

“A Shepherd Returns”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
Christmas Eve – 24 December 2009
Luke 2:1-20

Has anyone seen my sheep? I left them right outside not long ago. They’re short and soft and not terribly bright, but they will answer to their names: Fluffy, Puffy, Stuffy (he’s allergic to wool), and Steve. Anyone? Anyone?

Oh, OK, I see. You took them, didn’t you? Uh-huh. I get it now. Me and my friends go into town to check out what the angels were talking about, and while we’re gone, you snatch ‘em away. Figures. Can’t blame you; nice sheep, that flock. Our fault for leaving them here all alone. But when an angel appears all bright and shiny telling you something special’s happened next door in Bethlehem, it’s hard to wait on slow sheep.

Of course, truth be told, we went into town only partly to see what those angels were singing about. More than anything, we were just scared, and didn’t want to stay by ourselves out in the dark pasture anymore. You think maybe those angels took our sheep? Nah, silly question. What would an angel do with a flock of sheep?

Glad we went, though, because we saw something amazing. It was a little baby, who looked and smelled and cried like any normal baby, but there was something deep inside me that said, “Yitzhak,” that’s my name, “Yitzhak, that’s no normal baby.” And then I started telling his mom, Mary, about what the angels said, and I noticed that this woman was no normal mother. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but they were different: different in a way I thought was wonderful, but different in a way that I suspected a lot of people wouldn’t be able to accept.

We didn't stay long, because you could tell that Mary was tired, and her fiancé Joseph looked a little worse for wear, too. Plus, the baby had fallen asleep, and we didn't want to wake him. But as we walked out of town back to our flock, I felt that our short visit had changed me in a good way. I wasn't sure what that little boy might do when he grew up, but I hope that I'm still around to watch when he does.

So nobody here has seen my sheep? Maybe they wandered off. Turn your back for a minute, take a quick snooze, and off they go, nibbling the grass under their nose until they trip into a gulley and can't find a way out. I just hope no wolf wandered by and gobbled them up. You see, I rely on those sheep for their wool, and I like their company. I hate it when they wander off.

I guess you think I'm pretty stupid for leaving them out here undefended without a guide, but even though I depend on those sheep, what the angels told us was so promising, we couldn't resist the impulse to find this newborn child. You would have done the same, right? Dropped everything to rush into town and make a fool out of yourself asking around for a newly born baby. (Boy, the stares we got from some people.)

I mean, we knew the risk that the sheep might not be here when we got back, but we thought, "Well, it'll be a quick trip, and it's been a silent night, except for those angels." But you would have done the same, right? Taken a chance that everything you hold dear, everything of value, might simply vanish, like my sheep seem to have done, just to glimpse for a few minutes this remarkable baby boy and tell his parents what the angels told us?

I hope you would, because if I've learned anything tonight, it's that the greatest gifts in life might come at a cost, but whatever the price, those gifts are worth it. I wouldn't trade what I've heard and seen tonight for the biggest herd of sheep in all Judea. Wealth and the stuff you

can buy with it just doesn't compare with spending a few minutes near that little baby. What was his name? Oh, yeah, Yeshua. I bet his friends will call him Jesus.

There's a warmth in my heart that no campfire could match. I feel a joy now that beats what I felt the day I had my most successful sale of wool. So if you've got a few minutes to spare, go on and see for yourself. It won't be easy finding him. I wish I could give you directions, but big towns confuse a shepherd like me, and we got a little turned around on our way out of Bethlehem. But if you don't find him today, search again tomorrow, and the next day, until you do. He and his folks are in pretty simple accommodations, so don't bother looking in some palace, and don't worry about knowing for sure that you've got the right kid, because once you're there, you'll know. People might have told you that about other things before, but when it comes to this newborn, Yeshua, it really is true.

Take it from me, a hard-bitten shepherd who lives a rough and tumble life that just got tumbled upside down. I've got no sheep, but I'm at peace with that. I've got nothing of value to the world, but tonight, I received the best gift anyone could get: a message from some angels, a few minutes with a baby in a manger. Probably sounds to you like I'm crazy. Well, if I'm crazy, then I like crazy. Yeah, crazy is OK with me. Oh, wait! Did you hear that? Stuffy, is that you? Excuse me, I've got a congested ram to rescue. Amen.