

## STORIES FROM THE STABLE, PART II: WHEN SHEPHERDS BECOME SHEEP

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On August 15, 1945, The Andrews Sisters were singing “Don’t sit under the apple tree” to troops packed in a USO hall in Naples, Italy. A slip of paper was handed to Maxine which she read aloud. There was a moment of silence, and then the crowd erupted in cheers. Hats and shoes were thrown in the air with shouts of happiness.

The news, of course, was that WWII was over. The reaction was the same all over America. People in the streets of New York started dancing spontaneously in the streets. Farmers in the Midwest were honking their horns. It was joyful pandemonium.

Today we’re looking at a moment like that. It is one of the most joy-packed stories in the Bible.

### **Luke 2:8-20**

*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,*

*"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."*

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

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

Karin has said that if she could visit any moment in time, it would be this scene where the shepherds see all those angels. It would have been so over the top. There is not another

moment like it recorded for us in history. John paints a picture kind of like it of what heaven will be like, but nowhere else do we get this massive horde of angels filling the sky and praising God.

It is really an army. That's what the "multitude of heavenly hosts" should be translated as. These are God's warriors, and they come in full force to declare peace.

This is it. This is the news that all of creation has been waiting for. It was breathtaking for the shepherds, and I'm sure the angels felt the emotion of it as well. God's Son had been born.

You know how sometimes when people are celebrating an event, they will shake up a champagne bottle and then pop the cork? What happens? The fizzy champagne explodes everywhere, dousing everyone that's nearby.

When Jesus was born, it's like the cork was popped off a bottle of joy and it just explodes everywhere. That's why when it says there were shepherds nearby, I tend to think God let them in on this because they were so conveniently close and somebody had to know this news.

They do seem rather incidental to the main story. A bunch of country boys, out on the range – not even thinking about God necessarily. And here they're the ones who are privileged to witness history's most incredible event.

Most of the time when I have listened to people talk about why the shepherds were chosen, the focus has been on the fact that the shepherds were poor and had no social standing. God has a heart for the underdog and Jesus came for the oppressed and the undervalued in society – not just the upper crust. It was as unconventional to choose the shepherds as it was for Jesus to be born in a manger. And while the Pharisees would probably never even have gone to a stable to look for a king, the shepherds had no problem doing that, because it was in their comfort zone.

I like that way of thinking about the shepherds. And I have no doubt that is part of God's reasoning. It certainly lines up with his character. But I think there's something else there as well.

I heard a quote this week that said, "When you hear hoofbeats, look for horses – not zebras." In other words, look for the most obvious reason. And I think part of the reason the shepherds were chosen was because they were shepherds. I believe God wanted us to identify what he was doing with his own shepherd heart. He was inviting shepherds to come see that the Great Shepherd had come into the world.

What do shepherds do? They take care of the sheep. In this instance, Luke tells us that they were guarding the flock in the night. That would include protecting them from being eaten by wolves and other wild animals, from being stolen by thieves and from wandering off on their own and getting lost.

Sheep are some of the most vulnerable targets around. They have no real defenses. They're not all that fast or smart. So they're easy prey. That's why we have stories of King David fighting off bears and lions when he was a shepherd. The dangers were very real.

The Bible often refers to people as God's flock. We are like his sheep. And God knows that we as people are vulnerable to attack as well.

**Zechariah 10:2**

*The idols speak deceit,  
diviners see visions that lie;  
they tell dreams that are false,  
they give comfort in vain.  
Therefore the people wander like sheep  
oppressed for lack of a shepherd.*

Ever since Adam and Eve, people have been under the weight of sin. I like the way Zechariah describes it as being comfort that is vain and false hope. It looks good but it doesn't live up to its promises. When we travel a path that takes us away from God, although it might look better at the beginning, it's a dead end. And that is the only path we can choose on our own.

It's an oppressive situation. And God's plan, as we all know, was to change that.

**Ezekiel 34:11-16**

*For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness...I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak...*

You can see that God takes the role of a shepherd very seriously. But it is even more focused than that, because hundreds of years before Jesus was born, the prophet Micah caught a glimpse of how it would happen.

**Micah 5:2-5**

*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.*

*Therefore Israel will be abandoned  
until the time when she who is in labor gives birth...*

*He will stand and shepherd his flock  
in the strength of the LORD,  
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.  
And they will live securely, for then his greatness  
will reach to the ends of the earth.  
And he will be their peace.*

And if there was any question about who this hero was, Jesus said it plainly for everyone to understand:

**John 10:14-16**

*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me - just as the Father knows me and I know the Father-and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.*

That's a whole lot of background to make one simple point: God chose the shepherds because of their occupation. He could have sent the angels to King Herod, because Jesus would be a king. He could have sent one to the priests, because Jesus would be pure and holy. He could have sent the angel to soldiers to declare that he would be strong and mighty. But he chose shepherds – people who are all about providing care and protection. He wanted to draw attention to the fact that the time had finally arrived when the Good Shepherd himself was coming to free his flock, to bind up their wounds, to save them.

At his heart, God is a caregiver. When Moses asked to see his glory, God made it pass in front of him, saying

**Exodus 34:6-7**

*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*

That is how God sees himself. Picking the shepherds was more than just a random choice. So unexpectedly, they get this invitation to the first Christmas. And what we see happen is that they move from being the shepherds to being sheep – followers of Jesus, under his care. In this short account, we can see the entire process of becoming disciples.

Remember in biology studying the stages of the life of a butterfly? The boys have both done the science experiment at school where you watch the life cycle from caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly. It makes a good case study on change because the stages are so distinct.

The shepherds go through changes that are no less distinct. The difference is that as a follower of Jesus, at any given time, you can revisit any of the changes. It isn't a one-way progression. It's like the game chutes and ladders. You can be moving along the spaces just fine and then hit a chute square and find you're right back at the beginning, having to learn the same lesson again.

So these stages that we see are not stages that we leave behind us for good. I call them the five Ws of becoming a sheep.

### **The Work.**

At the start of our story, the shepherds were just going about their business, their work, which happened to be at night. You could say they were in the dark, physically and spiritually.

That's where we all start out. We can't see God. We don't know where we're going.

I read that when the Russian submarine, the Kursk, was sinking, they lost all power on board before the crew lost consciousness or drowned, so many of them continued to write letters to their families. It was pitch black, and Lieut. Captain Dimitri Kolesnikov signed off the note to his wife with, "I am writing blindly."

That's how we function in life much of the time. We're on a sinking ship writing blindly because it is all we can do. We're going about our work, but we can't see.

Praise God that he doesn't leave us in that darkness.

### **Matt 4:16**

*The people living in darkness have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.*

### **The Word.**

The shepherds were hit by brilliant light. They heard in the words of the angel the voice of God. They received the message of hope and joy.

It was a moment of awakening that came with conviction and power. They were terrified of it at first, it was so powerful and revealing. They knew the implications it had for their lives.

God's Word is forceful. It is dangerous and brilliant and comforting all at once. That's not to say that every Bible verse is going to jump off the page for you every time. In college I took a survey class of the Old Testament where we were supposed to read all the books. I can remember cramming toward the end of the semester, speed reading page after page so I could say I had read it. But I got absolutely nothing out of the experience.

But have you ever had a time when you were reading the Bible and a verse DID jump off the page at you? You might be going through a particular struggle, and something you've read 100 times before suddenly grips you and tears at you like never before.

We have to encounter God's word not as literature but as Truth. Imagine if after the angels had left, the shepherds had stood around and analyzed the appearance. "Did you see the color of those wings?" "I noticed there were 20 divisions of 1000 angels in 17 rows."

That's not what they did at all. They dealt with the truth of the message – the Word they received. They put their belief in the content.

We can't approach Truth from a strictly academic and clinical way. We need to believe what we hear from God and let it get a hold of us.

### **The Walk.**

What happens next for the shepherds is critical, and I would call it the walk. They put feet on their faith. Let's look at the verse again:

*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."*

The shepherds made a critical decision. They weren't going to just stop and say, "Wow. That was so great. I'm so happy about what the angels told us." They decided to investigate further for themselves, to look into the matter more and get the details.

When they were in the fields, they were sought out by God. When they went to the stable, they became the ones doing the seeking. That's the deeper level of discipleship – when we move from being pursued by God to pursuing him. We can't stop at just believing in him – we need to get up, walk to the stable and deepen our knowledge of him.

It's the difference between sitting in church and saying, "Here I am – tell me about God" and saying "I'm going to go and learn more on my own. I'm going to investigate what I now believe to be true." It's a richer experience of faith.

A.W. Tozer wrote, "It is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience they are not the better for having heard the truth."

### **The Witness**

When the shepherds did that, they found that it was just like the angel said, and they couldn't get over it. So what did they do next?

*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 were so excited about what they had seen that they had to tell people. They did such a good job of describing it to other people that everybody was drawn into the story and mesmerized by it.

First hand accounts of events are always the best. They have a ring of authority and credibility that overrides other forms of logical proofs. When somebody can say “I know what I saw,” it carries a lot of weight.

As we see God work in our lives, it isn't just for our benefit. It's for everybody else as well. When we see God doing things, our natural response will be to talk about it. We don't have to force it or feel pressured to do it – it will well up naturally the more we recognize where he is active.

### **The Worship.**

The shepherds didn't just talk to other people about it – They talked to God too:

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

Our first value as a church is that worship is central. We're making it our goal to be like those shepherds. But like them, it needs to be born out of what we see and experience of God. The more we know of him, the more we will see he is exactly what he says. We find him to be just as we've been told.

Worship is an area we can grow in forever. I have said before that I spent 20 years in churches before a light clicked on for me in this area, and I feel like since then my hunger for worship has grown and I'm still learning what it means to truly praise God with my whole heart.

What does that mean for us? How do we translate our life experiences into opportunities to give God glory? That's the ultimate goal – to make everything we do a way of praising him for everything he's done.

The verse says the shepherds returned. They went back to work – where they started out. They don't see things the way they did before. They will never be the same. But they are still in the same life situation, still watching over their flocks at night.

Even after we encounter Christ, there is work for us to do. There will still be long periods of what feels like darkness, while we wait for the light of his Word to break in. But now, the darkness is no longer the ultimate. We have seen beyond it, and though we are still in it, we know that it isn't all there is.