

Lavi--Shepherd of God's People

Ahhhh... It is so good to see you here in this place. I understand that this is a house of worship--and it is very beautiful. I should tell you though, that it is nothing compared to the temple in Jerusalem, the temple of my people. Such a place--the place that we meet God.

I can think of nothing better than the holy-days and the festivals, knowing that God is there waiting, though I would not know too much about those things as we shepherds have never been welcome in our own society--especially in our own temple. Because of the lives we lead, we are considered unclean--not acceptable before God OR man.

ENOUGH about that. Tell me, do you meet God here in this place? <Wait for answer>

WONDERFUL! I would think that nothing is better than being welcomed by the Almighty. <faraway look>

Well, there WAS a time we shepherds were welcomed by God--and I'll tell you, it was even better than going to the temple. It was when I was a boy--a long time ago...

But first, you must pardon me for being an old man and losing my manners. I have not introduced myself. I am Lavi of Bethlehem. My name, Lavi, means young lion.

I once asked my father if I got my name because I was so strong when I was born--and he laughed and said no--it was that I roared so loudly.

Even though "Lavi" began as a joke, when I was a young man I DID have a great mane of hair and WAS tall and strong--and I must say, full of courage. Many times I have fought the wild animals--the bears and even my namesake, with just a staff like this. Pardon my ramblings--because my story comes from even before that. When I was still small.

My father and his brothers were shepherds before me. Every morning they would come from in from the flocks laughing and talking and telling stories of bravery and of adventure--sometimes of things that happened the night before.

As soon as I could walk, I ran to greet them every day. I would crawl into my father's arms and listen to their stories--especially the stories of uncle Ira. He was father's younger brother. He should have had my name--he was strong and smart like a lion--but he was as big as a mountain. His name means "watchful" and God forbid that he see anyone or anything threatening the sheep...

I would beg to go the fields every afternoon, but my mother always shook her head and father would say "no." I think my uncle Ira was always as disappointed as me.

On that particular afternoon, uncle Ira protested. "Ah, but it is the day of Lavi's birth--a special day--and he is truly becoming a young lion--maybe he is ready tonight."

Mother raised her eyebrows, "I hear the stories and I know it is dangerous out in the dark."

Uncle Ira told her he would stay with me every moment, but she wouldn't budge. She was winning again, but father raised his hand to stop the discussion. "He is ten years old today. If Ira promises to

keep him safe, that is good enough for me--he may go.”

I would have been ready faster--but mother kept sending me back to get more cloaks--several times. “It will be cold tonight...”

When I had everything ready, Ira laughed and reminded me it was hours until time to go.

It seem like a lifetime before the sun began to go down and we started off. When we got to the flocks, the fires were already lit to keep away the animals and for keeping warm.

I never expected it to be so cold. And I never expected it to be so quiet. The fire looked good.

Then there were the sounds--which ones were animals? WHAT animals were they? I shivered and moved closer to uncle Ira. “Afraid?”

“No, just cold...” I was lying. I’m sure he knew. Father came and went several times, but true to his word, Ira stayed with me at the fire. He told stories about being a shepherd and he told stories about our people--about Moses and the prophets.

I liked the stories about us being God’s chosen people--and especially about the Messiah.

As the night wore on, I leaned back further and he wrapped his arms around me and I closed my eyes. What a wonderful night...

I snapped awake as uncle Ira stood and I dropped from his lap to the ground.

“Wha...wha...what happened?” I was rubbing my eyes. Ira was not looking at me--and soon I wasn’t looking at him either. “Shhhhh...” He put his hands around my shoulders and pulled me close.

First there was a light. It got brighter and brighter and brighter... Maybe there was quiet singing, but I’m not sure. The light alone was enough to wake us. It was as almost bright as the day.

Again I asked, “what...” but Ira shushed me and squeezed tight.

As we looked toward the light--suddenly a figure appeared right in front of us. It was a person, but it wasn’t. He was tall and strong-looking and, well, he was BEAUTIFUL! Looking at his face made my heart beat fast and I could hardly breathe--and Ira, Ira began to tremble--and I knew if he was afraid, we were in trouble.

Ira took a step back and knelt on the hard cold ground. As he did, he wrapped is arms tighter around me and wrapped his robes around me so that nothing was showing but my face and eyes--he was going to protect me, no matter what.

As I looked through his beard, I could see and hear everything.

I looked around and uncle Ira and I were the only ones upright--every other man near us was lying on the ground, shaking in fear.

“Wha...wha...wha...” I said again.

This time uncle Ira replied, “an angel from God, it HAS to be an angel from God...”

The angel spoke. I don’t remember exactly what he said, something about peace and good news and about a baby--the Messiah--being born. I do remember that as soon as he spoke, I knew there was nothing to be afraid of. The men around us began to stand and to smile and to listen. Some fell to their knees, praising God and praying.

Then dozens of angels joined him and it WAS brighter than daytime--THE LIGHT WAS COMING FROM THEM!

They began to sing praise to God and sing of peace--of this wonderful night and the birth of the Messiah. As the light got brighter, they sang louder and louder and then, as suddenly as it all started, they were gone.

Silence. Dark. Only the fire crackling.

Father had been out with the flock. Now he stepped into the firelight. “Did you hear and see?” he asked Ira. “Yes, we must go to Bethlehem to see--to see the Messiah, the king.” Some men stayed with the sheep, but we started for Bethlehem immediately. Sometimes we walked in silence and sometimes with shouts and sometimes with murmured questions and wonder.

“If God really sent the Messiah tonight, why didn’t the angels appear in the temple?” “Did we really see it?” “Why would God come to us shepherds--outcasts among our own people?”

We finally got to Bethlehem and I’d never seen so many people.

Standing or sitting around small fires. Some were even lying in the streets and against the buildings--resting and trying to sleep. Uncle Ira said it was the Romans’ fault, but I didn’t really understand.

It took a while, but we found the baby--and he was exactly like the angels said--in a stable—in a feed trough. I wondered how this could be any king, let alone the Messiah.

He was much more like us shepherds than he was like the priests and the people who were supposed to know God best. He was lying in a dirty, dusty stable with animals--and now filled with unclean shepherds.

I know religious people wouldn’t like any of it--but especially the part where we were invited by angels.

As we stepped in out of the cold, we told the man and woman what had happened and what we had seen--well father and uncle Ira did—no one else could find their voices. They were gracious but a bit puzzled and the baby seemed—well, he seemed just like any baby. They were tired so we left soon.

The men danced and grabbed people and shouted, “guess what happened?” “There is a baby, sent by God...” and lots more.

Some people stirred and walked toward the stable. Some muttered “drunk or crazy or worse...” But

we didn't care. We shouted and danced our way back to the fields and to the fires--but no one slept and everyone talked--wondering what it meant for God to come to US in the night. Shepherds of all people.

Many years have passed and I have been taking care of the sheep since that night. As I said, I have fought with lions and bears. I have protected my lambs from raids and thieves and storms. But never has a night been like that one.

The first night--the night of his birth. It was months later that I realized something--that God's gift was given on MY birthday. Every year, I celebrate that night and the day of our birth.

For a long time, I wondered why God came to us, lowly unclean shepherds--why we were the first to know of his birth.

Finally it came to me--this gift was not just for the privileged or for the priests or the important people. God's gift of his Son is also for the least of us.

Least or greatest, we must never forget God's love belongs to each of us--you and me.