
THE WORD COMES TO THE SHEPHERDS

BY MICHAEL CARD

The fire had burned low, as four exhausted men huddled around the embers. The spring air was pleasant though damp. They sat in the night poised, listening for the distress sounds of ewes who might be delivering their lambs. They were in the midst of lambing season, the only time during the year when the shepherds were required to keep a watch all night in the fields.

Already they had witnessed six lambs being born this night. Even for hardened shepherds the sight could still bring a tear to the eye, though each would do his best to hide emotion from everyone else. This was not a job for sentimental men.

It was Nathan the younger who spoke after a long silence.

“Uncle, how many more weeks till we’re done with lambing?”

“We might be done with it right now! The sheep, however, will probably be at it for another month,” answered David sarcastically.

David was the chief shepherd of this lowly outcast bunch, yet he still commanded a measure of respect even among the other villagers. You see, shepherds were on the bottom rung of Jewish society, barred even from testifying in a court of law. David knew the signs of the seasons and the sky. He understood the ways of the sheep better than anyone else in Bethlehem.

None of them noticed at first the light that had begun to glow behind them. It was, in fact, the smell of the angel that first caught their attention. There was a freshness about it, fresher even than the spring air that surrounded them. It awakened them with a jolt. (Years later, any one of them would be vividly reminded of the angel whenever a cool spring breeze would blow across their faces.) As they turned they saw the tall shining figure if a man, standing in the midst of the glow. But they knew this was no man.

Everyone looked to David to see what his response might be, whether to take up staff and protect the flock or run for safety. But David had fallen on his face. He understood who it was. The others followed his example and hugged the ground.

The voice of the angel was kindness itself and filled with joy. It spoke with a laugh. His first words were those most often heard from the lips of angels, “Do not be afraid.”

Then the angel paused, as if waiting for the frightened men to glance up and look him in the face.

“I have good news for you—good news of great joy!” he said raising his luminous arms.

In the midst of what seemed a dream to the shepherds, they thought they heard the angel speak a word that shocked them to full awareness. “Christ,” he said, “The One born tonight in your city is Christ the Lord.”

At this they tore their eyes from the holy light that was the angels face and looked into each other’s excited faces. Each seemed bathed in a new light all its own. Wide-eyed they began

muttering to themselves, “Christ, He has come? Messiah!”

As they looked back toward the angel, he seemed to understand that they wanted a sign, a way to find Him.

“He will be wrapped in rags, asleep in a feeding trough,” The angel said.

Puzzled, the shepherds had begun rising to their feet, moving toward the angel to ask more questions. All at once the sky exploded with light. It knocked them back on their faces. Squinting between their fingers they saw thousands of other angels, each radiating a blinding light. The sky was crackling and sizzling with the energy that surrounded them. Then a second explosion, this one of sound as the host erupted in praise:

“Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace
To men and women on whom
His favor rests”

Their eardrums all but burst at the sound of thousands upon thousands of voices. It seemed to the shepherds that the host had been waiting too long to utter their praise and now like a great dam bursting it came rushing in one flood of sound, the simple men all but drowned by it, their eyes momentarily blinded, their ears deaf with ringing.

As they gathered their courage to take a second look the host was gone. Multi-colored spots danced before their faces. They sat blinking, sticking fingers in their ears, trying to wiggle the buzzing sound away.

Nathan’s voice was hoarse as he whispered, “What shall we do?”

David replied, “What do you think? Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing!”

As they entered the outskirts of Bethlehem, Nathan said out loud, yet still to himself, “Where in this shoddy village would the Messiah- blessed be He- be born? Even the finest house is a hovel.”

Didn’t the angel say something about a trough?” David said, “He must be in a stable.”

The next few hours the shepherds spent wandering from house to house, and stable to stable, bewildered and asking irritated townsfolk if they had seen a baby wrapped in rags and lying in a feeding trough. It’s not hard to imagine the kinds of responses they received in the middle of the night from tired townspeople who had been awakened from a warm bed with such a seemingly stupid question!

“There’s no baby!” one of the shepherds grumbled. “We’re going back to check on the flock.”

As two of them trudged off in the direction of the fields, Nathan and David looked bewildered at each other. There was a sort of tired panic on their faces.

“How could they?” the younger asked in amazement.

“Perhaps there’s some hidden meaning,” David spoke exhausted. His exhaustion was more a matter of his shattered hopes than his tired body. “Maybe it’s not as simple as we thought. We’ll ask the rabbi in the morning, that is, if anyone in town is still speaking to us in the morning!”

They stood in the middle of a small square, tired and confused, about to follow their friends when they thought they heard the faintest sound of the crying of a new born baby. It sounded to the shepherds...

almost like the bleating...
of a newborn lamb.

