

**A Shepherd** (for Advent Prayers 12.22.2016)

based on Luke 2:8-15

My people have always herded sheep, as far back as any of us can remember.  
My grandfathers, my uncles, my cousins. Sometimes even my sisters and my mother get involved.

Some people say it's a humble life. Maybe.  
But we always remember that King David was a shepherd, too,  
and that Moses got his start tending his father-in-law's sheep.  
He was watching those sheep when he saw the burning bush and heard the voice of God,  
so you never know what can happen.

Although, I never heard of anything quite that strange or fantastic happening to my family.  
At least not until it happened to me. To us.

Tending sheep is a tricky job.  
Sheep are pretty good at listening and paying attention. Until they aren't.  
They like to stick together. Until they don't.  
If you are a good shepherd, they know and trust your voice. Until they get scared.  
And they get scared A LOT. All it takes is one or two scared sheep to change the mood of the whole herd.  
It's like a lit match landing on a bed of hay. Boom! And everything goes up in flames.

Some people say a sheep is an animal born looking for a way to die.  
That's not really fair.  
I never look at them that way. I just think they need a little more help than other animals.  
All of us need a little more help sometimes.

Going across a river or a stream is always hard.  
The guide sheep, the ones who know us the best, will stick close by  
and walk confidently into the water just like all of us shepherds.  
Other sheep are more fearful and we usually have to use the rod to nudge them into the water.  
If it's lambing season, that's a hard crossing.  
I always like us to carry the lambs one by one across the water, but it takes time.  
If they're a little older, we push them in.  
And almost always we have to swim downstream to rescue a lamb or a weak sheep that got away,  
hold their heavy, wet wool bodies close to ours and swim them ashore.

I grew up sleeping among sheep, out in the fields at night, so it's not strange to me.  
When I was little, the mother sheep treated me like I was just a different kind of lamb.  
They would nuzzle me and push me around with their noses,  
just as if I were the lamb of another mother.  
I hated that.  
But the lambs would also play with me, butt heads and leap around. That was fun.

For people who live in a town their whole lives, it's hard for them to imagine.  
They think we're dirty and inferior.  
And I suppose we smell a lot like sheep. They sort of sneer at us when we come into the market.  
We don't even go near the temples.  
But we don't mind. We're proud to be shepherds.

The best shepherds know how to keep the flock calm, but you really have to know what you're doing.  
It sounds strange, but you have to get inside the sheep's mind and think like they think.

My uncle Simon was one of those shepherds.  
He could keep a 100 or more sheep completely calm almost all of the time.  
Whenever he was around they just all breathed more easily.  
When he raised his voice at the right time, the sheep responded right away.  
That's the kind of shepherd I try to be: in tune with the sheep,  
so that they know they are safe and will listen when there's danger.

So the night that it happened:  
It was calm that night, lots of stars in the sky.  
One strange bright big star that we hadn't noticed before.  
We were in the fields just outside Bethlehem. It was a regular grazing place for us.  
All of us sleeping or staring at the sky, in one big clump of wool and humanity.  
Breathing and snoring together.

Shepherds sleep kind of like dogs, with one eye open all the time.  
You never know when a bold jackal or a hyena or a wolf may sneak up on you.

It happened kind of quickly.  
We heard this singing, at first very far off, but then getting louder and louder.  
It was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard. Just beautiful singing.  
I thought maybe it was coming from some people in town.

It got louder and louder  
and then there was this strange light in the sky that got bigger and closer,  
until all of the sudden there was a whole choir of angels just up there among the stars singing to us.  
They got so close; they couldn't have been more than 10 or 20 rod-lengths away.  
Dozens, maybe hundreds of singing angels. I thought I was dreaming.

All of us sat bolt upright. My heart was pounding out of my chest.  
And what was really strange was that the sheep rustled only a little bit. They stayed perfectly calm.  
All of us shepherds were more scared than they were.  
It was as if a whole chorus of my uncle Simon was reassuring them.  
For the first time in my life, the sheep seemed calmer and wiser than we were.

Then this one big angel came forward and said very forcefully, very clearly,  
and with solid reassurance:

Do not be afraid; I am bringing you good news of great joy.  
Today in the city of David a baby is born who is the Messiah, the promised one.

And then went on to say,  
Here's the sign:  
you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

Somehow it was like we were the sheep and that angel was a big winged uncle Simon.  
We all began to calm down, to breathe more easily.  
I looked around and there were these goofy smiles on all our faces.

And then all of the angels just broke into this amazing song:  
Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace and goodwill to all people!

They kept singing it over and over, over and over,  
each time more beautiful than the last.  
And then gradually they began to fade into the night sky,  
just singing that same phrase again and again,  
getting fainter and quieter,  
until no sound was left except the stillness of the night sky  
and the heavy sleepy breathing of sheep and lambs.

We sat there for a good long time, completely still and quiet,  
but our bodies were abuzz with the feeling of angels hovering near us.

And then we did the only thing we could do.  
We went to Bethlehem,  
all of us, sheep and lambs and shepherds,  
wandering through the night-time streets.  
We didn't need directions; it was like we just knew in our hearts where to go.

And I cannot fully explain it here,  
but after that,  
everything was different.