

The Song of the Stars (The Good Shepherd)

Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34:1-6; John 10:11-16 (IV Easter B)

for children of all ages, given May 3, 2009 at the Union Church of Bay Ridge, ©2009 Mary B. Speers, pastor

Little David was a singer-songwriter, and like most singer-songwriters, he had a day job. Little David took care of his father's sheep.

This was in Bible times, a long time ago, even longer ago than Jesus, even longer ago than the prophet Ezekiel. It was about a thousand years before Jesus was even born, so that's about three thousand years ago.

Think of Samuel as a big-time talent scout, the *original* kingmaker. He was so powerful that people said he could even foretell the future. He picked King Saul, and now here he is, coming up from Jerusalem to see David's father.

In Bethlehem, David's father was a man who mattered. He had a big farm, and he was wealthy enough, and important enough, that he'd even sent a coronation present to King Saul a few years ago. He had eight sons (and maybe some daughters), and that's why David had to take care of the sheep: he wasn't going to inherit any land, being the eighth son and all, so he needed a way to make a living. But his father being pretty well off would also explain how come young David had a harp—they're pretty expensive—and being a shepherd would explain how he had a lot of alone time to think, and write his songs, and plenty of time alone to practice...

But I'm getting ahead of the story, and you're going to hear a lot more of it over the summer, because this year is the year you hear all about King David and the whole soap opera of the kings (and a few queens) of ancient Israel in your Old Testament readings, all summer long. Still, it couldn't hurt to give you a little outline today of some of it, just in case you might miss a week or two later on.

So here's Samuel, and he's at the house of Jesse, who is young David's father. And Samuel asks to see all of Jesse's sons one by one, kind of like Cinderella's prince, or Merlin maybe, and it's kind of your standard once-upon-a-time story: each of the eight sons of Jesse has a lot going for him, but none of them is quite right, and finally, but only after Samuel asks if there maybe isn't one more, *finally* they call for little David, who, of course, is the right one all along, and is out watching the sheep. And immediately Samuel the prophet, the kingmaker, breaks open the little bottle of olive oil, right on David's head: "You will be king!" he says—and then off he goes.

And little David doesn't even have time, right then, to wonder what that might mean. He has a lot to do.

He has to get back to the sheep and take them to green pastures. When they are finished munching all the stalks of the spring wheat and barley harvest, right

down to the nub, he has to take them over to another green pasture so they can start all over again eating there. Sheep eat a lot.

And then when they're thirsty from walking around eating in the sun, he has to lead them down to the valley stream to drink, and once they get there, he has to find a quiet pool where they won't slip in and drown, or be swept away by the rising spring currents.

And down in that valley, there is danger. They are hemmed in on all sides, and the lions come down to the stream to drink, too—and also they come because there are likely to be...some tasty sheep. Look, here comes one now! And, *shazam!* Little David wrestles it to the ground. See him in the window over there, with the lion at his feet?

And you see him also with his arm around the little lamb? That's the one that ran away up the hill when the lion came, but she was little and tripped and fell, and David had to go after her and look for her and carry her back on his shoulders, and she had a cut on her head, so he rubbed oil on it, to heal it and make it better...

And then, when all the sheep were safe, he would lie down at the entrance to the protected place, the "sheep-fold", so that he himself was the gate, and no animal—wolf, lion, or straying sheep—could step over him without waking him up.

And he lay there, singing softly to the drowsy sheep, gazing upward there under the stars—and there were a lot of stars, this was three thousand years ago, there weren't any streetlights, no orange glow from the city, no airplanes overhead, no cars and trucks, no TV, no I-Pod...nothing but silence and darkness and the great vast dome of sky with millions, trillions, who knows how many stars...

And little David lay there, with his back all snuggled up against the fluffiest of the sheep to keep warm in the cool of the upland evening, strumming his harp, gazing at the stars, and thinking...about what it all meant, this extraordinary day.

"King" was a "new world order", new in his own lifetime. There hadn't been any kings in the Land of Israel; there had been judges and leaders and people who heard the voice of God and relayed it to the people, but there hadn't been a king before Saul. And before there was a king, it had all been working—about as well as anything works that has humans in it. Humans are a lot like sheep, thought David, as he worked out a particularly tricky chord progression on his harp.

Anyway, there had been no king before King Saul. God was king. And when the people wanted a king ("Our friends have kings! Why can't we have a king too?"), God would say things like, "If you have a king, you will have to leave your fields, and your family, and your sheep, and your harp, and go fight in the king's

army, whether you want to or not." God said, "If you have a king, you will have to follow him whether you think he is following Me or not." The king, said God, would not necessarily be a good shepherd.

And the fact was that King Saul was not working out. He'd been running off starting wars without waiting for a go-ahead from God or any support from his allies. He'd already put his own son Jonathan in harm's way, even if it did give his son a chance to show he was ten times the soldier his father was. And then the king had gotten involved with some weird archaic religion, and now he was dragging the whole country down with him in the vortex of his clinical depression.

"But," thought little David, "who's to say I'd be any better? What'll happen to me if I'm not? Will Samuel go pick somebody else behind *my* back, too?" "Baaaaaahh," said the sheep.

And this was before we, or David (and certainly not the sheep), had any inkling of any of the truly disastrous things David would grow up to do, when one day he did in fact become king: the lusts and judicial murders and abuses of power. It was 'way before the prophet Nathan would tell King David the story of the little ewe-lamb and bring him back to his senses and back to following God. It was 'way before the bad shepherds, the dissolute kings, of the end-times of the prophet Ezekiel, and *really* 'way before the time of Jesus, when the Wolf was very clearly Rome (remember your mythology? Romulus and Remus, nursed by a mother wolf?) and the hired hand was very clearly Herod — not a real king but a nouveau-riche upstart, no class at all, who ran away at the first sign of trouble, more like Saul than Jonathan...

"So why," thought David, "why bother?" — and now he was *really* wide awake, the way we all get, sometimes, late at night, all knotted up inside with worry and doubt. He worried about the future, and he worried about the past, and he worried about himself and the whole nation of the People of God who were, somehow, apparently, going to be *his* responsibility, and all because some old guy came to his house and poured some olive oil on his head.

"Why did I even leave the sheep today," he thought.

Because there's something I want you to do, said God.

"What?"

King Saul is sad, and I want you to bring him a song, said God. *Lie back down, with my lovely warm sheep at your back, and my glorious universe before you, and the song will come, a song of comfort and healing and strength.*

So little David lay down again. He snuggled his back into the back of the sheep, and he took up his harp, more to hug for comfort than to play, and he lifted up his eyes to the hills, above the hills, to all the millions of stars.

“Why,” he thought, “They look just like sheep! God’s sheep, on God’s hillside, in Heaven, so they’re really little because they’re really far away. But look at the Milky Way, it could be a flock on its way to green pastures. And look at that little one, leaping through space all at once, like that little lamb I went after today.

“Poor King Saul, he has so much to think about, and so many people to worry about. He is so worried about having to be a good shepherd that he is even worse than ever, and he can’t even play the harp to make himself feel better. Doesn’t he know the LORD is his shepherd?

“God keeps me safe, just as I keep my sheep safe,” thought little David, as his fingers found the harp strings. “God leads me on the right paths just as I lead the sheep on the right paths” (and the sheep said, “Baaaaaah.”) “Yes, that’s right, little sheep: God helps me find food and water, just as I help you find food and water, and then when you’ve had enough and you’re all sleepy, I find you a place to sleep that’s safe, and I sing to you, and I lie down right here to keep you safe all night. And if *I* do that, think how well God will do that. The LORD is always a good shepherd, better than I could ever be. We’ll always be in the right place if we follow the LORD.”

David smiled as his fingers fell from the harp, and he drifted off to sleep beneath the sparkling starry sky. Right now, no worries about the future, just answering God’s call to take his gift on the road, do the next right thing and help somebody else. “That’s the song I’ll take to the king,” he thought as he snuggled into the soft wool of the sheep, “the song of the stars. Thank you, God. ‘The LORD is my shepherd! I shall not want!’”

The words to David’s song are in the Bible, and although we might not know how to play the harp, nor do we know David’s tune, down through the centuries the People of God have sung David’s words to as many tunes as there are people. We said them together at the beginning of worship today, and in your life you will hear and say them many times more. They will comfort you as they comforted King Saul: they will give you strength even in your darkest hour. People are still writing their own melodies to David’s song, and one of them will be yours:

“The LORD is my shepherd: I shall not want...”