

THE SOUL FELT ITS WORTH

A Short Christmas Story Inspired by Luke's Gospel, Chapter 2

CORELLA ROBERTS

O HOLY NIGHT, THE STARS ARE BRIGHTLY SHINING,
IT IS THE NIGHT OF OUR DEAR SAVIOR'S BIRTH

Sleep tugged at his eyelids as Rishon gazed into the cloudless night sky. A myriad of stars dappled his view, but tonight he took no comfort in tracing the familiar outlines of the warrior or the bear. Tonight the stars felt distant and cold, like a million eyes glaring at him. Their effervescent light flickered joy for someone else, but for him, they only enumerated his failures.

He leaned his head back against the cold stone of the sheepfold and pressed his legs against the opposite side of the entrance. To his right, a lamb bleated sharply in a piercing yelp of pain, but Rishon didn't look toward the direction of the cry. He didn't have to. He knew it was the one he affectionately called Nirel—the one he lost track of yesterday who slid down an embankment and caught a broken branch on the inside of his tender thigh. The gash ran deep and nearly to his belly, but Nirel would live. Not until Passover as intended, though. Only the perfect lambs could be presented to the Lord. Poor Nirel would be sold before then for mere denarii, practically discarded as worthless.

Rishon's hand came to his mouth where he absentmindedly covered his separated lip. He couldn't talk normally, drink without dribbling, or smile at someone without receiving a look of disgust in return. He knew what it felt like to be blemished. Unworthy. Tossed aside. And his distracted negligence had brought that same fate on his favorite little lamb. He scrunched his eyes shut against the accusatory sky as a hot tear slid down his cheek.

LONG LAY THE WORLD, IN SIN AND ERROR PINING,
'TIL HE APPEARED AND THE SOUL FELT ITS WORTH

A bump to his knee startled Rishon back to wakefulness and he raised his staff quickly to block the hopeful escapee. "Oh, no you don't! Get back in there," he scolded. The ewe eyed him for a moment before meandering back to the dozing herd. Rishon rebuked himself for falling asleep, knowing that losing a ewe in the night would earn him far more disgrace than even yesterday's mishap with Nirel.

He stood to stretch and drew the attention of his brothers by the fire.

"Need to switch?" called Zenoa, who stood to his full, impressive height in a gesture of readiness.

“I guess so,” Rishon lisped. It wasn’t that he didn’t appreciate his big brother’s help, it was just that he always seemed to need it. In every area where Rishon failed, Zenoa excelled—he was brawny and smart, intuitive and attentive. Everything that Rishon wasn’t.

Rishon took his place next to young Madai by the fire. Turning his anger outward, he chided, “Hey, quit poking it like that. Those sparks will set this field ablaze in no time.” Madai scowled in disapproval of his brother’s reproach and continued to stab at the burning embers.

“Didn’t you hear—” Rishon started in on Madai again, but at that moment a jumping spark seemed to catch the wind and soar above them, growing in size and brightness as it rose.

Rishon and Madai scrambled backward to escape the unusual flame, when it burst into the form of a man, still aglow, whose radiance turned the hills to waves of shimmering light and made the air feel thick like water.

Unable to think or move or speak, Rishon stared in terror as Madai crouched next to him. He vaguely heard Zenoa’s voice, trembling as he questioned the flame-man’s identity.

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” The voice was both gentle and commanding, quiet to the ears but booming to the heart.

Slowly, the thought that this visitor might be a messenger from God reached the surface of Rishon’s mind. He glanced at his brothers, just to make sure they were seeing this, too. The wonderment on their faces left no doubt.

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born...” the messenger paused and turned his face toward Rishon before finishing his statement, “...for you.”

Me? Rishon blinked and met the angel’s gaze. He thought it almost looked as if the messenger smiled.

“He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” As the angel spoke, an image took shape in Rishon’s mind. A young mother. A watchful father. A snugly wrapped babe on a bed of straw. A cramped stable built onto the side of a house that he recognized. A street that he knew.

The mental picture vanished and the stars, which had appeared so distant just hours ago seemed to rush toward the earth and surround them.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests,” the starry host proclaimed. Their chant rose and fell, carrying Rishon into the song like a small boat in a wild and beautiful sea. He fell to his face and let the current of glory toss his soul heavenward.

He knew the angels were gone before he looked up, but he could still feel the crackling air, like a cold heat, making the hair on his arms stand up.

Madai gripped his shoulder. “What *was* that?!” he shrieked.

“An announcement,” Rishon replied, his voice surprisingly steady. He rocked back on his heels and surveyed the quiet hills, the waning fire, the mellow sheep, who appeared completely unaffected by the mysterious visitors. “The birth announcement of the Messiah.”

Zenoa held his post as the gate to the sheepfold, but he leaned against the rocks in a way that made Rishon suspect the entrance was actually upholding him. “I... I... do you...” he stammered. Trying again, he spit out, “We need to remember what they said! What was it? A baby? A manger?”

Enjoying this unusual moment of having the upper hand over Zenoa, Rishon grinned. “Yeah, I remember. And I know where to go, too.” He stood and grabbed his staff. Meeting his brothers’ blank expression, he laughed, “Well? Are you coming with me?”

Midai jumped up and scampered to his side. Zenoa looked back at the sheep, concern on his brow. Glancing around, he spotted a couple of large rocks. “Help me block the entrance,” he commanded. The brothers obeyed, and moments later they were bounding out of the field toward the glow of Bethlehem in the distance.

A THRILL OF HOPE, THE WEARY WORLD REJOICES,
FOR YONDER BREAKS A NEW AND GLORIOUS MORN

Rishon’s lungs burned and Madai protested behind him, but he couldn’t stop now. He wouldn’t. They were going to meet the long-awaited *Messiah*, Israel’s promised deliverer!

Almost there now. He ran through the dark streets, zigzagging through alleyways until he saw it—the stable in his mind’s eye. A flickering light shone over the stone walls as the shepherd boys charged up to the entrance, panting.

They were met by a young man, barely older than Zenoa. “Whoa! What’s the emergency?” He took stock of them, then asked, “Did you lose your sheep? They’re not in here.”

Rishon glanced over the man’s shoulder, spotting a female figure in the corner as Zenoa answered, “No. Uh, I’m so sorry. We didn’t mean to disturb you.” He grabbed Rishon’s arm and started to turn away.

Rishon jerked loose. He looked at the young man's kind face and decided to try their wild tale. But the more he told of the flame-man and the chorus of stars, the more self-conscious he became of both his own lisp and their apparent insanity.

"Yosef," a woman's voice from the corner called, "let them in."

Yosef smiled and stepped aside. Rishon hesitated before entering the stable, but, at the sound of a baby's small whimper, all his excitement swept over him again and he practically ran to the manger.

There he was. Just as the messenger had said. Just as he'd seen in his mind. A tiny baby, snugly bundled in strips of cloths so as to almost look as if he were prepared for burial.

The young mother whispered, "I've seen an angel, too. He told me to name the baby Yeshua."

An awed silence settled over the three boys as they studied the sleeping infant. *The salvation of Yahweh, right here, so small and fragile*, Rishon, thought. *Maybe you don't have to be impressive to be important.* Little Yeshua scrunched his face and pursed his lips. The boys laughed.

"We should go now," Zenoa said, but Rishon caught a hint of reluctance in his voice.

The mother must have, too, because she offered, "You can come back tomorrow if you'd like."

"Okay!" piped Midai. "Can we bring our parents, too?"

"Of course," she laughed.

Midai charged out into the street, bouncing up and down as he listed off everyone they had to tell. "Oh, do you think Uncle Chaim would let them stay in his workshop? That would be a whole lot better than a stable! C'mon!"

Rishon and Zenoa galloped after him as dawn cast its glow over the cobblestone streets of Bethlehem. But before turning the corner, Rishon paused, wanting just one last glimpse of the birthplace of the Chosen One.

The first rays of sun were sliding heavenward from directly behind the stable. From Rishon's vantage point, it almost looked ablaze, haloed in dawn's glory. He looked skyward, away from the brilliant light, to where the last stars winked at him. He heard the angels' voices in his heart again. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." *He* was favored. *He* had been chosen to meet the newborn Savior. *He* had been seen by Yahweh.

And with arms stretched heavenward in thanks, Rishon's soul felt its worth.

FALL ON YOUR KNEES;
OH, HEAR THE ANGEL VOICES!
O NIGHT DIVINE! O NIGHT WHEN CHRIST WAS BORN.

Written by Corella Roberts, Dec. 18, 2020

Story inspiration and angelic quotes taken directly from Luke 2:8-20, NIV.

“O Holy Night” original words by Placide Cappeau (1847). Translated by John S. Dwight.