

O Holy Night

Diary of a Shepherd

by Pastor Joseph P. Sugrue

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First Edition

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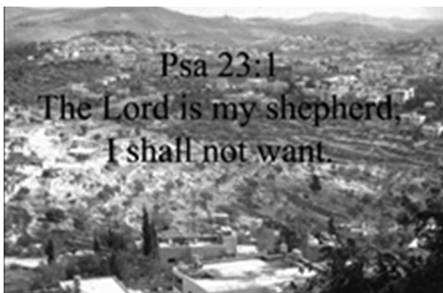
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The Jewish word shalom (peace) means much more than a truce in the battles of life. It means well-being, health, prosperity, security, soundness, and completeness. It has to do more with character than circumstances. Life was difficult at the time of the birth of Christ, just as it is today. Taxes were high, unemployment was high, morals were slipping lower, and the military state was in control. Roman law, Greek philosophy, and even Jewish religion could not meet the needs of men's hearts. Then, God sent His Son!

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In a Rabbinical list of thieving and cheating occupations we find that of the shepherd. This classification of herders as notorious robbers and cheats means that like the publicans and tax-gatherers they were deprived of civil rights, i.e., they could not fulfill a judicial office or be admitted in court as witnesses. The shepherd was considered a thief and unclean.

This discrimination against shepherds on the part of Pharisaic Rabbinism is best understood if one realizes that the independence of the shepherd, who during the summer was on the move with the flock for months at a time with no supervision, constituted a serious temptation to steal some of the increase of the flock. It is worth noting that to buy wool, milk, or a kid from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property. The Rabbinical record asks with amazement how, in view of the despicable nature of shepherds, one is to explain the fact that God is called "my shepherd" in Psa 23:1.



Shepherds were really outcasts in Israel. Their work not only made them ceremonially unclean, but it kept them away from the temple for weeks at a time so that they could not be made clean. Yet this makes clear that God does not call the rich and mighty; He calls the poor and the lowly (Luk 1:52-53; 1Co 1:26-29).

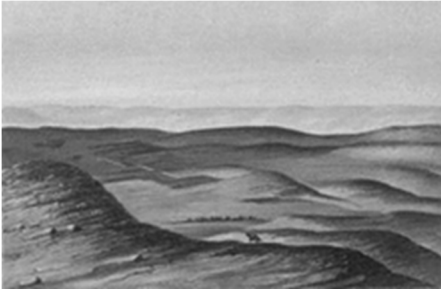
Luk 1:52-53

*"He has brought down rulers from their thrones,
And has exalted those who were humble.*

*"He has filled the hungry with good things;
And sent away the rich empty-handed.*

1Co 1:26-29

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God.



Shepherds are not easily fooled. They are practical men of the world who have little to do with fantasy. If they said that they saw angels and went and found the Messiah, then you could believe them. God selected hardworking men to be the first witnesses that His Son had come into the world. Though shepherds were considered to be at the lowest rung of the social ladder, in His grace, God gave the first

announcement of the Savior's birth to lowly shepherds!

Bethlehem was no greater. Though mentioned by Jacob, it remained for many ages small and unimportant. The name does not appear in the list of villages assigned to Judah by Joshua, nor do we encounter it again until the 17th chapter of Judges. There it states that the young Levite, who subsequently became the first idolatrous priest in Micah's house of gods, and afterward the head of that grand religious apostasy which had its seat in Dan, was of Bethlehem-Judah.

This is not much honor to the place; and the next event in her story is even less creditable, for the terrible catastrophe which befell the tribe of Benjamin was directly connected with a woman of bad character from Bethlehem, as we read in the 19th chapter of Judges.

It is not until the time of Boaz and Ruth that anything pleasant occurs in the history of Bethlehem.

Rut 4:11

And all the people who were in the court, and the elders, said, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel; and may you achieve wealth in Ephrathah and become famous in Bethlehem.

But after that it rose to great celebrity as the birth-place of David.

1Sa 17:58

And Saul said to him, "Whose son are you, young man?" And David answered, "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite."

And, finally, it was rendered forever illustrious by the advent there of David's greater son and Lord.

Mat 2:1-5

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet,

Mic 5:2

*"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity."*

Still, it never became large, and never will, for there is a fatal lack of water, and of certain other natural advantages, necessary to create and sustain a great city.

In 1600 the population was 1500. A man visiting the city in 1860 saw the number of inhabitants to be not more than four thousand. Imagine how small it was in the year our Lord was born. This visitor noted that they were ever distinguished in the great feasts at Jerusalem by their fierce and lawless manners, and if any row occurs they are sure to have a hand in it. It is asserted in this country that there is something in the water of certain places which renders the people sturdy, hard, and fearless, and it is curious enough that people of this character have ever been connected with Bethlehem.



David and his family, his mightiest captains, Joab and others, came from it, and they were fierce, terrible men. Had the water which David so longed for (2Sa 23:15-16) any influence in compacting such bones and sinews, and hardening such spirits?



2Sa 23:15-16

And David had a craving and said, "Oh that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem which is by the gate!" So the three mighty men broke through the camp of the Philistines, and drew water from the well of Bethlehem which was by the gate, and took it and brought it to David. Nevertheless he would not drink

it, but poured it out to the Lord;

The rumor can't be true since David didn't drink the water. But, what is significant is his desire for the water that he used to drink as a shepherd, for David desired to shepherd the sheep of Israel, and as such he is and always will be a type of One such Shepherd who was to come.

Perhaps we can find another influence. Bethlehemites were noted shepherds, even to the time when the angels announced the birth of the Savior. The occupation, in such a region, contributes greatly to educate just that sort of men.



The position of Bethlehem is admirably adapted to call out those elements of character and train them to the utmost perfection. Seated on the summit-level of the hill-country of Judah, with deep gorges descending east to the Dead Sea, and west of the plains of Philistia, the shepherds of Bethlehem had to contend not only with bears and lions, whose dens were in those wild gorges, but also with human

enemies – the Philistines on the west, and Arab robbers on the east. A shepherd of Bethlehem, from childhood, became accustomed to bearing fatigue, hunger, heat, and cold, both by night and by day, and also to brave every kind of danger, and fight with every kind of antagonist. Thus the youthful David learned to sling stones when he led his father's flocks over the hills, and thus was he prepared to conquer Goliath; and so too by defending his charge against bears and lions, he learned to defend against lion-like men in war, and to conquer them.

From this background a fictitious diary is comprised, yet not everything written hereafter is fictitious. It is designed in order to help place the reader in the position of a shepherd witness of the events of this night of nights, or at the least to place his imagination there, as if he was the first to stumble upon such an account from the viewpoint of such a shepherd of Bethlehem.

Diary of Samuel the Shepherd:



My name is Samuel. I am a shepherd in the wilderness of Bethlehem. I have been such since my youth and for so many years I have watched these sheep and the generations of sheep before them. The warmth of the day has turned to the cold of this night.



It has become so dark, yet my eyes are keen and adjusted.



I have to be so or I would not be fit to do what I love to do. You may think that it's a menial job to be out at night watching the silliest and dumbest of creatures that God has put on this earth, but it is not what you may think. Enemies are all around them. In fact, enemies are drawn to them because of their frail nature, and that frail nature is a profit to some and a delicious meal to others. I turn to the left and out there are Arab robbers. I turn to the right and out there are Philistine robbers. And I look all around and there are lurking bears and lions with empty bellies. I carry a sling and a bag of carefully picked stones and in my right hand is a staff of which I am an expert. What one man may see as a blur of shadows I see keenly and clearly. Sheep at the edges of this flock, thousands of yards from me are but dark spots on a barren landscape, yet I can see them stir when an enemy approaches and if he does, man or animal, I will run like a swift wind to that spot and expertly hurl my staff, pointed end slicing through the air with expert precision on that target. I have pierced many a lion and bear and sometimes men who only heard the sound of my javelin after it was through them. I can sling a stone as David did when he faced Goliath and hit him in his fat head, unfortunately my targets are 3 feet smaller but I am accurate none the less.



Yet this night it is quiet, dark, clear, and cold, and how I love this time to think my thoughts that only God and I can hear. I never feel as close to God as I do when I'm out here alone at night.

Psa 63:6-8

*When I remember Thee on my bed,
I meditate on Thee in the night watches,
For Thou hast been my help,
And in the shadow of Thy wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to Thee;
Thy right hand upholds me.*

Isa 26:9

*At night my soul longs for Thee,
Indeed, my spirit within me seeks Thee diligently;
For when the earth experiences Thy judgments
The inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.*

Bethlehem is such a small town for we have a terrible supply of water, but what I love about this place is that I walk the same dirt, grass, and trails as King David once walked upon so many years ago. I know every inch of this place. In the summers we take the sheep up into the mountains to feed on the new grasses and in the falls and winters we take them back into the valleys. For years I have done this as my father David had done. He was fearless and I have learned to be like him. He killed a lion and a bear who had taken his sheep; he actually took those sheep right out of the beast's mouths. The creatures were so insignificant and yet David risked his life for them.

1Sa 17:33-37

Then Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth while he has been a warrior from his youth." But David said to Saul, "Your servant was tending his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went out after him and attacked him, and rescued it from his mouth; and when he rose up against me, I seized him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, since he has taunted the armies of the living God." And David said, "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."



It is to me not only noble, but somehow divine. Doesn't the God of Israel call Himself our shepherd and if so, are not we His sheep. Oh, how I wish He would come. He has not shown Himself to Israel in hundreds of years. I long for Him. I look up at the myriads of stars and remember His promise to Abraham.

Gen 15:5

And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

And Abram believed Him who was able to promise. Yes, Israel has grown large in number, but numbers don't mean anything if there is not a true shepherd to lead them.

My favorite little sheep always come up to me and rub against my legs. I turn over my staff and rub them closer to me with the blunt end and they purr with affection. Oh how I wish God would come to do this to me for I love Him so. This peace that the Romans have brought is no peace at all. Sure we don't war anymore, but I would rather war as I do against the bear if it could bring peace to my heart; a peace that will only come when Israel has fulfilled what God promised my father Abraham with no Romans!

Yet God is patient as He has been with me. I'd be a fool not to recognize that as so many of the zealots do not. Ah, what a world? Forget these thoughts Samuel; your job this cold and dark night is to protect these little lambs. Some of them will go to the Temple for sacrifice and so make sure that the sacrifice doesn't happen too early in the mouth of a lion.



My shift is almost over, for we watch in 3 hour intervals. We bivouac together in tents and we must take shifts for you must be keen out here. As we say, a sleeping shepherd is a dead sheep. I call out my guttural sound and my own sheep come to me. Many are here that are not mine and I watch them, but before I go in, I call my own, for I love my own, and I care for them more than a mother cares for a

newborn child. They are healthy and without disease and I, and don't take this the wrong way, I love them. They run to me and I comfort them. They hear me and I know that they are comforted. Like my children, they depend on me.

I am familiar with the prophet Isaiah that to us would be born a King, a Mighty God from a virgin and the governments would rest on His shoulders. How does a virgin birth a child?

Isa 9:6

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;

And the government will rest on His shoulders;

And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

I don't disbelieve it, for how could Israel be restored to a kingdom? Both seem to me this night just as improbable. I must go in and wake Mordechai, which I always enjoy. It's his shift and I will sleep and hopefully dream the good dreams of deliverance.

[Samuel wrote the rest of his diary on that night's events after he returned to his flock. Segments of it will be interspersed throughout this narrative.]

Luk 2:8-9

And in the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields, and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.

I'm not a man that is easily frightened, but when this happened, when night and darkness that we were all so used to turned to day, and angels appeared in the vault of the dark blue sky as they are on the veil of the Holy of Holies, I was scared half to death. The light was blinding yet we could still see. And then they told us to not be afraid and it was as if the words themselves chased our fears away.

Luk 2:10-11

And the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Did I hear that right? Did he say for all the people and not just Israel? And did he correctly say a Savior who is the Messiah and King and Lord? Heck, did he just say, "for me?"

Luk 2:12

"And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger."

And after the great winged angel spoke there appeared in the vault of the sky a tremendous amount of angels so numerous that they blocked out every star, mountain, sheep, heck, everything and they sang with voices so pure and beautiful that I've never heard before or since.

Luk 2:13-14

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

Did he say peace? Is it Shalom, a peace of the heart and far more than an absence of war? There hasn't been war for decades, yet he speaks of a peace that I feel in my heart. He does mean peace, peace within, the peace of deliverance. Could it be that peace has come to all men, Jew and Gentile, this night? And to us, those who are deemed unclean by the Temple and who cannot even be witnesses in court and cannot even go to the synagogue or Temple like the others? Is he saying to us – peace?

Luk 2:15

And it came about when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us."

Yes, we were not like many, did I tell you how tough shepherds in these parts are? We went to see. We didn't go to see if it was true, we went because it was true. I don't know about all the others but I've been waiting for this night after night since I was a boy. I gotta tell ya, I didn't imagine the Savior of Israel would be announced in this way, but I know it was never up to me to know how, but to know period. I believe. Oh God Almighty, Creator of the vaulted heavens, angels and men, I believe. I must go and see and I know that when I get there, I will see.

[How amazed the angels must have been when they saw the Creator born as a creature, the Word coming as a speechless baby.]

Is that all it takes? Faith. Is that all it is, not the Law that no one could keep, certainly not us, we can't even go to the Temple most times, for who would look after these little sheep? These sheep have more access to the temple than we do. Holy God, is that all it takes is faith in your deliverance and glory? It must, for why would You appear to those such as us? Why didn't they appear to the priests and scribes? My heart is bursting with the thought of it which is growing within me – it is just for me and them and anyone who has faith, Jew Gentile, any. We must go see, leave the sheep to Him, God, Who will deliver man, He must deliver sheep, let us run like we've never run before.

Luk 2:16

And they came in haste and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.



We came upon the cave where the little family was. You might wonder how we knew where it was. I owned this place and Mordecai and a few of the other shepherds owned other caves or stalls that were close by. There are many little caves around Bethlehem where we store animals. We didn't have to look at too many of them before we found them.

And there they were. You wouldn't believe it as I almost thought I was hallucinating. Do you know that feeling that when you run so fast to see something and all the while you form a picture in your mind about what the scene will look like, and then when you finally see it, it is nothing that you imagined? There they were; man, woman, and child, and the child just like the angel had said, wrapped in strips of cloth like they do for dead people. It was almost as if the little child was wrapped in death. I appreciate an irony as much as any person and this was the apex; a newborn wrapped in strips of cloth usually

reserved for dead people, lying in a feeding trough, and surrounded by my own beasts, donkey, cow, etc. It smelled of earth and animals, dark and wet. Who gives birth in such a place, never mind the birth of the Savior of Israel?

When I told the man, Joseph, and the woman, Mary, what we had seen and heard from the angels they didn't actually look that surprised. Joseph told us that Mary was a virgin and that this was not his sired child.

Luk 1:33-34

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

Both of them shared with us that an angel had appeared to them months ago announcing this event, that unto the world a Savior would be born and that they should call Him Jesus.

Mat 1:21

"And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins."

His name was Jesus ... I thought about it for but a second before I laughed, not the flippant laugh like a joke, but the laugh of someone who found a thing that he was looking for in the place where he left it – Iesous, it means “Jehovah is salvation.” It is a common name among the Jews. A common name sure, I have a cousin named Iesous, but this name is not common this night. Of course it is Jesus!

They said that they were both direct descendants of David. This was David's Son. Didn't God tell us that David's son would sit on his throne forever? This is Him. God had not sent a soldier or a judge or a reformer, but He had sent a child to meet man's greatest need. This frail little baby is Him in this feeding trough. What a place for the Savior of the world? He must be protected! Yet God will protect Him, who would dare hurt God's anointed One? As I shepherd my sheep, God will shepherd Him and care for Him and protect Him, and now I know beyond a doubt that God will shepherd me as well.

Isa 40:10-11

*Behold, the Lord God will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His reward is with Him,
And His recompense before Him.
Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs,
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes.*

Mary had tears in her eyes, as did I. When she told me what had happened to her and what she heard from the angel, and I did likewise, it was like I had an instant sister, for we were united in spirit and purpose. No other night in the life of a man was as important as this one, nor as significant, and I will never forget it. But it is not just for me. As the angel said, peace is brought to all men with whom God is pleased. If you are a believer in Jesus, the Savior, and Messiah, and Lord, then you are my brother and sister and to you the angels have come to reveal to you the same truth that I heard, for today, born in the city of David is Christ the Lord.

Luk 2:11-20

[vs. 11]for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [Start of vs 17.]And when they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

Isn't it funny that we, who were not allowed to be witnesses in any court because of our uncleanness, are now the first witnesses of the birth of Christ the Savior? If this isn't God I don't know what is.

We were not allowed to be witnesses in court, but no one could stop us from telling all of Bethlehem about the Savior of Israel being born, and the witness of the angels both to us and the family of David in the cave. Oh, holy night, for hear the angels' voices in ours, it is the night of our dear Savior's birth, oh night divine!

And, yeah, we went back to work, to the same work. So should all of us. One day our feet will be lifted up and never to return, ruling with the angels of heaven, but not yet. Great emotion over the birth of the King and Savior should not stop us from the work that we must do, but now we do it in a very different way, as unto Him. There is a face now associated with our victory in this world. Even the sheep seem even more precious, although I think in my heart that none of them will be needed for sacrifice anymore. Those strips of cloth and that common manger seemed to state that He would be the sacrifice and that He would finally bring peace, not to the world, but to men's hearts where real peace must be.

This is Samuel, a lowly and humble shepherd who was given the privilege of seeing and hearing the proclamation of the Savior of Man. I ask you who are of my kind, my humanity, my flawed and failed human nature, but who are of the kind that desire a Savior for and of yourself, that you remember Him this day and know that He came. He was born, I am an eyewitness, I saw them in my own stable. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is exactly what the angel said and as it turned out, even so much more. On certain days we give gifts to others, but these pale in comparison to the one gift given and that is as the angel said unto me. I wasn't qualified in the minds of the fortunate in this world to be a witness for Christ, I would say to you, with the courage that I now possess, to not care at all about what others may say that you can and cannot do or say,

for that child, just hours old, gave us shepherds more courage than a hundred victorious kings of men. Speak of Him. Shout His name and His birth amongst men, as with us as it will be with you, there will be some who will listen.

Luk 2:11

for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

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“While the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief, and envy. He cannot give peace of heart for which man yearns more than even for outward peace.” [The Stoic philosopher Epictetus]

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