



Shepherd's STORY

Baruch tightened his *aba* around him. Good thing this was their last night on the scrubby hill before they moved the sheep indoors. He should get a fire going before the others complained.

He paused, savoring the glittering canopy of stars. They seemed more vivid tonight for

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some reason. The air, too, was different, oddly still, almost expectant, as if the universe were holding its breath waiting for something spectacular to happen.

Baruch shook his head and eased himself off the damp ground, his eyes as always scanning the surroundings for predators. His son—who at twelve years of age acted like he possessed all the wisdom of the ages—would scoff at his imaginative musings. Already he'd decided that being a shepherd was boring, announcing that when he grew up, he was going to join a traveling caravan that traded in spices instead. Baruch smiled as he gathered kindling in his arms. *Just as I said to my father, and he said to his father before him...*

Joshua prodded a patch of bare earth with his rod and shivered. Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a tiny lick of flame flaring against the bright, bright sky. Baruch had finally started the fire.

Joshua liked the night. Dark wasn't scary to him, like it was to his younger brothers and sisters. Even though he didn't enjoy the cold, he was sorry that tomorrow he'd be back in town. Too many people there made fun of him during the day.

At night, though, and especially

out here in the fields, few saw his head.

Joshua gently fingered the flat indentation. The donkey had been afraid, that's all. It didn't mean to kick him. The good part about the accident was that he couldn't be a carpenter like Papa anymore. Animals were nicer than people—except for his family, of course. *Mama said God made all living creatures, and he had Adam name everything, so I like to give them names too...*

The aroma of heavy wool and sheep dung filled Nathaniel's nose as he lay in front of the sheepfold. The animals were unusually quiet, which meant they were content, thank the Lord. But why was Baruch so late with the fire? He raised his head a little. Ah, there it was.

Tomorrow he would be home. The thought warmed him more than the camel's hair garment in which he wrapped himself. He knew Hannah would have everything ready, with fresh hay and grain for the sheep on the ground floor of their small house, and a meal prepared for him in their rooms above.

Poor Hannah. She bore the burden of being childless so courageously. He wished and prayed for children too, but like the husband of her biblical namesake, he hoped he could take the place of ten sons for her.



A pleasant drowsiness stole over him as the fire caught. *She's the best thing that ever happened to me...*

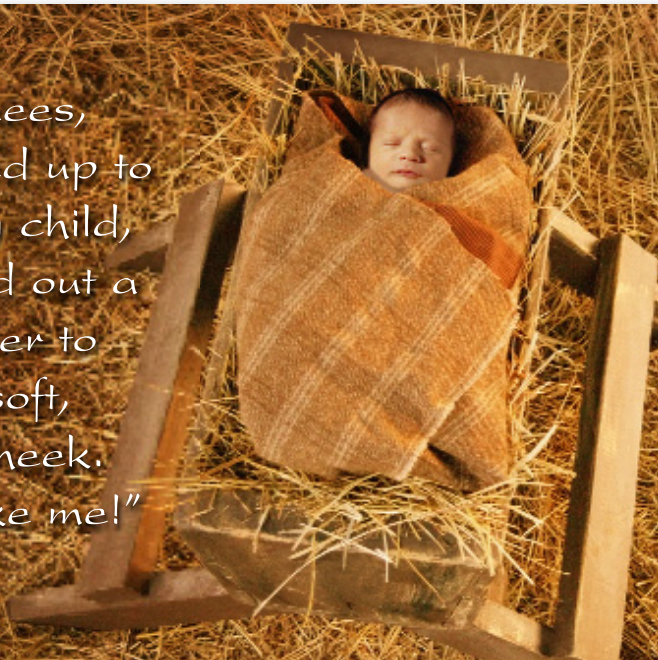
A blaze of light exploded across the sky, swathing the expanse in a brightness that rendered the feeble fire wholly insignificant. Baruch shielded his eyes from a radiance more dazzling than any summer sun and took an involuntary step backward, nearly colliding with Nathaniel, who had bolted upright. Joshua also leapt to his feet, his mouth open wide in astonishment.

Nathaniel's voice was little more than a croak. "An angel!"

Already he'd decided that being a shepherd was boring, announcing that when he grew up, he was going to join a traveling caravan that traded in spices instead. Baruch smiled... *Just as I said to my father, and he said to his father before him...*



On his knees,
Joshua sidled up to
the sleeping child,
and reached out a
grimy finger to
touch a soft,
blushing cheek.
“He’s just like me!”



The trio clustered together, stunned by the vision standing not two feet in front of them, surrounded by a splendor unmatched by anything of the world. Not a speck of darkness remained. All around them was luminosity and brilliance and beauty.

The heavenly being’s voice was surprisingly gentle, yet as clear and powerful and piercing as the encompassing light. “Don’t be afraid.”

The three dropped to their knees and huddled closer, trembling.

“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.”

The fear was like a roar in Baruch’s ears. He was surprised he could even hear the words.

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

The Messiah? Here? Now?
Nathaniel wondered if he had fallen asleep and was dreaming.

“This will be a sign to you: You’ll find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

A baby! Joshua loved babies, loved how soft they were, and their sweet little smiles. Babies loved him too, Mama said so.

But the message confused him. How could the Messiah be a baby? The firmament exploded once

more, in an overwhelming display a thousand times greater, if possible, than before. A multitude of angels spread across the sky, too many to count, hovering above the quiet hillside, filling the space with a resonance infinitely finer than any produced by the most talented temple musicians:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests!”

Then, as quickly as they came, the creatures were gone, vanished up to the heavens like a whirlwind. The fire flickered. All was as it had been before—except for the three shepherds.

When Baruch could breathe again, he looked down at the slumbering city. Surely others had seen and heard the incredible proclamation!

Nathaniel finally broke the silence. “Well, what are we standing around here for? Let’s go!” Despite his bold speech, his voice quivered.

“Yes!” Joshua emphatically added his agreement.

Baruch quickly bent to gather stones to block off the entrance to the sheepfold. The others joined him, adding prickly dry thorn bushes on top like the rest of makeshift fence, to keep other animals at bay.

They hurried down the steep, rocky slope toward the city, their sandals thumping on the dry grass, the cold air all but forgotten. Nathaniel took charge. “The angel said he was in a manger. I say we look in the inn first.”

Baruch stopped so suddenly that the other two bumped into him. “But what if he’s not there? Bethlehem’s full of people. How will we ever find him?”

“God will help us.” Nathaniel and Baruch stared at Joshua’s calm demeanor in the stark moonlight. “If he told us about the baby, then he’ll show us where he is.”

They reached the outskirts of the city in record time. No one stirred.

“Where is everybody else?” Baruch verbalized the thoughts of them all as they scurried through the dark streets. “Why just us?” Neither of his friends could think of an answer.

As they neared the walled caravansary along the route to Jerusalem, Joshua sprinted ahead, toward two men stationed at the gated opening. “Is there a baby here?” he asked, only slightly winded.

The guards laughed. “Not that I know of,” said one.

“Not really a fit place for that, with the animals and all,” the other explained.

Nathaniel pushed forward, panting. “We’re...looking for a woman who’s...just had a baby.”

“I told you, not here,” the first sentinel responded. “Now go away!”

“Let me try.” Baruch exhaled heavily. “You didn’t...hear or see anything...unusual tonight?”

The first one dug an elbow into his companion’s ribs. “He picks the busiest night of the year to ask!” To Baruch, he added, “It’s the census, remember?”

“Can we talk to the innkeeper?” Nathaniel persisted. “Maybe he knows something.”

The two guards exchanged glances. “I don’t see any harm,” said the second. “They’re only shepherds.”

“And they smell like it, too!” the gruff man grumbled. “All right,

but just for a few minutes." His partner lifted the heavy bar from the door. "Don't stay too long or I'll come looking for you!"

Small groups of men clustered around low fires in the open courtyard, their camels and other pack animals resting nearby. The second guard pointed to a tall, thin man engaged in an animated conversation. "That's him."

The trio rushed over. "Excuse me, sir, do you have a baby?" Joshua interrupted.

A look of astonishment crossed the man's narrow face. "How did you know?"

"Where are they?" Baruch's eyes darted around the space.

"As I was saying to my friend here, I...well, I couldn't turn out others who'd arrived first, so I—"

"Just show us where the stable is, sir!"

"How did you know they were in a—"

Once again, Nathaniel came to the rescue. "If you would point it out to us..."

"Around the corner." The innkeeper motioned with his head. "My own personal stable. I couldn't do any better than that..."

The shepherds barely heard his last words as they dashed toward the lone arched opening on the side of the building.

A young woman bending over the feed box carved in the wall looked up at their footsteps. The man with her moved as if to protect her and what they now saw was an infant lying on the straw of the manger.

"It's the Lord!" Baruch breathed.

Joshua stared at the mother. She was obviously very tired, but her face shone like his Mama's did when she tended her babies.

Nathaniel advanced hesitantly. "We were out on the hillside, and angels appeared and...they told us the Messiah had been born." He swallowed hard, realizing how ridiculous the words sounded. "Is he the one?"

The man placed an arm around the woman's shoulders. "So Mary, we aren't the only ones who know,

after all." He nodded. "Yes, this is the one the prophets speak of."

Nathaniel knelt, surprised to find tears flowing down his cheeks. "God has come to earth," he whispered.

Baruch joined him on the packed earth. "To think that we are witnesses..."

On his knees, Joshua sidled up to the sleeping child, and

reached out a grimy finger to touch a soft, blushing cheek. "He's just like me!"

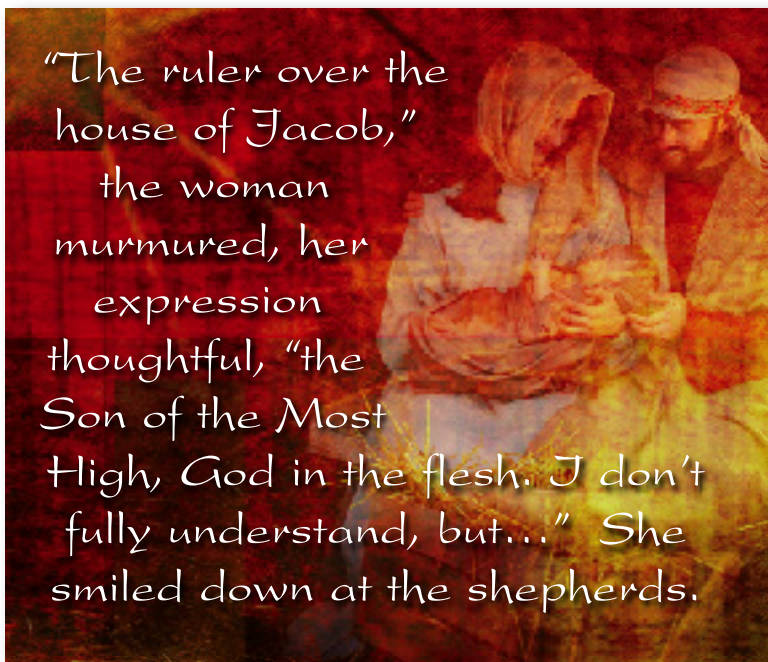
"The ruler over the house of Jacob," the woman murmured, her expression thoughtful, "the Son of the Most High, God in the flesh. I don't fully understand, but..." She smiled down at the shepherds. "Thank you for coming to worship with us tonight."

Nathaniel glanced at his companions. "We've got to get back."

They stayed a moment longer, each silent but offering glorious praise to God in his heart, eyes riveted to the One for whom his people had waited for so long. At last, the three rose to go, their heads bowed. At the doorway, they stole a final look at the remarkable scene. But the parents weren't watching their departing guests; instead, they were gazing down at the newborn as if he were the only person in the entire world.

Baruch shook his wife awake just before dawn. "I can't wait to tell you what happened!"

He tried to talk softly so the children sleeping nearby wouldn't be disturbed. But his voice grew louder as he described the night's events, and his son's eyes opened.



Baruch reached out and tousled his hair. "And you think nothing ever happens to shepherds!"

The sheep secured, Nathaniel bounded up the steps to the loft. "The Messiah is here!" His wife turned in surprise at his rambunctious entrance, listening in growing wonder as he related the amazing story.

When he finished, she took his hand. "We must make an extra sacrifice. And perhaps another one as well."

She placed his rough palm on her swollen midsection. "In case you haven't noticed, we'll have another reason to rejoice in a few more weeks."

Joshua found his mother in the courtyard they shared with several other families, grinding grain for the day's bread. She beamed at him. "I'm so happy you're home again, son. I've missed you."

"Mama!" Joshua hopped from one foot to the other in his excitement.

"I've seen the Lord!" □

Penny Musco is a writer who is married to a theatre manager. How their daughter came to study astrophysics in college is still a puzzle to them.