

THE LAST SHEPHERD

They sat side by side on the hillside, silently gazing into the starry sky. Finally, the boy spoke. "Would you tell me about that night, Jacob?" The old man said nothing.

The boy asked again. "Please, Jacob. I won't laugh at you. I really want to hear the story." The old man finally turned toward him. "No matter, Peter. The laughing doesn't bother me anymore. My thoughts just don't come as quickly as they did 70 years ago."

"So it's been that long? Seventy years?"

"More than 70. I was about your age. Just a lad. But I remember... as if it were last night." He stared nowhere in particular, his mind lost in another time.

"And the others with you, Jacob? Were they older?"

"Yes. I was the youngest--and probably the most afraid."

Peter paused a moment, then whispered. "Tell me. Please."

Jacob began, "We were alone on the hillside, watching over our sheep. Just as you and I are tonight. Then instantly, like a lightning bolt from heaven, an angel stood among us. Like a blazing fire, he brightened the whole hillside...." The old man paused as the boy interrupted, each thought tumbling over the next. "Did the angel speak to you, Jacob? What did he say? Were you frightened?"

Jacob was sober in his recollection, as one who had told the story many times. "His message stunned us. After thousands of years, the Messiah had finally come, and we would find Him in a stable in Bethlehem. But He would not be a man, but a baby lying in manger. We were too frightened even to speak. Even Eli, who seemed as big as Goliath to me, could not stand up."

Peter could hardly utter his question. "Then what happened, Jacob?"

"When the first angel had spoken, the heavens exploded with others--all singing and praising God. Soon they all disappeared as quickly as the light from a snuffed candle."

"Then you went to Bethlehem?"

"Eli took off first, and I tried to keep up as best I could. We ran from stable to stable until we found the Child."

"Jacob, the boys in the village say you dreamed all these things."

"Yes, I've heard them. But they are mistaken. We all saw the Child... and touched Him. Flesh and blood

"They say you are just an old man who makes up tales about the Child to sound important. All of the other shepherds you claim were with you have been dead for many years, and there is no one left alive to prove your story. They call you 'The Last Shepherd' to make fun of you."

"It is true that I am very old and have outlived all the others who ran to Bethlehem that night. But I am not The Last Shepherd, Peter."

"What do you mean, Jacob? You said that the others were dead."

"They are indeed. But there was another shepherd in the stable that night who is still alive. He is The Last Shepherd."

"But who is this shepherd, Jacob? I don't understand."

The Child, Peter. The Child. Do you know what He called himself when He grew up?"

"Yes! Now I remember. The Good Shepherd!"

"He is also the Last Shepherd, for no others will come after Him to guard and protect His flock."

"But can He prove your stories about Him?"

"Tell me, Peter. How do you get your sheep to come to you?"

"I call them by name, and they come. First one, then another, until all are safely in the fold."

"Exactly. And everyone who sees them respond to your call knows you are their shepherd. And so it is today with The Last Shepherd. He calls His sheep by name, and they gradually go to Him one by one. But a day is coming when He will call all that remain, and the rest of His flock will go to Him at once. Then those who disbelieve will begin to understand."

"When will that be, Jacob?"

"I don't know, lad. I don't know. But with each passing year, I long more and more to hear my name called. I hope it will be on a night much like tonight, here on the hillside, guarding the sheep."

"Could it be tonight, Jacob?"

"Yes, lad. It could be tonight." And they lay back on the grass... listening... as if trying to hear a distant voice.

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."