

Then the Shepherd's Returned

By Jenéne M. Francis, inspired by The Gospel of Luke (2:1-20)

The night sky was clear. Five raggedy young shepherds huddled around a low fire, half-listening to each other, half-listening to their drowsy flock bleat and sigh. Ora was telling star stories, learned from the old Greek woman who taught her sheep-keeping. As boys will do, Caleb and Zev delighted in disrupting, pointing out faces of local characters. Before Aliza decided whether to get silly with them or go all-girls with Ora and Tikva, flames stirred, revealing a shimmering body. Before astonished eyes, a man (or woman, they could never agree after) shifted between childlike and elderly. The stranger settled on something in between, greeting them with open arms, "Don't be afraid. I'm a messenger with good news!"



"Stay right where you are," shouted Tikva, leaping to her feet and grabbing her staff, ready to swing if necessary. The dogs growled but stayed at her signal.

"I'm not going to harm you! I have been sent to tell you that tonight, very near Bethlehem, the messiah is born! You'll find the baby on the outskirts of town lying in a manger." Eyes blazing, she (or he) was joined by a multitude of light-beings dancing among the stars, singing of peace, and praising God's glory. The shepherds open their mouths as one, inhaling sight and song into their souls. Darkness returned, but celestial excitement swirled.

Caleb broke the silence, "We need to check. I'll go." Arguing erupted. Tikva cut them off with an emphatic stomp of her staff. "We all go. Aliza, Zev - set the dogs. Caleb, Ora - light the torches." She filled a bag with cheese, fruit, and flatbread, then they raced off looking for signs on the hillside.

They found the surprised couple on a dusty floor, backs leaning against the manger with a sleeping newborn in the hay. Eyes blinking as torchlight flooded the small cave, but not alarmed, the man's arms remained wrapped around a young woman. A broad smile plumped Aliza's rosy cheeks. She blurted a loud whisper, "that angel was telling the truth!"

Edging closer, the shepherds' story poured out, one talking over the other. Chest expanding, the father exhaled a smile, shoulders releasing stress he didn't realize he'd been carrying since the dream that brought him to this night. The mother closed her eyes, pressing palms together, raised them to her lips. "Thank you," she sighed, brown eyes sparkling at the scruffy crew. The baby's eyelids fluttered. With a big yawn he started fussing. Everyone laughed.

The father rose to shake hands, “I’m Joseph, from Nazareth. My wife, Mary, and our son,” after a slight hesitation, adding “God’s son actually. We will name him Jesus. Thanks be to God! And to God’s messengers!” He and Mary shared stories of their own angelic visitations. The shepherds’ arrival was welcome confirmation of what they had hoped and trusted to be true.

Caleb, vibrating unspent energy, raised eyebrows at Ora. Slipping into town, they knocked on doors, announcing the messiah was found, just as an angel said. Some, annoyed at being awakened, returned to sleep. Others, curious or believing, rushed to the cave. Women moved by a desire to help a first-time mother arrived with food and clothing.

Tikva allowed Aliza and Zev to stay and help. She and the older two took turns with their sheep, returning daily to the manger to share a meal and stories. Joseph became known in town, offering carpentry to express gratitude for their generosity. Mary encouraged any who desired to hold Jesus. He didn’t seem to mind. With eyes like his mother’s, and deep with ancient wisdom, he captivated the hearts of all who embraced him.

Word got around drawing people from near and far. After exotic visitors came with their tale of following a star, Joseph had another dream. Not everyone was ready for the messiah. He and Mary left in a hurry.

The shepherds returned to their flocks. Sometimes they became weary or discouraged, but discovered that when they returned to their memories, reminding each other how they *had* seen the heavenly hosts, *had* found the infant as the angel said, *had* held Jesus in their arms smelling his newborn head, *had* laughed with Mary and Joseph as his little arms flung before getting a hand stuffed in his mouth. Then the shepherds’ peace and hope were restored. They would again offer praise to God, telling everyone that despite seeming evidence to the contrary, Jesus, Emmanuel, son of God and son of Man, dwells among us.

Behind the scenes ...

Every year as Christmas stories are retold I'm drawn to [the nativity](#), deepening themes that surfaced before. Preparing for this *Into the Deep* contribution I returned to [Luke's gospel \(2:1-20\)](#) for a bit of [lectio divina](#).

Then the shepherds returned... stopped me in my prayer-tracks. In 2020 Jesus wanted to show me something new. I backed up a couple verses: *all who heard their message that this child was the messiah were amazed... Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.* Who did the shepherds tell? When? I moved in prayer to an [Ignatian contemplation](#) leading to the birth of this short story.

Like light strengthening slowly at dawn, as I reviewed the unfolding of my prayer, I became aware of shifting emotions from apprehension to relief, to joy and gratitude. Shepherds acted on faith and hope, racing to look for confirmation, joy-filled to discover signs the angel described. Mary and Joseph stepped out in trust to have this child, making a life together because of angel visits and dreams, relieved and grateful when the shepherds arrived.

God knows we need signs of encouragement, especially during long winter nights that seem darker than usual. I invite you to recall a time when you received good news or confirmation of a big decision this year, then share that story with another. We never know when our reaching out will be a welcome affirmation of someone else's might be "yes" to God. In a card or over the phone, online or in person, how might you encourage someone this Christmas?

For going deeper

- Take a five minutes to set the mood for praying with the [scripture](#) or shepherds' story by listening to [Stars](#) by Ēriks Ešņvalds. The piece's ethereal beauty always quiets and expands my heart with grateful awe. Reflect on comments from the vocal artists of *Cantus*.
- Read the [O Antiphons](#) or sing the Advent carol, [O Come, O Come, Emmanuel](#). Pause on verse five, the antiphon for December 21st, "*O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death.*" Pray for the grace to see and share God's eternal light.
- Learn about Georges Lemaître, S.J, [a Jesuit priest-astronomer](#) contemplating the heavens around the same time as poet Teasdale composed "Stars" who developed a scientific theory on the origins of the universe prior to Edwin Hubble and his "Big Bang Theory".

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