



THE SHEPHERD - [a Christmas Story]

Benjamin's jaw ached. It did that a lot now. Especially since the weather had turned. He pressed the tip of his tongue into the socket where his eye tooth was missing. It pushed out the scar on the lip above, beginning another dull pain.

Benjamin felt a lot older than his 20 years. He shifted to his side to give his hip a rest. *David played his harp to keep his mind off this hind side*, he supposed. The tumbling hills below Bethlehem were certainly no more comfortable in David's day.

It was the last watch and the darkest of the night. Benjamin's eyes had fully adjusted to the unpolluted darkness. He could see the sheep and their starlight shadows. Some stirred but most were still. The strange convergence of stars above seemed to be growing in intensity and continued to disturb the shepherd. For weeks the strange and undoubtedly bad omen had assembled itself in the sky. And now? The greens, blues and reds were converging in colorless light, almost like the startling flash of midday sunlight off the tops of rolling waves. He'd seen those once up in Galilee when a storm from Jordan stirred the sea from afar. The waters had seemed almost alive and certain of themselves, driving mystery, light and darkness of depth his way. *Why did this strange new star remind him of that?* Benjamin looked back down to his group's flock.

He caught sight of the one lamb he felt most responsible for. The one he dreaded most. He drifted away to the memories of one terrible day. The one to which his jaw and lip gave testament...

"Come with me, Benjamin!" his father boomed. "Today is the day. Even the Romans won't steal the Day of Atonement from us, even if they steal all the rest. We must head for Jerusalem now, before the crowds make it impassable."

Benjamin carried the lamb out of the cave for the last time. Until today, it was the property of his family, along with the inn above. But the Roman 'tax seizure' was now complete.

"This inn is the place where Samuel himself rested before crowning David King!" protested the part-

time shepherd and master of the inn." His voice was full of fiery pride and desperation as he watched the soldiers dumping their belongings in the street. There was nothing that could be done to stop this injustice; no one to hear the appeal. Issachar made it to the passerby traffic anyway. The turncoat tax agent receiving the keys from the centurion sneered back. "We have no king but Ceasar, or haven't you been following the news?"

"Herod the 'great', you mean?" mocked Isaachar. "Or has Caesar abolished the last of our 'government?'"

"Of course..." trickled back the tax collector's answer, steeped in sickening sweetness. His reply was specifically vague. One could read it a couple of ways.

Issachar grabbed his remaining belongings and stormed out. Benjamin's mother hid on the side of the building, crying her own disappointment. Benjamin handed the leads of the animals to his father and quickly came to his mother's side. The centurion stationed by the corner of the building was bored and gruff as he drove them from the shadows. *Typically insolent*, thought Benjamin. *Enforcing property seizures didn't hold much appeal and even less glory for a soldier*. Benjamin gathered up their sacks and led his sobbing mother, supporting her by the elbow. They followed the head of their household away from the only house Benjamin had ever known...

The night air was getting colder, stirring Benjamin from his bitter reverie. He looked back up at the omen above, dead center in the constellation of the Ram. The center of Israel's heavenly home. The dark tears began to flow. The converging transits of those strange stars looked almost complete. The three were one star now, and shockingly brighter. Benjamin couldn't bear to look at it for long. He shifted back to the cruel narrative playing in his head...

Issachar left his wife with friends at the gates of Bethlehem. Out he marched, leading the ewe so the lamb would follow. Benjamin caught up, taking one lead, the two sheep now between them. His father quickly resumed the story Benjamin heard every time they made this journey. This time tinged with fury. Understandable. Benjamin felt the same way.

"You have as much right as any of those so-called priests up on that mountain, Benjamin. Aaron's blood flows in your veins, you know." For the umpteenth time, Issachar recited the family legend. How a Levite priest lost his virgin daughter to marauding Benjamites at Shiloh. How she became the founding mother of one of Benjamin's greatest clans. How David's line and theirs had mingled over the centuries. Benjamin was sure it was nothing more than a legend, marveling at his father's pride in it.

"This time, there's no denying our sacrifice, Benjamin. This lamb is *the One*. The perfect lamb."

Benjamin began to take in the seriousness of his father's determination. This lamb would soon bleed

for his family's sins. Like no year in recent memory, this year's lamb was indisputably perfect. The money changers were not stealing this one. One of those inferior rejects in the dying pens was not going to be forcibly traded for their own specimen. The lamb itself seemed determined to make it all the way to the holy mountain. It remained silent amid the bleating of other animals being led to their own slaughters.

Together the young man and his father led the ewe and her lamb up the many conflicting inclines. They passed by all the animal traders trying to select out the best animals and offer back 'certified' temple sacrifices. turtledoves with broken feathers for perfectly healthy sheep. But they came with the all-important papers. Inferior gifts with the lies of men attached. But they got you in the door. Issachar marched right past them all.

Benjamin hesitated at the Great Steps. His father marched on. The Romans guarding the steps dropped their spears and brought him to a halt, as expected. In that booming voice of his, Issachar demanded, and loudly. "Fetch the inspecting priest! This one stands for us." He looked down at the lamb, now showing white in the sun against the tan steps. It's tall stature and fine legs stood above all the others being shoved along to the right through the checkpoint marked for 'certified' offerings.

"He's on break," the guard laughed back. The other guard apparently thought the man a comedian. "All animals to the right. This entrance is for visitors only. 'People' - if you Jews can be called that." Issachar didn't budge. He repeated the demand. The line was backing up. Complaints from behind began to build. The large man and his lamb completely blocked the path between the guards. Benjamin grew nervous.

"That's enough nonsense, Jew. Step aside and find the money changers. They'll take care of you." The guard sounded reasonable enough - for a Roman. He glanced at the lamb. He knew a fine specimen as well as the next man. Too bad this big shepherd would lose it. But that's just the way it was. Maybe the soldier would buy it later for his own dinner.

"Fetch that lazy priest and I'll be on my way." Issachar's voice had deepened. The guard wasn't about to permit a threat, but he was feeling magnanimous today. He smirked and half-heartedly nodded his head sideways. The other guard stepped off around the corner. Two temple guards appeared on the steps above the Romans, avoiding their shadows. They were not happy.

"So, where's the robe who will inspect my offering?" Issachar hollered up at the new temple protectors.

"In that line," they replied, jabbing their spears toward the money changers. The contractors. The ones who had bribed their way into the pockets of both the Romans and the Temple bureaucracy. The ones who held the blood money till it could be washed in the bins of Egyptian traders. Till the money could come back up from 'Egypt' liberated.

"NO!" Thundered the proud Benjamite. "This lamb came from the pastures of David. It meets every requirement. It goes to the High Priest. It *will* stand for us in the Holies."

"Just move it over there, mister" hollered the man behind Benjamin. He reached up to grab Issachar's sleeve, pulling harder than he intended. Issachar's right sandal slipped down a step, forcing him off balance. He overreacted, pulled back and fell up the steps - right into the Roman guards. The temple guards rushed down the steps to join the fray, forgetting the Roman shadows. Issachar tried to force his way past the centurions, dragging both tethers and the attached animals with him. The Romans kept their balance and poised to strike.

"NO!" Benjamin's father bellowed as the butt of a Roman spear came crashing down at the base of his skull. He died instantly. Benjamin rushed up to his father and received the backswing of the same spear - full in the mouth. He stumbled back, spitting out a tooth. He was more stunned by the blow to his father, the sickening crunch still echoing in his own head. He found the two leather leads in his hand. He didn't know what to do. His father's dilated eye stared back at him from the tan step.

"Grab that one!" yelled one of the temple guards further up. Benjamin was about to lose the innocent sacrifice or his life. Probably both.

An old prophet stepped through the mess, grabbing both the leads and Benjamin's elbow with an iron grip. Simeon, that ancient little man who prophesied daily in the Temple.

"Come son, before they seize you all." He was short enough that the lamb's nose almost touched his chin. "This one is indeed fine, but he is not worth your life!" Benjamin stumbled along, reaching back for his father. The crowd had already filled the hole, obscuring his view. A familiar face from Bethlehem rushed past him. A cousin. He pushed past Benjamin through the crowd, calling Issachar's name.

The little prophet rushed sideways to an ignored door hardly bigger than himself, pushing through. "The true Lamb is coming soon, I've been promised," spoke Simeon with an almost wild intensity. He led, or drug, Benjamin on. His grip was astounding for his size.

The old man is speaking nonsense thought Benjamin. *But what good were thoughts at a time like this?* Benjamin's father was... GONE.

In his stupor, Benjamin didn't know how far he was led. He didn't recognize the street. The prophet's elbow burst open a little gate. They were suddenly in full sun, outside the old Jerusalem walls, beyond the noise and tumult. The light blinding Benjamin, his rage welled up and he shook off the little man's grip.

"Settle, my son. Go now. Take your gift. You have already given your best."

The old man seemed on the verge of tears, now. Benjamin's eyes unleashed like a faucet. They both felt the bitter irony. The lead to the lamb and its ewe went limp as Benjamin sunk to his knees. The animals just stood confused.

"Hold fast, young man! An even better gift is coming. One to save us All! Go!" He pointed at a path that led to a lower ledge. Beyond, Benjamin could see familiar rills and the colors of Bethlehem's palms. At least he thought so. It was impossible to see clearly through the blizzard of tears and pain. For miles his feet plodded, the two sheep following obediently...

What had changed in the months since? Nothing. The Romans had just gotten more severe in pursuit of their ridiculous census. Benjamin looked up again at the omen star. "If God wanted our best, He got it. My father is dead." Benjamin spat out the words, the strange whistle of his missing tooth making a mockery of his anger. His father was the believer. Benjamin was done with it. "Is that what you wanted, you omen? To devour the only one in my family who really believed? Who died for your

precious 'sacrifice?' His blood ran in the streets of Jerusalem - because of *You*. You're certainly not going to do anything about it. You don't care about us. You don't even hear." Benjamin waved off the deaf heavens and the penetrating eye.

The sheep below began to stir, bothered by their shepherd's outbursts. He lowered to a whisper, just as fierce and focused on that forbidding beacon in the sky.

"Has the world gone completely mad? The wicked rich eating the poor for lunch. Believers suckered and exploited to death. *Your* people!! Foreigners and the elites picking over their carcasses. Is that the way you wanted it? Is this the way it will always be? A sick joke? All of us idiots for hoping? For wanting a little peace? Well?! Is it??"

A sky beam pushed its way down to earth from that Omen Star, landing on the hill above Benjamin. He sucked in his breath from a new, indescribable fear. And then the sky exploded.

Ripping down in watery torrents of light, thunderous feet slammed into the ground around him. Pillars of fire reached up three cubits to blazing faces of flame. A voice shook loose Benjamin's heart and mind. One of the furnace bronze heads faced him. Gravity pulled all points of Benjamin down to the rocky soil.

"Don't be afraid. This is Good News. Joy for the whole world! The Savior - The ONE has arrived. Right here, in David's town the Liberator has come. He will rule. Look for this - a child lying in the manger wrapped with rags."

Suddenly the force of thousands of these angelic heralds crowded the very atmosphere. Their legions shouted louder than any earthly choir, Temple shofar or gong. "Great is God! Higher than the highest heavens! His peace is now wherever He gazes His eye."

The air was heavy; flowery; liquid; unbreathable. The thousands of voices lifted from the Earth, rushing back up to the heavens. Benjamin gasped for breath. He leapt to his feet and rushed, blinking, back to the campfire. All the others were rising from their own slayings. The vision was the same. The image of the baby was the same. They all went at once. And Benjamin knew exactly where to look. The cave of his boyhood.

The stable of his family animals. The cleft in the rock. The hiding place of his childhood games. And here was a wiry man holding a torch up above the manger. Half his frock was missing, a ragged tear for a seam below his waist. An exhausted young woman leaning against the rough wood stroking the baby's head. The child's body bound in strips of his father's shirt, with extra soft cotton sticking out from the windings. The men of the field knelt outside the entrance. The man left his woman's side to approach them.

"We have heard great things about this child," one of the older shepherds said to the man.

"So have I," he replied.

Slowly each man made a cautious approach, Benjamin last. Here the smells of his past welled up and overwhelmed him. The hay, of course. The moss on moist rocks at the rear of the cave. The soft dust of centuries. The cold didn't stop at the entrance of the cave. Benjamin saw a little shudder come over the under-dressed man. Benjamin removed his cloak, shook out the dew and placed it around his shoulders. The man nodded his thanks, removed it and placed it around his wife. She was too much in rapture to notice. The other men left erupting into excited discussion as they headed up to the path toward town. Benjamin turned to follow them. Then he heard the baby stir, opening its eyes.

Innocence looked up at Benjamin and transfixed him. He was suddenly overcome with the words of that strange Temple prophet and the angels. A peace he could not comprehend softened him. His resistance melted. Here was something, someone, beyond value. And deserving of so much more than this cave.

If only they had a few animals to warm them, Benjamin thought. And then it hit him. He walked the mile back to his flock and found the ewe with its almost weaned lamb. His father's pride and joy. Issachar's great hope.

Benjamin led the animals back to the cave. The lamb, beginning to take his own grass, nuzzled and nibbled at the manger. The baby touched his black nose. It jumped a little. Not in fright but almost playful surprise. Benjamin gently led them to the side of the manger where the man sat huddled on the hard ground, the stick pack of his donkey behind him. The two sheep settled down next to him sharing their warmth. Neither of the new parents would sleep much that night, Benjamin knew. But they would have enough warmth to survive. And they were a family. They would have enough.

Benjamin went his way convinced that in some fashion, his father's ambition had been achieved, even though this lamb wouldn't shed its blood. He went his way rejoicing, and hardly knowing *why*.

© 2020, Bram Floria. All Rights Reserved.

May be reprinted with attribution and website address "CompassionRadio.com"



P.O. BOX 2770 | ORANGE, CA 92859 | 800-868-2478 | WWW.COMPASSIONRADIO.COM