



Pictures of Christmas

The Missing Shepherd: A Picture of Faithfulness

Have you ever wondered, “Who stayed with the sheep?” Think about it - angels appear with fantastic news of the baby “who is Christ the Lord.” The shepherds hear the news and get ready to head to Bethlehem. Suddenly, one of them says, “Wait! Someone has to stay with the sheep!”

I know – in our living nativities, the sheep are at the manger with the shepherds. It makes a charming nativity scene, but it couldn't have happened that way. Sheep are slow; they are hard to manage, and there were dozens of them. The shepherds did not take an entire flock to Bethlehem! But they couldn't simply leave the sheep alone. Someone had to stay behind to watch them and protect them from wild animals.

One shepherd was not at the manger; he stayed with the sheep. Who was this missing shepherd?

First, the missing shepherd was someone who was willing to do the lowest task. He was the person who always said, “I can do that job if no one else wants to do it. I don't mind.” He was the person who did willingly the tasks no one else wanted to do.

Behind many of the exciting stories in the Bible is someone who does the lowly jobs, someone who is usually invisible. Read through the book of Acts and you will never see the name of Luke. He is invisible. We know he wrote the book because of early church tradition, but his name is not given anywhere in Acts. He traveled with Paul, but the only times we see this is when the pronoun changes. When Luke joins the party, “They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia” (Acts 16:6) becomes “We sought to go on into Macedonia” (Acts 16:10). Luke never talks about his role in Paul's mission. He never uses a hashtag #DoingGreatThingsForJesus or posts a photo of “Paul and me evangelizing the Roman Empire.”

Luke is invisible, but he is faithful. Remember that Luke was a medical doctor - and Paul needed lots of medical care. Someone had to bandage him up after a beating; someone had to take care of his ailments. According to Roman law, a citizen like Paul had the right to take one slave with him when he went to prison. Early church tradition says that Luke

volunteered to be that slave in order to serve the Apostle Paul. Luke valued faithfulness over splash.

Second, the missing shepherd was reliable. The other shepherds knew, “He will do his job. He won’t fall asleep or wander off. The sheep will be safe; we can rely on him.” He was not flashy, but he was reliable. You could count on him.

All through Scripture, we see minor characters who are essential to the story because they are reliable. The Magi travel across the desert to see the young Jesus. In our nativity scenes, we show them on their camels carrying their gifts. But the wise men did not feed and water their camels. Servants guided the Magi through the desert, cared for the camels, set up the tents at night, and carried the packages of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Servants who had no choice. Servants who had not read prophecies of a coming King. Servants who were merely doing their job. But they were faithful to their task.

We see this faithfulness in another family story. Mordecai helps to save the nation of Israel. Queen Esther is the instrument of their salvation. But there is an unimpressive servant, “one of the king’s eunuchs,” who has been appointed to serve the Queen. Esther would have never known about the plot against the Jews if Hathach had not been a faithful servant. He is the one who brings the message from Mordecai. He doesn’t get much attention, but he was reliable.

Third, the missing shepherd played a part in God's great story of salvation. I like to think this shepherd volunteered for the task, but to be honest, I don’t know if he volunteered or if he was simply the low man on the totem pole. Maybe he was the youngest shepherd, so the others said, “Sorry, but you can’t go. You have to take care of the sheep.” But whether he was a volunteer or a draftee, the missing shepherd played a part in God’s story.

While the other shepherds were at the manger, the missing shepherd was quietly playing a tiny in God's big story. Again, go through Scripture and you will find dozens of people like this.

Naaman gets his name in the Bible because he's healed of leprosy. It’s a wonderful story: a Syrian general healed by a Jewish prophet. But Naaman would not have known about Elisha except for a Jewish servant girl who said to her master, “There is a prophet in Israel who can heal you.” She didn't choose to be there; she was a slave. But she played a part in God's great story.

It is exciting to have a leading role in the nativity play. Children argue over who gets the part of Mary and Joseph. Even the shepherds and wise men appear onstage. But, if God

assigns you to take care of the sheep, will you be faithful? Will you play your small part in God's big story?