couldn't - something had happened to us. Sure - we'd heard what the old prophets had said, especially Isaiah telling about a child to be born and a son given with amazing names and titles but it wasn't until much later that we realized how everything fitted in. Finally we realized we couldn't just sit there. We said to each other ...

“Let's go to Bethlehem - it's not so far”. Strangely, we felt the sheep would be perfectly safe – we didn't hesitate so off we went.

The good citizens of Bethlehem weren't overjoyed to see us – it's odd that if you're on the fringes of society they can sense you coming. Mothers grab their children, men stand in front of women, upright citizens cross the road to avoid being contaminated by our company, - yet we finally found the stable and sure enough there was the baby with his mother and father amidst the cattle and sheep, the chickens and the goats. Everything looked - well – so alive yet so peaceful. Even the donkeys kept quiet. Later we got the family's names. Mary looked - well - very young yet serene and very happy. Joseph, her bloke – well he wasn't too pleased when we first appeared, standing very close and protective but he did allow us to come in. The baby was named 'Jesus' and sure enough there he was lying in the feed trough just as the angel had said.

There was something truly awesome and holy in that ordinary old barn.

We couldn't believe ourselves but we simply fell on our knees and worshipped this babe. We knew in our hearts that God had come to us – yes even to a bunch of hard-bitten old dead-end night-shift shepherds.

We knew we were in the presence of God, we were staring at our Saviour.

Later we learned that some scientists had come cruising through the desert on their flash camels all decked out in really rich threads. We heard they were astronomers and mathematicians loaded with the goodies and do you know what they did?

Exactly the same as us – high and mighty as they were they came in, fell on their knees and worshipped the baby Jesus! So there you are! From the opposite ends of society we met with Jesus.

It's a while ago now and a couple of our number has died but you wouldn't believe the peace they felt - we could see it in their faces. As you can see I'm pretty old but I watched Jesus grow up and saw him in action sometimes, always surrounded by a real mix of people – we don't know how long he will go on for or what will happen to him – he has certainly made powerful enemies among the religious bigots and the top dogs – there are even rumours that they'll try and get rid of him. He sets such an example of love and is not bothered by social or religious barriers; he just reaches out to everyone. He's equally happy with Jews and Gentiles, black people and white and all shades in between. He regards women and men as equals and equally loved by him and by God. No wonder the officials are worried. He is showing us that God is embracing everyone, welcoming them into the family, giving everyone the gifts of love and of grace, of freedom and joy - to the entire world.

Apart from that first revelation the greatest moment for those of us around today was to hear Jesus say

“I am the Good Shepherd - who gives his life for the sheep----”

You can't know how beautiful those words sounded to people such as us

He's *our* Shepherd forever – we hope and pray this Christmas, through the New Year and forever he will be yours as well.