

Sermon Title: NightWatch! --Traveling from Bethlehem

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 11:1-10

The Prophet Isaiah once told us

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear;⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

The Old Shepherd's Wife begins:

It ain't easy being a shepherd's wife, you know? There are a lot of things I don't like about it. It's not a glamorous job by any means. Nobody has much respect for a guy who looks after sheep. Oh, it's important enough. A lot of people depend on our family for food and wool, of course, for making clothes and blankets. But you don't get invited to a lot of parties. For one thing, you always smell like sheep. And there's never any time for going to parties even if you do get invited. The sheep don't give you any days off to celebrate the festivals or the high holy days. They always have to be looked after.

If you don't keep a close eye on them, they run into a gully, or break a leg or get tangled in the brush. And you gotta keep wathcin' to see no wild animals don't get 'em or maybe some bandits lookin' for a free meal.

So that means we gotta babysit them sheep even at night, husbands and wife alike. We don't own no land, and we can't afford fencing, and it wouldn't do any good anyway since the grass and water dry up if you keep the sheep in one place too long. No, we gotta keep looking for green pastures and still waters if we want our sheep to survive.

Oh, I ain't complainin'. I'm just sayin' as how it ain't all that easy bein' part of a shepherd's family, know what I mean? My husband and his brothers take care of about a hundred and twenty head in our fold. That's not a big fold hereabouts. There's not many people well off around Bethlehem. That's 'cause the Romans take all our money. I don't remember when the Romans weren't around, but my father used to tell us stories about the time when this land around belonged to Israel. Hasn't been that way in over three hundred years now. My father told us about Abraham and how God promised him the land way back before Moses. Bet you didn't know Abraham was a shepherd. He kept sheep. So did his son, Isaac, and his son, Jacob.

Well, anyway, these folks never did get the land God promised, but after Moses led the people out of Egypt away from Pharaoh; he took them into the wilderness. Moses was a shepherd, too. He married a shepherd's daughter, just like my husband. He watched the sheep after he ran away from Egypt, before God sent him back there to free the Israelite slaves. And I guess you could say he was a shepherd to the people in the wilderness, too. He watched over them and protected them for forty years. Now Moses didn't get to come into this land, but Joshua led the people in and fought the battle with all the bad people who used to live here. So God made good his promise to Abraham and gave this land to Abraham's descendants.

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:26-35

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

The Old Shepherd's Wife continues:

Come to think of it, I guess I really shouldn't complain much. This is a pretty famous little town, Bethlehem. David was born here. My father and mother had lots of good stories about David. You'll never guess what David used to do 'fore they made him King of Israel. That's right, he watched the sheep. He was a shepherd. About all the great people of Israel were shepherds. Guess that's 'cause we're all descended from Abraham.

That was a good time, when David was King. We owned the land then, and with God's help, we ruled ourselves. But we were not very good people and we didn't pay attention to the prophets God sent us. We ignored Amos, and he was shepherd, too! So God has taken our land away from us and made us slaves again. This time the Romans rule us.

But we know that God will never go back on his promise to us. One day soon, God's gonna send us a deliverer like Moses or Elijah or David, and he will set us free again. Some think he's already come. A fella named Jesus is drawing big crowds and doing miracles and such. He heals a lot of people, I hear tell, but that's nothin'. A lot of guys are going around doin' that these days.

And you gotta admit, things aren't any better around here since this guy Jesus showed up. But still, there is something special about this guy. They say he was born right here in Bethlehem, but I don't know. He's from up around the Sea of Galilee, a town called Capernaum. They say he grew up in Nazareth. Jesus is about the right age, but there are also stories that the Messiah was killed years ago by Herod's men.

Well, maybe I'd better tell you the whole story. My family was watching the flock one night a long time ago. I wasn't supposed to be out there, but sometimes Mama and I would go out into the fields. I was pretty young then, but I'll never forget it. It was really strange. There was a great light, like a storm, but no rain, no thunder. And we were blinded, couldn't see a thing. The sheep was makin' a terrible fuss, runnin' this way and that, bleatin' their hearts out.

Well, I got real worried and tried to chase 'em cause I knew my father'd be real mad if we lost any sheep cause of some dumb storm. Well, it was no use. That light was just too bright and I couldn't see a thing. Then I hear this voice. I knew it wasn't anybody I knew. When you watch the flock at night, you get so you know each other's voice in the dark. I've never heard this voice since that night, either. Still don't know who it was.

Well, anyway, this voice says: "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find the a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

And then, out of nowhere, there was this sound of people saying something. I was so scared that I didn't even look up. My father and mother said there was a whole army of angels praising God. And the sound was better 'n anything I ever heard at the Temple in Jerusalem,

even on holy days. They said, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

Then it got really quiet. I found my way back to my father and mother in the dark. They were shakin’ on the ground. We started to talk about it quietly. Then we thought we should go after the sheep. But my father said we should go into Bethlehem to see if anyone else has seen this great light or heard the angels.

My father really thought the Messiah had been born. But it seemed silly to me. Why would anyone put a baby in a manger? They’re so dirty cause that’s where they feed the animals. They’re always full of bugs and dirt. I had a really poor family, but even in my family children were born in their mother’s beds.

Well, we got into town and everyone was asleep. There were even people sleeping in the streets. They had come from all over the country to register for the census. Some guy in Rome decided he had to know how many people were in his kingdom, so the soldiers ordered everybody to go to the city of their ancestors and get their names recorded.

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Old Shepherd's Wife continues:

I was really surprised that no one had been awakened by the army of angels praising God. It seemed so loud out in the fields. As we passed a small building, we heard a baby cry. We followed the sound around back. At first nobody said a thing. The angel was right. There was a little baby in a manger. His mother and father were there and my father told them what had happened. They didn't seem surprised at all.

We found out that they were in town for the census and couldn't find a place to stay. The father's name was Joseph, and he called his wife, Mary. They said they were going to name the baby boy, Jesus. In Hebrew that is the same as Joshua, which means salvation. I guess that Jesus had been named for Joshua, the leader who brought the Israelites in to the land of Canaan.

After a short while, we headed back to the fields to look for the sheep that had scattered when the blinding light came. My father was really happy. He told us how things were gonna be different now that the Messiah had been born. He told us about all of the things the prophets had said about the Messiah as we walked back to the fields. I had never seen him so excited. We were all glorifying and praising God for all we had heard and seen, just as it had been told to us by the angels.

Well, my father died believing that baby had been born to deliver the Jews from the Romans. Now this Jesus is coming to Jerusalem and my husband and I was thinking we would leave the sheep with our sons and head on over to see him. He's the right age, got the right name, and the reports about him are, well, fantastic!

Still, you have to admit that nothing has changed around here. There's still a lot of evil and darkness in this world; I don't see what some preacher is going to do about it.

Maybe we will go see him. Then again, I am getting' old and it's a long climb up the mountains to Jerusalem from here. How am I supposed to believe in a savior who let's me suffer. I'm not even really sure I saw what I saw or heard what I heard that night. Shouldn't the Messiah save us from the Romans? Shouldn't he come to claim the throne of David? Well, maybe that's why he is comin' to Jerusalem.

You know, it's crazy. Things aren't what I expect, yet still I have this feeling in my guts about Jesus. I sure would feel better about this guy if he was a shepherd, you know what I mean?