

25 December 2023

Isaiah 62:6-12
Titus 3:4-7
Luke 2:8-20

The boy sobbed, tears of rage streaming down his grimy cheeks.

“It’s not fair!” he declared. “Just because I’m a shepherd the market traders look at me like I’m a thief. I didn’t ask to be a shepherd: I didn’t choose to be the last-born in my family. I didn’t choose to be among the lowly!”

Old Absalom laid down his staff and sat down on a rock beside the boy. He cupped the boy’s chin in one hand, lifting it so that their eyes met. “I know. I know,” he said softly. “I too didn’t choose this life where others look down on us and instantly suspect us of wrong. It is sad, and it is unfair, and it is hard. But at the same time, Menahem, I rejoice in it because our lowly class has been given an enormous privilege!”

“Wh-what privilege?” Menahem sniffed, looking searchingly into Absalom’s intense eyes.

“The privilege of being witnesses to the birth of the Messiah!”

Menahem started upright. “No! Really? The Messiah?”

“Yes, Menahem, the Messiah,” affirmed Absalom.

“When did it happen? Why don’t I know about this?”

“It is perhaps to my shame that you don’t know about it ... although there are reasons, reasons that have become perhaps even more apparent in recent weeks. But sit down, and I’ll tell you all about it. Make sure though that you keep an eye on our sheep: the story is worth the loss of a lamb at least, but I don’t think our masters would agree...”

Menahem sat on a grassy mound nearby, and, as the old man prepared to begin his tale, cast a watchful eye over the flock quietly cropping the coarse grass on either side, and weighed his cudgel in his hands, ready for danger.

Absalom took a drink from a gourd, cleared his throat and started.

“It was about thirty years ago that it happened. My companions and I were at that time in the hills over yonder, near Bethlehem. Our various flocks of sheep had been penned up together for the night, and we’d looked them over for any scratches or illness. The fire had been lit, the evening meal – a couple of fat ewe’s tails – was roasting, and we were sharing stories of the day’s events and gossiping about the townsfolk.

“All of a sudden, a blazing light appeared on the crest of the hill – almost as if the sun had reversed its course and was rising again where it had just set. We were very frightened: too frightened to run, we just cowered there. Old Hamor nearly fouled himself in the shock!

“Then out of the bright light a voice spoke. It was an angel, a messenger of God Most High. He said, ‘Do not be afraid.’ His voice had authority, like a herald that proclaims the decrees of the governor throughout the towns; but it also had warmth and goodwill to it, and we began to feel strangely reassured.

“‘Do not be afraid,’ the angel said, ‘I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all people.’”

“Good news?” broke in Menahem. “Just like the ‘good news’ we hear all the time from whoever happens to be the Roman emperor at the time: ‘good news, I have an heir’, ‘good news, I have conquered another nation’, ‘good news, I have disposed of this or that enemy.’?” His sarcasm was palpable.

“No, on the contrary, this was indeed good news: news that was good for us ... indeed for the whole world,” replied Absalom. “‘I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all people’” he recited. “‘Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord.’

“Imagine the thrill that surged through our hearts. At last the one promised had come, God’s anointed servant, who would liberate our nation from the Roman oppressors, and who would re-establish us as a nation under God, as the children of

the Most High. Not the so-called *pax Romana*, benefitting those at the top, but a real peace, a wholeness in all things and for all people. This really was good news!”

“Wow!” breathed Menahem. “That’s amazing! But how were you to find this baby, this Messiah? Even in a small place like Bethlehem there must be several births each week and any set of parents might claim that their child was especially anointed by God. We shepherds can hardly go on a door-knocking campaign: imagine the response to a band of us low-life’s appearing at someone’s door in the middle of the night!”

“Well, the angel had a solution to that, telling us of a sign by which we would identify the right baby: ‘You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’”

“A manger? A feeding trough?” spluttered the boy, incredulous. “Of all things! Even my poor parents had a suitable little bed for me.”

“But you see,” replied Absalom, “that was exactly why it would be a sign – because no-one else would do it. Once we’d found the baby I had a chat with the householder – a relative of the child’s father – who told me that the stall was the only space he had left when the couple arrived: other guests were already occupying the guest room. The woman was heavily pregnant and uncomfortable after a long journey, and they needed somewhere urgently. They had all come to Bethlehem for a census, and the baby’s father – a carpenter – was too of King David’s line and therefore had to register there.

“But I’m getting ahead of myself. After the angel told us how to identify the Messiah, he was joined by a great multitude of other angels. They were singing. And what singing it was too! While the angel’s song has firmly stuck in my head for all these years, I would not dare give voice to it because my attempts would defile its beauty.” He paused to wipe a tear from his eyes.

“What were they singing?” asked Menahem eagerly.

“It was a great song of praise, but amazingly one that joined earth and heaven. It went, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.’ Isn’t that wonderful?”

Menahem nodded, as the old man continued his tale. “And when the singing was over, the angels had gone. We were all thunderstruck. When we felt able to speak again, we were of one mind – to follow the angel’s implicit instruction and go to the town and find the baby. And we went straight away, leaving just one of the older men to stay close to the sheep. It took surprisingly little time to find the right place – we’d decided to split up, so that it would be just one person at each door, inquiring of a recent birth – but it seems we were mysteriously led to just the right home. There in the stall was a young couple with a new baby, wrapped against the cold and laid in the feeding trough just as the angel had said. We were awestruck and felt overwhelmed at the privilege of witnessing what the angels had announced. We knelt and gave honour to God and to the baby. The baby’s mother - Mary, her name was – questioned us closely about how we had come to be there...”.

“Well, I guess it would have looked suspicious,” offered Menahem. “A bunch of us good-for-nothings arriving out of the blue wanting to see a baby.” His voice had a note of bitterness in it.

“No, no, you’ve got it wrong. Mary, it seems, was trying to put all the pieces of the puzzle together: she was a no-account girl from up north, not someone of noble birth. She didn’t look down on us. I got the impression that our explanation of why we’d come to be there was important to her, helping her confirm her understanding of what this all meant.”

Menahem, thoughtful now, again cast his eyes out over the sheep.

Absalom paused for another drink, and then continued. “So, you see, when the traders and townsfolk look down on you for being a shepherd, hold your head high because we shepherds have been witness to wonders!”

He sighed, and went on quietly. “You wondered why you’ve not known of this before. Certainly when we left the house where they were staying we told everyone we met what we’d heard and seen. People were amazed; some thought that the shepherds had lost their senses, but others spoke of their wonder and their hope at the prospect that in a few years, when the child had matured into manhood, Israel’s deliverance would be at hand. But it soon became apparent that this was dangerous news to share: just a year or two later Herod was on the warpath, killing all the infant boys in and around Bethlehem, trying to ensure that he and his heirs would have no rival.”

“I see,” said Menahem quietly. “So that’s how it ended eh?”

“I don’t think so,” replied Absalom, “although some among my companions that night seem to think so. Old Zimran is still alive. If you get him in a good mood he’ll talk of that night, but he just chuckles and says there must have been something dodgy in our stew for us all to have had such a weird dream. Dad used to have big arguments with me about it, saying we must have misunderstood the angel’s message and that it was coincidence that we found a baby in a manger. Another among us developed a bit of a following later in life as he camped out on the hillsides waiting for the angels to come back – he just wanted to experience the thrill of it all over again.”

“That’s all a bit pointless,” remarked Menahem. “But what about you? What do you say?”

“Well, I’m a bit mystified. I have great faith in God’s power, and I have reasonable confidence in my own eyes. So when, a year or so ago, people started talking of this Jesus of Nazareth and all that he was saying about the kingdom of God and reconciliation between God and man, and all the signs he was performing, I paid close attention. I’ve made some quiet inquiries of his acquaintances and family, and I’ve become pretty confident that this man must be that child whose birth the angels announced. So I’ve been waiting to see what happens when Jesus decides to form his army and take on the Romans.”

“Oh yes!” said Menahem with fervour.

Absalom shook his head. “But now I’m confused because of the news coming out of Jerusalem: news first of his death during the recent Passover feast – a horrible death by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans – but then news too that people have seen him alive, risen from the dead after a couple of days in the tomb. None of this is what I expected. Risen from the dead? Incredible! So I’m off tomorrow to Jerusalem to see for myself. And I wonder: is God doing something new here? An end to the power of death and to those who trade in that power; the lifting up of the lowly and unworthy; the beginning of peace between God and man – now that really would be something new, something worthy of the angel’s song, genuine good news!”

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