

While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night

In the lead up to that first Christmas, the picture that Luke paints for us in his Gospel is the peaceful sort of vibe you get when you think about shepherds watching over their flocks on a calm and balmy evening on the grassy slopes just outside of Bethlehem –

Lu 2:8-20

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Now, the question that dropped into my mind was, why shepherds???

Why did God choose to make this particularly spectacular announcement to shepherds???

So, I began doing a bit of digging to find some answers, and here are my findings:

There has been a longstanding connection with Israel as God's people, the sheep of his pasture, and the imagery of God as the Shepherd of his people:

- *Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.* Ps 100:3
- Jacob's blessing over Joseph – the Mighty One of Jacob referred to as the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel. Gen 49:22-26
- David was identified as the one who will 'shepherd my people Israel, and you shall become their ruler,' and as we know, the one who came to the understanding that God, *Yahweh*, was his Shepherd. 2Sam 5:1-5; Ps 23:1
- Jesus is, of course, the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:14-15) who will lay down his life for the sheep, who will also become the Chief Shepherd at his second coming, and will

give a crown of glory to his under-shepherds (1Pet 5:4), and then provide shelter and rich provision in our resurrected lives in the new creation:

- *17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water.' And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'"*
(Rev 7:17)

So far, fairly straight forward, but as I dug a little deeper, I discovered further relevant data:

In Bible-times, tending sheep was basic to the local economy of Judea, so shepherds were common, and good shepherds were in demand. While most were reared for their wool, sheep also provided food; the slaughtering of a sheep for a guest was considered a generous hospitality!!! And, sheep were one of the animals that were acceptable as sacrifices to God.

But wait, there is more!!! Beyond these practicalities, there were numerous other village industries that were dependent on the initial good work of the shepherds:

- Wool spinning – providing wool for weaving to create the basic materials
- Clothing manufacturing – making articles of clothing from the basic materials
- Hide tanning – for sheepskin coats, vests, rugs, blankets, and ugg boots.
- Household storage logistics – wineskins, milk skins and waterskins.
- Tentmakers – sheepskin hides sewn together, and internal woollen curtains.
- Musical instrument manufacturers and suppliers – ram's horns
- Medical & cosmetic suppliers – ram's horns for ointment and perfume containers
- Allied manufacturing – sheep bones were used for needles, hairpins, scrapers, lances, and arrowheads.
- Temple marketeers – providing last-minute sacrificial lambs for the unprepared

So, shepherds were part and parcel of these thriving village industries all over the region, and as such, shepherds were key to not only the tending of the sheep but also for the supply of raw materials to many other artisans whose families were dependent on the income from these various industries. In other words, many people depended on their expertise in managing their flocks in good health and regular breeding cycles so that all the other industries could be supplied.

The Old Testament gives a number of examples of shepherds and their shepherding activities.

Abraham, we know, developed great wealth and influence through the development of his flocks, and Moses learned his leadership skills, firstly from Pharaoh, his adoptive grandfather, and then from managing his father-in-law Jethro's flocks in the back blocks of Midian.

But it is Jacob who gives us the most interesting profile of what it meant to be an astute and entrepreneurial shepherd.

He managed his uncle Laban's flocks for 14 years to marry Rachel, the girl he loved, who was Laban's younger daughter. The initial arrangement was that he would marry Rachel in return for seven years of managing the flocks. The seven years went by in a flash, but the morning after the wedding, the girl he has spent the night with was Leah, Rachel's older sister. When Jacob complained about the swindle, Laban's response was to see out the week-long honeymoon with Leah, and then he could have Rachel as well, but must work another seven years for that privilege, which Joseph was happy to do – the things you do for love!!!

However, at the end of the 14 years, when Jacob requested he be allowed to go home to Canaan, Laban was not keen because he realised that he had become very wealthy through Jacob's wise management of his flocks. So, he asked him to name his price, and he would pay him to stay. But when Jacob insisted that he needed to go and build his own life in Canaan, Laban again asks, how much will this cost me?

Surprisingly, Jacob indicated it would not cost him anything, because Jacob had a breeding program in mind that would take a couple of years to work out but ended up making his flocks much larger than Laban's. Jacob was a savvy entrepreneur!!!

So, we can develop a bit of a profile as to the kind of person that a good shepherd would have been:

- **Resourceful** – able to look after themselves and their flock for weeks at a time
- **Proactive** – always on the lookout for good pastures and clean water supplies
- **Caring** – they knew the sheep by name; developed a personal relationship with each
- **Hands-on with the sheep** – unlike goats that can fend for themselves, sheep are quite dependent on human care for good food and clean water; protection from predators; medical attention from insect bites; self-induced accidents; broken limbs; lambing difficulties, and the like.
- **Foresight** – always playing the long-game through careful attention to health, welfare, breeding cycles, and other networking opportunities
- **Entrepreneurial** – able to see the bigger picture and leverage their pivotal influence in the social fabric – great networkers.

So, why did God choose to make his announcement to shepherds?

Because he knew they would understand the bigger picture behind the announcement!!!

And what was the sign that God gave them? A baby in a feeding trough!!!

A birth always represents the promise of new life, leading into the whole process of life, and potential for growth and development!!!

They went out praising God telling everyone they came across about it all – great networkers!!