

Christmas Eve Midnight Mass

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

It was a night just like tonight.
It was late and dark.
Humid and warm.

You people always think it snowed.
It no more snowed there
than it does here!

Besides, you'd never find *me*
wandering out in the snow. Oh no!
Not with *my* flock.

But it *was* dark,
and it *was* late,
and *we ... were ... tired*.

Truth be told,
we didn't mind being out
under the stars that night,
away from all the 'business.'
Back in town it was a *mad house*.

The Emperor—
in all his imperial wisdom—
had called for a census.

'Everyone back to your home town!
Everyone back where you belong!
It's time to count.'

Ugh. What a headache.
What a nightmare.
People coming and going
from all over.

There's only ever one reason
why they do that, you know.
Taxes.

Oh, the governor was most excited of all.
More people on the census
meant more money in his coffers, too.

Those days, *everyone* was talking about
big people,
big changes,
big things coming our way.
'Make the province great again!'
Heh. They had no idea.

So, with all that going on, we said,
'Who cares? Let's go.
We'll take the sheep.
We'll wander far.
We'll sleep in the fields.
No one will miss us.
No one will care.'

You see, when you're people like us,
the census doesn't matter.
When you're people like us,
you don't count anyway.

* * *

Of course, it didn't always used to be that way.

These days people call us
'filthy' and 'dirty.'
They look down on us.
Mock us.
Avoid us.
Revile us.

They see the sunburn on our faces,
the callouses on our hands,

the dung and the dirt on our toes . . .
and they call us *animals*.

We shepherds are the last reminder
of the old nomadic lifestyle,
something they wish they could forget.

But don't they know?
Don't they remember
that the greatest king
our people ever had . . .
was a shepherd like me?
(They don't call Bethlehem,
the city of David for nothing!)

But it has been a long, long time
since David was king . . .
and a lot of things have changed.

Do you know what breaks my heart the most?
Do you know what hurts above all else?
The temple priests.
Even they despise us.

Let me tell you a secret.
I'm not just *any* shepherd.
My sheep aren't just *any* sheep.
I have a *special* job, an *important* job.
Right there in Bethlehem,
just a two-hour walk from Jerusalem,
my job is to tend the Temple flock.
Mine are the 'lambs without blemish'—
the choicest in all the land!—
used by the priests in every temple sacrifice.

I keep their lambs for them;
I guard them night and day;
I protect them with my very life.

But because I live in the fields,
because I can't keep the rituals,

because I'm always 'unclean' . . .
to them, I'm just another outcast . . .
just another necessary inconvenience.

Have you ever—
even once in your life—
felt completely
unwanted,
unworthy,
unloved?

Then you know
what my life was like.

Until that very night.

* * *

Of course,
I know you know what happened.
I know you've already heard the story.

But how can words do it justice?
How can we possibly recount
what really happened?

There we were,
finally resting and reclining
on the cool, damp grass,
staring up at the stars in the sky,
when all of a sudden, right before us,
there was a kind of shimmering, a shining . . .
something strange, and hopeful, and warm . . .

Then all of a sudden, **BAM!**
With the light of a thousand suns
this 'thing' stood before us!

Everything about it
filled me with joy and hope,
with *dread and fear*.

We wanted to run,
but we couldn't move.

And then, clear as a bell,
straight to my heart,
it spoke three words:
'Be . . . Not . . . Afraid.'

I say it 'spoke,'
but to this day,
I don't know how.
I don't know if the thing had a mouth.
I don't even know if it had a face.
I just know that
somewhere deep inside me
I could hear it.
I *knew* exactly what it wanted me to know.

'Listen,' it said.
'I have come with news of great joy.
For *you*, for *you*, for *you*:
A helper has come.
A savior is here.
Born in the city of David.
He is the messiah, the Christ, the Lord.
Go . . . go and find the baby
lying in a manger.'

Tears flooded my eyes
and questions crowded my head.

'For *us*?'
'For *me*?'
'In *David's* town? The *shepherd's* town?'
In a *manger*?
With *animals*?

Then before we knew it,
the sky lit up with an explosion of majesty:
a thousand dancing stars and moons,
all calling and yelling,

‘Glory to God! Glory to God!
Peace to his people on earth!’

And then,
quick as it had begun,
it was over.

We looked at each other.
We didn’t say a word.
We got up, and we RAN.

We left those sheep, and we ran to town.
People yelled as we bumped them on the streets.
They thought we were drunk!

But as we rounded the corner, we saw it.
Just as we had been told:
a tiny, wrinkly, brown little baby boy,
lying where the animals eat.
And there was a woman, too, and a man,
sleeping where the animals sleep.

The place smelled
like dust and dirt,
like water and blood,
like sweat, and hay, and dung.
It smelled like . . . heaven.
It smelled like *home*.

The mother looked up at us
as though she had been expecting us,
and with barely a whisper she said,
‘It’s okay. You can hold him.’

And so, I did.
I reached down,
and I scooped him up.

You know, when they’re brand new,
they’re so small.

It's like they can fit
right in the palm of your hands.

So I pulled him close,
and with my dirty, weather-worn hands,
I held him.

How can I describe it?

It was . . . promise.
It was . . . love.
It was . . .
it was . . .
it was . . . *communion*,
if that makes any kind of sense.

I never wanted to let him go.

* * *

You know,
I know who I am
and who I'm not.
I'm a nothing.
A nobody.
I don't count.
I never have.

But in that moment
I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt
that the Lord our God,
had placed in *my* hands
the most precious thing
the world has ever known.

A lamb without a blemish.
A king for David's throne.
A priest who could love a sinner like me.

Heh. They all said something 'big' was coming.
What did they know?

What I know is this:
young or old,
rich or poor,
dirty or clean,
slave or free . . .
our God
has not
forgotten us.

O how he loves us,
more than even
the angels can say.

And as crazy as it sounds,
the greatest gift
he has ever given . . .
fits right . . .
in the palm . . .
of your hands.

Amen.