

A SHEPHERD'S CHRISTMAS<sup>1</sup>

I love looking at the stars. I never get tired of it. That's one of the great things about my job. Out all night watching over my sheep. I keep a watch out for wild animals. Don't worry, I've got my staff handy, just in case one shows up. But I have lots of time to look at the stars. I look up at the stars, and I think about God in heaven.

There's a song about the stars I like. My people are Jewish, you know. We have lots of songs that were written by King David. You know, David was a shepherd once, just like me. There's one song that goes,

*O LORD, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name throughout the earth!  
You made your glory higher than heaven!...  
I look up at your skies, at what your fingers made—  
the moon and the stars that you set firmly in place.<sup>2</sup>*

Now, I always understood this first part of the song. There's no way you can look at all of these stars and not know that God created them. That's just the way it has to be. But the second part always caused me problems:

*What are mere mortals that you should think about them,  
human beings that you should care for them?<sup>3</sup>*

That's a question I've always wondered about. Does God really think about us humans? Does God care for us? Does God care for me?

Because I'm a shepherd. Most folks don't think too highly of shepherds. I mean, I spend all my time living out in the open with a few other guys and a bunch of sheep. I don't have a real home. I don't have a real family. Just my buddies and me. And none of us gets along well with people. Not each other. They're all good guys. They're like me. But the other people. The people in the towns. The people in the cities. We have to go into town sometimes. And I tell you, I don't like it. Too crowded. Too busy.

And the townspeople. They don't like us either. We walk by and they grab their children's hands a little bit tighter. I see things like that. And they wrinkle up their noses. Well, I guess we do smell like our sheep. We shepherds just don't notice the smell anymore. But the townspeople sure notice.

But the sheep need us. Sheep need shepherds. Sheep are kind of stupid. They'll follow each other off a cliff if you don't stop 'em. They'll stand in the same place and eat and eat and eat until they make themselves sick if you don't move 'em along.

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<sup>1</sup> inspired by an idea from Bryan Wilkerson's "A Wonderful Night"

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 8:1, 3 CEB

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 8:4 NLT

Sheep are also stubborn and ornery sometimes. And sheep are easy prey to wolves. Sheep need a shepherd. I'm the one who makes sure nothing happens to them. Sheep need a shepherd to lead them and to guide them and to keep them safe.

And you know sometimes, sitting out here at night, I get to thinking. And I think that maybe I'm a lot like a sheep sometimes. I'm ornery and stubborn at times. I can fall prey to the evil in the world. I can even fall prey to the evil inside of me. I'm like a sheep sometimes. And I think how wonderful it would be to have a shepherd myself. Someone to watch over me and protect me. Someone to guide me. Someone to keep me heading in the right direction. I could use a shepherd.

David had that song that said,  
*The Lord is my shepherd.*<sup>4</sup>

I'd always had a hard time with that. I need a shepherd. But is God really my shepherd? Does God really care for me like I care for my sheep? Because I do care for my sheep. I really do. I know them all. I've given each one of them a name. Does God know me in the same way? I could use a shepherd. But is God really my shepherd?

You know, good religious people don't think very highly of us shepherds. One reason is my people, the Jews, have way too many rules and regulations. In fact, there are hundreds of laws we're supposed to obey.

There are rules about how you're supposed to wash your hands. Well, we have dirt and blood and manure on our hands all day. It's hard to keep them clean. There are rules about how you're supposed to kill your food and cook it. Well, we catch what we can, and we can't be too picky. There are rules about resting and worshipping once every seven days. Now how can we do that? Out here, one day just kind of flows into another and you lose track.

You know, I'd love to get those religious folks out here sometime, to see if they could keep all of their rules out here. I bet they couldn't do it. But I tell you one thing, if I got them out here, they might get a chance to look at the stars. They might get a chance to see God's handiwork. You can't look at these stars without thinking about God.

One night during my watch, I decided to see if I could count all the stars in the sky. After a few hours I had to give up. There's no way to do it. There are just too many of them. But do you know what David says? He says,

*The Lord counts the stars and calls them all by name.*<sup>5</sup>

Isn't that amazing? God knows how many stars there are. And not only that, God calls them all by their names. He knows them all.

I used to wonder if God could really know my name too. Does God know me? But now I know. It's because of what happened a couple months ago.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 23:1

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 147:4 NLT

It was a night like this. Cool. Crisp. The stars were shining. I had the second watch. I tried to find a real uncomfortable rock to sit on. That's what I do. It helps me stay awake. The night was very calm. The sheep were asleep. The other guys were snoring. Very peaceful.

But then, something strange happened. At first it looked like sparks, except there was no fire. And the sparks were moving around in the air, except there was no wind. And the air itself seemed to be moving. Very, very weird. I woke the other guys up. "Fellas, you gotta see this."

And then all of a sudden there was this light, and it got brighter and brighter. And then, in the middle of the light was this man. Now I know that he must have been some kind of angel. But that night I was scared. I was terrified. I hit the ground and put my face in the grass. But I heard this beautiful voice. It said, "Don't be afraid." Actually, I don't know if he said it or if he sung it. The voice was so beautiful and so different from any other voice I'd ever heard in my life.

And I looked up, and the angel said, "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!" Then he said, "You will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."<sup>6</sup>

And then there was another angel, and another, and then the whole sky was filled with them. And they were singing back and forth to each other, "Glory to God, Glory to God, Glory to God in the highest heaven."<sup>7</sup>

I've since tried to remember how to sing that song, but I can't do it. It's almost as if that song were not of this earth. But it was so beautiful.

And then, they were gone. Just like that. Everything was back to normal. Well not quite. The sheep were nervous, and they were starting to scatter. So we got them rounded up. And then we decided we had to go into Bethlehem to check this out. Nobody wanted to stay behind. We couldn't leave our sheep behind, so we started herding them in front of us, prodding their fuzzy tails all the way down the hill.

When we got to Bethlehem, the streets were crowded. We had forgotten it was tax time. One nice thing about being a shepherd is no one bothers trying to collect taxes from you. But all these people had come to be counted. And a lot of them were sleeping in the streets. We would ask some of them, "Have you heard about the baby?" But none of them knew anything.

So we started looking in stable after stable. But they were all dark and just had animals inside. But then we saw it. A stable with light coming from it. We rushed over and looked in. There was a little fire, and there were a couple of oil lamps burning. And there was this couple. And they had a baby, wrapped in cloth strips. And since they didn't have a cradle, they had put him in the animal trough, just like the angel had said.

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 2:10-12 NLT

<sup>7</sup> Luke 2:14

We walked in, and we told them the story about the light and about what the angel told us. It sounded kind of weird as we were telling it. But you know, they really seemed to take comfort in it. And then I asked if I could see their baby. And I went over to the back wall and knelt down and looked in the trough. And you know, it's really strange. It was just a regular looking baby. And yet I felt God's presence in a way I never had before. I don't know how to explain it. He was just a regular little baby. And yet, somehow, God was there. Somehow, God seemed to be present in that little baby. I asked what his name was. The father said, "Yeshua." Yeshua. Jesus. "God saves." I remembered the angel's words: 'A savior, who will be Messiah and Lord.' At that moment I knew. What the angel said was true. And I thought, how strange. It was just us and this little family. No one else. No priests. No people. Just us. Were we the only ones who knew who that baby really was?

Well, the couple looked tired, and we wanted to get out of town before daybreak. So we headed back to the hills. But we were laughing, and singing and joking and carrying on the whole way. It was great. What a great night.

And I've thought about it a lot since then. I think about what the angel said: "For you a savior has been born." For you. I know he meant all of us. I think he may have even meant everybody in the whole world. But I can't help thinking that he was also talking to me. A savior has been born. For me.

That means God does care. God knows who I am. God cares about me. God wants to be my shepherd. He wants to watch over me. He wants to protect me and save me and guide me.

Now I understand what David was talking about:  
*Lord, you have searched me out  
and you know everything about me.  
You know when I sit down  
and when I stand up...  
You study my traveling and resting.  
You are thoroughly familiar with all my ways...  
How precious are your thoughts about me, O God.  
I can't even count them;  
they outnumber the grains of sand!*<sup>8</sup>

I bet you could say, they outnumber the stars too.

So now, I look up at the stars, and I still think about God in heaven. But now I know that God in heaven also thinks about me. God sought me out.

One night, the God who created the stars came down and visited me.

God visited me!

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<sup>8</sup> Psalm 139:1-3, 17-18, mixed BCP, NLT, CEB, NIV