

## **Angels and Shepherds - Simeon and Anna**

John Marcon at St. Francis, Titirangi

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*Luke 2: 8 - 38*

**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 folks that never miss worship - 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** – 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. 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're written off as no-hopers.

Shepherding at night is one of the few jobs we can get.

**Take these hands** – well they're more used to being fists – or holding a jug of cheap grog. They fight off wild animals and beat up sheep-stealers. Maybe they roll a few dice - that's what they're familiar with - rather than prayin' and all that stuff.

So here we were out on a cold clear night huddled around the fire.

**We had the sheep rounded up** and locked away in the pen just by a large cave – look I've even kept a piece of rock from just in front of it - but we couldn't really relax – a half starved fox or a gang of thieves could sneak up as silently 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 night - 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, 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 before we got started 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 - **“Good News!”**; we didn’t hear that very 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. We could recognize the words.

**“Glory to God in the Highest and peace to all people on Earth!”**

Just as quickly it was all over and the stars and the cold and the darkness returned. We tried to settle down again but we couldn’t - something had happened to us.

**“Let’s go to Bethlehem,”** we said – **“it’s not so far”**.

Strangely, we felt the sheep would be perfectly safe – we didn’t hesitate once the decision was made, so off we went.

**The good citizens of Bethlehem** weren’t overjoyed to see us – it’s odd but true that when 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 you - yet we finally found the stable and sure enough there was the baby with his mother and father amid 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 happy. Joseph, her bloke – well he wasn’t too pleased when we first appeared, standing very close and protective but eventually he invited us in. The baby was named ‘Jesus’.

**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 rich robes. We heard they were astronomers and mathematicians loaded with 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 have died but you wouldn't believe the peace they felt - we could see it in their faces. We who were younger then watched Jesus grow and we see him in action sometimes – we don't know how long he will go on for or what will happen to him – he's made powerful enemies among the bigots and the top dogs – there's 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 is showing us that God is embracing everyone, welcoming them into the family, giving us the gifts of love and of grace, of freedom and joy to the entire world.

For us the greatest moment apart from that first revelation was to hear him say ...

**“I am the Good Shepherd ----”**

You can't know how beautiful those words sounded to the likes of us.

Y'know we discovered that being believers in Jesus didn't make the nights any warmer, didn't tame the wild animals and certainly didn't stop those sheep-stealers from trying it on but it sure made a difference to our attitudes.

**We stopped blaming God and everyone else for our troubles** – sure we'd had the dirty done on us and life was pretty raw – but we found that with Jesus we could change ourselves – we stopped being bitter and angry at everyone.

We reckoned if God had gone to all that trouble to come and save us – to believe in our worth - we could begin to believe in ourselves.

We used to pride ourselves in our hard-man image and our power to scare people. If they disliked us well we hated them - but not any more. It wasn't just that Obed knocked off the booze or even that I became reconciled to my wife and kids it was that we had a new beautiful reason for living. Gradually we gained a new reputation for honesty and - would you believe – gentleness. The fists uncoiled and became helping hands.

**One night we heard a gang of rustlers** prowling outside the sheepfold. Instead of grabbing the swords, knives and clubs, Obed lit the lamp and held it up high. I stood up with both hands raised and called out “Come in brothers and have a feed with us!” – that stopped them dead in their tracks – but they did join us even if they looked a bit ah – sheepish? at first.

**Gradually they told their stories** – so similar to ours – so we shared ours with them. One of them had been to the Temple he said. He could tell we didn't quite believe him.

“You? Wouldn’t it fall down?!”

“It’s me Mum” he revealed, – “you know what mothers are like – special family occasions – and all that stuff”. We understood. Mothers have powers that even God would like. Our new-found friend went on to say that while he was there this family came in with a baby boy. This real old man had called out to them. He tottered across the Temple forecourt and leaning on his stick he reached out for the baby. Apparently everyone knew this Simeon as a wise and faithful man who had told everyone that he was going to see the Messiah before he died.

Soon quite a crowd had gathered, including the Temple priests.

**“Mary and Joseph were a little cautious about parting with the baby – maybe because the old fella looked as if he might fall over any minute.**

He – a man would you believe - took the baby in his arms and gave thanks to God first for the joy of meeting his Saviour – he went on about being happy to die then he told Mary that Jesus would shake Israel up like no other and the truth about everyone would be known and that she would know suffering of her own. That set everyone chattering. The priests stroked their beards trying to look wise. People had hardly got their heads around what old Simeon had done when this really ancient woman turned up - 84 they said she was – can you believe it – twice the age that most women live to. Well she launched into this prayin’ and praising God for the baby Jesus.”

**“There’s got to be something in it I reckon.** I think maybe I’ll turn over a new leaf.”

“You’ll do much better than that”, I told him, “you’ll turn over a new life”.

That’s how a bunch of shepherds and a gang of rustlers came to trust God.

With what we’d seen and heard we could never be the same again.

A new day had dawned, a new year begun, new life had been born for us and is every day renewed.

**Jesus became *our* Shepherd in a new way we’d never have believed possible – we hope and pray that this New Year he will be yours also.**

John Marcon