

“A Shepherd’s Story”

Matthew 2:1-18; Luke 2:1-20 ¹

Well, hello there! You have quite a crowd gathered here tonight—nearly as many as live in my whole town! I doubt that you’ve come together to listen to me, but since you’re here, and since I have a little while to talk to you, I’d like to tell you about the most amazing night of my life.

My name is Jesse, and I’m a shepherd. From what I’ve seen around here, folks don’t do much shepherding in these parts, and you may not know very much about sheep—so I’m going to tell you a little bit about what I do.

Shepherds are folk who take care of sheep—I’ll bet you knew that—and sheep are pretty interesting critters, in my opinion. They’re fairly small animals who can live as long as twenty years, but the average is ten to twelve.²

We raise sheep for their wool and their meat, mostly, although we also get lanolin and cheese from them. Some of you may have eaten meat from sheep, and you may know that meat from sheep less than a year old is called “lamb,” while meat from sheep older than a year is called “mutton.” Lamb and mutton are a lot more common in some parts of the world than they are here.

When most of you think about sheep, you probably think about wool, and you’re right to do that. Wool can be used in lots of ways, such as making felt, blankets, socks, sweaters, and all kinds of clothing. One sheep generally produces about eight pounds of wool a year, although a really good sheep may produce as much as thirty pounds.

Wool comes in many natural colors, such as black, gray, silver, brown, or red, but white wool brings the best price because it can be dyed with any color. There’s even one breed that has a unique coat of white with black spots called “Jacob’s sheep” after Jacob in the Bible (Genesis 30:31-43).

Shepherding is sometimes dangerous work, such as when we have to climb down cliffs to rescue lost sheep or when we have to defend them against predators such as mountain lions; but most of the time, the work is slow, and you’ve got a lot of time on your hands.

Shepherds do different things with all that time. Some make wood carvings or make musical instruments. Some compose poems and ballads. Some practice with their weapons. You may remember that young David, the son of Jesse in the Bible, did all of those things during his shepherding years, and those skills served him very well later!

Actually, our great King David grew up in the same neighborhood as I did, a thousand years before I was born. We’re both from Bethlehem, a little town not too far from the great city of Jerusalem. In fact, it was David who conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital, long, long ago.

Bethlehem has a storied history, going all the way back to our ancestor Jacob, who buried his wife Rachel near Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19). Ibzan from Bethlehem was one of Israel’s judges (Judges 12:8), and it was in Bethlehem that Boaz married Ruth. You probably know that Boaz and Ruth became the great-grandparents of David (Ruth 4:21-22). What I want to tell you

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 24, 2015.

² Information about sheep is from www.sheep101.info.

tonight has to do with the most amazing thing that ever happened in our town, and in order to do that, I need to give you a little background.

I was born near Bethlehem in the year 3736. You Gentiles know that year as 25 B.C. My family had always been shepherds, so it was really no question about the fact that I would be a shepherd, too. Shepherds were pretty low on the social totem pole, but it was steady work and honorable work, and I felt quite at home on the Judean hills under the open sky.

In those days, our nation was subject to the Roman Empire, and that meant that whatever Caesar wanted was how things were. Caesar maintained his government and his lavish lifestyle through the power of a standing army of more than 300,000 men. This army maintained peace throughout the Empire and it also enforced the collection of heavy taxes to pay for itself, the government, and Caesar's extravagant lifestyle.

In the summer of the year 3759—that would be 2 B.C. in your calendar—Caesar decided that he needed a new census to count the people under his rule so that he'd be sure he was getting all the taxes he thought he was due.³ It was customary for men to return to their families' original hometowns for such registrations, because that made it easier to decide whether all of the sons and cousins had been accounted for.

Since I was already at home, this was no problem for me, but Caesar's edict required thousands of people to travel, and some of them came home to Bethlehem. Since we kept to ourselves out in the fields, we shepherds weren't greatly affected by these crowds of strangers, but we saw the long line of folks making their way into town, and we wondered where in the world they would all sleep!

So here comes the amazing thing. One night while all of this ruckus was going on, several of us were out with the sheep, as we usually were. It was a cloudless night with a full moon,⁴ and we were enjoying the fine summer weather. Suddenly, out of thin air, a strange man appeared in front of us, and we were surrounded by a brilliant light that would have hurt your eyes at midday, much less in the darkness. We were absolutely terrified. We figured that this had to be some kind of supernatural being.

Seeing our terror, the angel smiled and said, "*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. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger*" (Luke 2:10-12).

And then—as if that weren't enough!—the hills came alive with all the armies of heaven! It must have been like the time when the great prophet Elisha's house was encircled with horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:17)! We suddenly saw thousands and thousands of angels, all praising God and saying, "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests*" (Luke 2:13).

Then, as suddenly as they had appeared, all those angels vanished! After a little bit, as our eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, we looked at each other and said, "*Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about*" (Luke 2:15). We cast lots to see who would remain with the sheep, and then we hurried to the village. I was

³ These dates correspond to the conclusions reached from careful astronomical and historical examination and recorded at www.bethlehemstar.net. The Jewish calendar year is 3,761 years ahead of the Roman calendar, such that the year 2015 is the year 5776.

⁴ The full moon on June 17, 2 BCE signified the "fullness of time."

lucky to be one of the ones who got to go. We were pretty sure we knew where to look, and I need to give you some more background so you can see why this was all so special.

As Gentiles, you may not know that God's Law is very particular about the animals to be offered as sacrifices at the Temple, especially those to be killed as sin offerings. Those animals have to be without blemish or defect of any kind, and those sacred flocks are nourished and nurtured from birth until they're taken to the Temple to ensure that they have no wounds or scars or blemishes of any sort.

These special sacrificial flocks have been raised and kept here in Bethlehem for hundreds and hundreds of years. The Temple shepherds keep their flocks outside of town and watch over them from a tower that was built long ago by our ancestor Jacob.⁵ For nearly 2,000 years, that tower has been known as "Migdal Eder" ("migdahl ayder"), or "The Watchtower of the Flock," and the Temple flocks have been kept near that tower since King Solomon built the first Temple nearly a thousand years ago.

Now while the Temple flocks live outdoors all year, there is one occasion when a ewe is brought indoors, and that's when she's ready to give birth. The Temple shepherds maintain a special, ceremonially clean stable in The Tower of the Flock, where they bring those ewes for birthing. Everyone in Bethlehem knew about that Tower and its birthing stall, and from what the angels had told us, we were pretty sure that would be where we would find this child. We remembered these words from the prophet Micah: "*As for you, **watchtower of the flock, stronghold of Daughter Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to Daughter Jerusalem***" (Micah 4:8).⁶

Sure enough, we found the baby and his parents in the birthing room of the Tower, just as the angel had said. The parents' names were Mary and Joseph, and the baby's name was Yeshua, "Jesus," which means "Salvation is from the Lord"—but I'll bet you knew that.

In that moment, my friends and I were able to see the fulfillment of Micah's ancient prophecy with our own eyes: "*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 old, from ancient times*" (Micah 5:2). Although it was now late at night, we were so excited that we ran back down the street shouting to everyone about what had happened!

⁵ Genesis 35:21

⁶ Migdal Eder is mentioned in in the Bible in Genesis 35:21 and Micah 4:8. Targum Yerushalmi (also known as Targum Pseudo-Jonathan) states that "**He spread his tent beyond Migdal Eder, the place where King Messiah will reveal Himself at the end of days.**" *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel On the Pentateuch with the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum from the Chaldee* by J. W. Etheridge, M.A. (1862): "And Rahel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. And Jakob erected a pillar over the house of burying-which is the pillar of the tomb of Rahel unto this day. **And Jakob proceeded and spread his tent beyond the tower of Eder, the place from whence, it is to be, the King Meshiha will be revealed at the end of the days.**"

<http://targum.info/targumic-texts/pentateuchal-targumim/>

<http://targum.info/pj/pjgen32-36.htm>;

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Targum_Pseudo-Jonathan

See also Alfred Edersheim, *The Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah* in one volume (1886; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), part 1, pp. 185-186, especially this: "**That the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, was a settled conviction. Equally so was the belief, that He was to be revealed from Migdal Eder, 'the tower of the flock'**" (p. 186); and also see Rabbi Mike L. Short, *Migdal Eder*, www.mayimhayim.org/Rabbi%20Mike/Migdal%20Eder.htm;

<http://www.kolsimcha.org/messages/2009/040909M.pdf>;

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migdal_Eder_\(biblical_location\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migdal_Eder_(biblical_location)).

As amazing as little Jesus' birth announcement was, that wasn't the last of the strange things associated with Jesus and Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary continued to live in Bethlehem for some months after Jesus was born, and Joseph developed quite a reputation as a carpenter. But later that same year, at about the time of the winter solstice, some most unusual visitors showed up in Bethlehem.⁷

As you probably know, news travels quickly in villages such as ours, and we knew the strangers had arrived almost as quickly as they passed through the town gates. Unusual men they were, from the east, toward Persia. They were men who studied the stars, and they said that strange things had taken place in the heavens in the autumn of the previous year, signs that caused them to be sure that a unique King had been born in Israel, a King who would be for all people, not just the Jews. They were so sure of this that they had set out in search of this King, being guided by signs in the heavens that brought them all the way to Bethlehem.

When Isaac, the innkeeper, heard their story, he was sure they were talking about little Jesus, so he took them to the house where Joseph and Mary were now living. These astrologers gave very expensive gifts to young Jesus—gold and frankincense and myrrh—we knew this because it was all the talk of the town; and then they left as quickly as they had come. I was reminded of that strange night when the angels had come to announce Jesus' birth.

The magi didn't even stay one night in Bethlehem. After making their gifts to little Jesus, they set out at once on their journey home. Nor did we have to wait long for the next chapter of this most remarkable story to be written.

The next morning, Bethlehem was all astir, not just because of the strange visitors, but because Joseph's family had vanished in the night. They apparently got up in the middle of the night and left town with only the clothes on their backs—and with the gifts of the magi, of course.

Not long after that, an unspeakable evil came to Bethlehem. Herod was old, and knew he was about to die. He, too, knew about Micah's prophecy, and he knew from the astrologers' visit that the Messiah had now been born. Calculating from what the astrologers told him, Herod decided that if he killed all the baby boys in Bethlehem who were two years old or younger, he'd be able to destroy this child who threatened his throne.

I remember that awful night well. We could hear the commotion all the way out in the fields . . . and then a great cry of anguish filled the night with horror. I shuddered as I remembered the words of Jeremiah, "*A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more*" (Jeremiah 31:15).

But Herod didn't get Jesus. I guess God must have warned Joseph somehow, because Joseph and Mary and Jesus just disappeared the same night the Magi came, and I didn't see Jesus again for nearly thirty years, though we heard rumors about Him from time to time (Matthew 2:13-18).

Years later, when Jesus showed up in Jerusalem as a man, He made quite a splash once again. He went to the Temple and threw out the merchants and the money changers, saying "*Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!*" (John 2:13-17). We shepherds and most of the common people thought that was a pretty cool thing to do, but the Temple leaders and city officials didn't think much of it, as you might expect.

⁷ The date was actually December 25, 2 BCE. See www.bethlehemstar.net.

Jesus did all kinds of amazing things, and I saw Him do some of them myself. But what Jesus said was really a lot more amazing than what He did. He told us about God as we had never heard about God before (Matthew 7:29). There was something about Jesus that made it seem almost as though you were listening to God Himself . . . and of course we were. The angels had told us so.

You know, I think it's pretty special that God, who created everything that exists, would choose to be born as a little baby in a sheep pen in a nowhere kind of town. I think it's pretty special that God would announce His arrival to a bunch of unwashed shepherds out in a field instead of to the king. God seems to like the ordinary stuff He made Himself more than the fancy stuff that we humans make, and I guess that does make sense.

My friends and I had actually been looking forward to the Messiah's birth. After all, it had been foretold for centuries. We just didn't expect Him to come to us! I don't have time tonight to tell you about all that Jesus did, or about how He was killed on a cruel Roman cross and then was raised to life again, but those things *really did happen*. I saw them. And then I saw Him!

Because Jesus really *was* raised from the dead and is alive forever and ever (Revelation 1:18), that means that this same Jesus is actually right here, right now. And at the end of the Bible, Jesus says, "*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me*" (Revelation 3:20).

Most of you are going to leave this meeting and go home to eat dinner. I suggest that you listen for a knock at the door! But the truth is that you're coming to His Table right now.

My friends, the Christ who was coming has come, and He has promised to come again. Indeed, as I've told you, He is here, now. This is the Table of Jesus. It is provided by His own sacrifice of Himself, once for all, to bring you to God,⁸ and so this Table is set for you.

⁸ Hebrews 5:9, 7:25, 27, 9:12, 26, 10:14