

Night of angels

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [November 14, 2006](#) issue

Mordecai was snoring loudly beside the fire. The eight young shepherds stood there looking at each other, unsure of what to do next. Simeon patted his belt, checking for his pouch and sling. Then he moved away and sat on a rock just beyond the faint glow coming from the small fire.

“What are you doin’?” asked Nun.

“Someone’s supposed to stay back from the fire to protect his night vision. I’ll take the first shift.”

The others nodded or grunted their approval, then found seats around the fire. There was the usual boasting, talk of girls, cursing and telling of stories, all punctuated by occasional bursts of laughter and bodily noises. But after a while, they all settled down and talked softly or dozed.

The moon slid across the sky, sinking lower. The night air grew colder. The young men took turns sitting away from the fire and keeping their eyes on the flocks. Mordecai snored away. Hananiah fell asleep during his watch, which came near the middle of the night, and was awakened rather roughly by Obed when it was his turn. Hananiah wandered back over to the fire, dropped to the ground, and yawned.

Obed turned his eyes to the meadow. Everything seemed peaceful enough. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, he turned and looked down toward the creek. It was at that moment that something began tickling the edges of his mind. Before he could put words to the feeling, he was already becoming nervous. He stood up and looked hard into the darkness, his eyes instinctually moving around the edges of the herd. He stared for a few long minutes before he realized what he was seeing. The herd was agitated. They weren’t bolting with fear, but they were moving, milling, stamping their feet. Something was making them uncomfortable.

Obed rose to his feet and stood atop a large rock for a better view. He gave a low whistle, and the men around the fire grew silent and turned to look at him. When they saw him standing on the rock, they left the fire and came to him.

“What’s goin’ on?” asked Baruch.

Obed kept his eyes on the herd. “I don’t know. There’s somethin’ wrong. Somethin’s different.”

“Look at them,” offered Lemuel. “They’re all just kind of movin’ around. Uneasy or something.”

Suddenly the herd grew silent and still. Not a sound came from the meadow. Not a bleat or a clatter of hooves on rocks. The mood of the sheep infected the shepherds, and suddenly no one felt like laughing or telling stories any more. Something was wrong.

They began to head back toward the fire and were just on the edge of its light when they realized—all of them in the same instant—that there was a strange man among them. He certainly hadn’t walked over the rocks and up to the fire; they would have heard him. There was no explanation for his presence. He wasn’t there, and then he was.

No one spoke because there was something wrong about this man. He seemed too solid, too heavy, too anchored to the ground. Later, when they tried to explain this to people, they would say that he was more real than anything around him. Compared to him, the rocks and trees seemed light and airy and impermanent, as if they might crumble and fall apart. When people asked if it might have been a dream, they would laugh and say that this man was no dream. If anything, he was real and they and everything else in the meadow that night were dreams.

They clustered together and backed toward the fire, leaving the man at the edge of the light. Mordecai stirred in his sleep, snorted once or twice, then rolled over.

There was a pause while the strange man looked at the shepherds, and all the sheep were silent for perhaps the only time in history.

And then he spoke. When they heard the sound of that voice, they all knew that they were in the presence of a mighty angel of the Lord God Most High. Not a one of them doubted it for the rest of their lives, though most people would never believe them.

The voice was deeper and more vibrant than the shuddering death-groans of a falling tree. It sounded as though the hills beneath their feet had cracked open and

found a voice. It was like a mountain shaking with laughter. The vibrations pouring from the angel's mouth tickled their bodies as if someone was drawing a giant bowstring across their midsections. The voice was SO-VERY-LOUD.

There were two syllables in what it said, and the pounding sound of each syllable caused them to flinch.

The angel said, "Fear not."

"Fear not" is one of the standard opening lines that angels use to calm humans when they meet them, but it rarely does any good, and it certainly didn't do any good on this night. At the first sound coming from the angel's mouth, all eight shepherds fell flat on their faces. They were shaking and clinging to the earth as if crawling back into the dust from which they came might save them this night.

The angel's shocking voice awoke Mordecai. He jumped up with a frightened shout and saw the young shepherds falling to the ground at the edge of the firelight. Thinking that they were fighting and perhaps drinking, he stomped over to them, waving his staff and cursing. But his anger shriveled into cold terror when he saw the angel. His staff fell from his hands. Some of the young men looked up from the ground and saw Mordecai, standing perfectly still, staring at the angel with his mouth hanging open.

Then the angel began to speak again. All of the young shepherds turned their faces back to the ground and put their shaking hands over their ears. When Mordecai heard the sound of the angel's voice, he started screaming and did not stop. He might have spoiled the angel's message, but he strained so hard in screaming that his voice gave out almost immediately. He kept screaming, mind you, but after that his voice was nothing more than a scratchy sound.

The message of the angel was simple but astonishing. It said, "I bring you glad tidings of a great joy that is for all the people of the world. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

Then the angel fell silent. After a few moments, the shepherds raised their heads and stared. The painful, scratchy sound that was coming from Mordicai grew fainter until it was gone. He closed his mouth and stood there panting.

The angel lifted its face, looking at something behind them, and began to walk toward the fire. The shepherds dropped their staffs and scrambled, falling over each other in their panicked attempts to get out of its way. The angel's steps thudded heavily into the earth, crushing the vegetation and pressing rocks deep into the soil. It passed through the fire without even noticing it, scattering the burning wood across the ground. Sparks filled the air.

Lemuel's staff was lying beyond the fire. The curved head was a little off the ground, for it was resting on the flat top of a small rock. The angel continued walking without the slightest regard for anything in its path. One of its feet came down on Lemuel's staff, and the wood didn't slow its descent even for an instant. There was a loud snap, and when the angel lifted its foot, Lemuel's staff had been broken cleanly in two.

Lemuel cried out and ran over to the broken staff, but the other shepherds didn't notice. They were looking beyond Lemuel to the rocky hillside. On that hillside stood an army of angels. The one who had given them the strange message melted into the crowd of angels milling around on the hillside.

Lemuel had been kneeling, looking at his father's broken staff, but now he rose and joined the others in staring. It almost seemed that the hillside would buckle under the weight of those dense, angel bodies. There was some shuffling and then all the angels became still. There was the sound of crickets and a single, drawn-out bleat from a sheep.

And then the angels began to sing.

The sudden onslaught of beauty drove the shepherds' fear away and filled them with a joy that few humans will ever know. They froze, whether standing or sitting, some with their hands over their mouths, and no one moved until the singing was done.

It seemed as if the stars had burst into song. Voices as deep and strong as an ocean combined with others as delicate as the whisper of a hummingbird's wings to make a harmony that would be heard only on this one night, on Earth.

"Glory to God in the highest," they sang. "In the highest heavens. And on Earth, even on this Earth let there be peace for all humankind."

For the rest of their lives, the shepherds would long for the sound of that singing, but their minds would not be able to retain it or explain it. The only thing that was left to them was a deep and grievous longing for something that they could not quite remember. It was like a word or a song on the tip of their tongues, but just out of reach. As old men they would occasionally think they heard angels singing in a child's laugh or in the rushing of a fast river. When that happened, the longing would open in them again, like an ancient wound.

Like all people who witness beauty of an uncompromising purity, they were never the same again.

The angels were gone before the sound of their singing left the hills. The last of it reverberated in the night sky and faded.

The shepherds held one another and wept.

This article is one chapter from "The Shepherd's Story," a new audio book by Gordon Atkinson, available at www.reallivepreacher.com/Christmas

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