



## CHRISTMAS STORIES

### Shepherd's Story

***(He's tending sheep in David's fields outside Bethlehem – listen as he shares his experience)***

There's no better place in all Israel to shepherd sheep than right here – especially now.

These fields, just outside Bethlehem, these ancient fields, they've seen sheep for centuries. Endless cycle. Generation after generation.

Up till now, I could never tend sheep in these fields without musing on the past – it echoed all around me. But now, I will never, ever be in these fields without leaning expectantly into the future.

All because of last night. Last night!

Before last night I'd work in these fields and think back, always back, to David. Back some 10 centuries. Back to the glory days of Israel. Back to the glory days of these fields.

For it was right here that David, later to be King, served out his youth as a shepherd, just like me. Bethlehem is his town. That's what we call it still – "David's town". These fields were his stomping ground. This job shaped him.

I've always imagined David chuckling over the sheep just like me. You have to have a sense of humour with sheep. If you don't lead them to food, they don't

eat. If you don't find water for them, they expire. There are lots of animals that just know inside themselves how to find their way home when lost. Sheep sure aren't among them. Give me a goat, it'll fend for itself. Give me a sheep, and I've got a full-time job. Without a shepherd, sheep are hopeless.

But they grow on you, sheep do. In the quiet, lonely hours in the fields on my own, I entertain myself by talking to the sheep, endless conversation, recognizing each one, calling them by pet names. I'm sure David did the same. Sheep end up recognizing your voice. Gathered at the well with other shepherds and other flocks, all mixed up together, all looking so much the same, each sheep absolutely clueless as to the direction home, yet at the sound of their shepherd's distinct voice, they pull away from all the rest and follow.

I've always imagined David got trained for his job as King in these very fields, with sheep like mine, that needed tending, that needed a clear call, that needed leading, that needed a shepherd.

David, here in these fields. I'd remember.

I've always imagined that David was right here, right at this spot, tending his sheep when the call came from his father, urgently, to come home to meet the prophet Samuel, because the aged prophet specially wanted to see him. Turns out Samuel had met each of David's seven older brothers in turn, surveying each one, looking for some sign, but not finding what he thought he would – until David came in. When he saw David, the old prophet's eyes lit up, a smile washing across his face. He rose to his feet, taking a flask of oil in hand and pouring it on David's head in the presence of his brothers. Such an act had occurred only once before in all Israel, when that same prophet had anointed another head, the head of the very first of Israel's kings – Saul. But Saul had turned away from the Lord God, and now David, shepherd boy though he be, was the newly anointed one, oil marking him as God's chosen.

And when the prophets, down the years since, proclaimed the Lord's promise of another anointed one – the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ who would come – each time the image of ruddy young David with oil flowing down his brow, growing to be Israel's greatest King, has spurred us on to believe that Messiah could be nothing less, indeed only greater yet.

David, here in these fields. I'd remember.

I've always imagined it was somewhere near this very spot that David's father, Jesse, told him he was to leave the sheep for a time and go to the front lines of the battle to see how his three elder brothers fared in the confrontation with the Philistines. When he got there he discovered a Philistine champion, a giant by the name of Goliath, taunting the armies of Israel, defying them to send a man into single-handed contest with him, winner take all. At that hearing, the soldiers of all Israel trembled. But young David was incensed. Previously, in these very fields, David had single-handedly rescued sheep from both lion and bear, and when the beast turned its fury on him, he seized it by the hair and struck and killed it. With the Lord's strength he had become a saviour to his sheep. Now he

would be a saviour to the troops of Israel. With only a sling and a stone and a heart trusting God, he defied the enemy, hurled the stone and watched as the giant crumpled to the ground. He rescued Israel out of Goliath's hand. He saved them from their enemy.

And down the years, the prophets promised no less, that the Lord himself would save his people from all enemies.

David, here in these fields. I'd remember.

Oh, and I've always imagined it was here, at this very spot, that David was startled out of his wits as the lion crept round from that boulder just there. Just there. Startled out of his wits. Startled, just like me, last night.

David, here in these fields.

And so my work, tending sheep, day after day, night after night, was touched by backward glances, reminders of history rich in this place. And I and my brother shepherds, peaceful in the evening with the sheep safely in their folds, would sing the songs of David, songs he wrote, right here, with lyre in hand and passion in heart, songs praising the Lord. And singing, we'd remember.

That's how it was last night. Last night when my gaze was forever shifted forward, expectantly, to the future.

I'd been through town yesterday before evening. The crowds were intense, so many people coming for the census. By chance I encountered a small cluster of people moving through the streets in the same direction as I. There was a big, burly man. I knew him to be one of the workers at the khan, the now over-full travelers' inn. He was escorting a young couple, the husband looking drawn and weary, and the wife looking as uncomfortably perched on a donkey as a fully pregnant woman could, for she was as close to delivery as any woman I've ever seen. They progressed slowly down the street and then stopped at a stable I've often passed, out of the way and quiet, home to sheep and cattle. They were being settled there for the night. I was glad, for their sakes, that someone had granted them access to this quiet, peaceful place, preserving them from the hustling congestion of the khan. For the stable, simple but secure, was a fit place of rest for a woman with child.

My encounter was merely fleeting as I continued out of town, back to these fields of David.

As dusk came to the fields last evening I called my sheep and led them into the single-walled enclosure I'd constructed from tangled bushes, providing some degree of containment and protection from the night and from predators. As they entered, I counted, ever mindful of their safety, serving as protector, like David. "1, 2, 3, 4," I counted, "55, 56, 57 ... 98, 99, 100." All securely enclosed. All safe. All sound.

Then I gathered, close by, with my friends, fellow shepherds, warming ourselves at the fire, ready for the sheep, singing songs of David up into the night.

Right here, at this spot, with that boulder right there, black against the peaceful darkness of the sky.

And then the sky blazed! Right at this spot! Blistering outward and upward, hemming us in, bowling us over, startling the wits out of us, like David. For there, above that boulder, was a figure standing tall and broad like a warrior of light, looming over us, threatening our lives more than any wild beast ever could.

“Do not be afraid,” his voice boomed. As if mere words could dull the blazing power of his presence. But his next words riveted my racing mind.

“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

For me, in that moment, it was as if all time stood still. The words rang out – Saviour, Christ, Lord – capturing images from these very fields, threading them through this announcement of birth, drawing them together into a long-promised future.

Saviour. That title stirred images of David’s stone crashing into the Philistine giant, dropping him to the ground, saving God’s people from danger and oppression. *The Saviour* to overwhelm all enemies, now born in David’s town?

Christ. Messiah. Anointed One. That name conjured images of oil oozing through David’s hair, flowing down brow and neck, dripping on clothing, marking him chosen. *The Anointed One* now born in David’s town?

Lord? Could it be? Lord? The name above all names? The name reserved for God himself? Surely this angel realized whom he was naming! The One to whom David sang! Was God himself now come as Saviour and Christ, born in David’s town?

The angel’s words echoed over me: “Good news of great joy ... in the town of David, a Saviour ... Christ the Lord.” He continued: “This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

No sooner had he finished than the glare of the sky was peopled with rank upon rank of shouting, dancing angels, joining their voices together in simple song greater than even David had ever composed:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”

The singing went on and on and on, echoing up the night, then slowly dimming as light and presence faded from view.

And here, we were left alone. Here in David’s fields.

“Let’s go!” I said, breaking our stupor. “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

I knew exactly where to go. And so we went. And there we found the man, still weary, and the woman, now beaming, and a baby boy, wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger, just as the angel had said.

In David’s town. A baby. Lying in a manger. Saviour and Christ and Lord.

And as we returned to these fields last night, we could not help ourselves but sing our own songs of praise and glory and joy to the Lord who had shown us this most amazing of all sights.

These fields will ever remind me of David – the shepherd tending sheep, the anointed King, the victorious saviour, the Lord’s praise-singer. But the landscape and the sheep and the memories are forever transformed by the glare of angel light, and past glories have been overwhelmed by future promises, wrapped up in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

I am now leaning, expectantly, into that future.