

Keeping Watch



*Luke 2:8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, **keeping watch** over their flocks at night.*

I don't know how many times I've heard this verse read in the Christmas story over the years, but this year the words that the shepherds were "keeping watch" stood out in a new way—most likely because I have recently read *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* by Phillip Keller. He recounted that there were times of the year that he would stay out with his flocks because of their susceptibility to danger from predators and thieves.

It had never occurred to me that even modern shepherds would need to spend the night watching over their sheep. Evidently, in ancient times, it was common for shepherds to camp out with their sheep between April and October, before inclement weather came.

I've always heard that the announcement to the shepherds had a symbolic meaning, showing how the Messiah-King came for both the lowliest class of society all the way up to Herod's palace in Jerusalem where He was heralded by foreign dignitaries (magi) from the east. But what if there were another symbolic meaning?

What if the message was graciously given to the Bethlehem shepherds because they were "watchful shepherds"—they were faithfully doing their duty to care and protect the sheep.

In Ezekiel 34:1ff God issues a stern warning to the religious leaders of the day:

*"This is what the Sovereign Lord says: **Woe to the shepherds of Israel** who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? ...You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally."*

Then He continues with what He will do:

*"For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: **I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.** As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep...I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice."*

Numerous times in His ministry, Jesus referenced the fact that He had compassion for the multitudes because they were like "sheep without a shepherd" and that He had come to "seek and to save that which was lost." In John 10 He clearly stated that **HE was the Good Shepherd**.

The Bethlehem shepherds raised the sheep that were used for the sacrifices at the nearby Temple in Jerusalem. Not only had Jesus the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) just been born in Bethlehem, but Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who had come to bind up and care for the gaping spiritual wounds in the hurting people was being announced to shepherds, who, like Him, were faithfully carrying out their duties and **watching out for** those put under their care.

At the end of His ministry, Jesus conferred His shepherding role to Peter when he stated three times to "Feed my sheep/lambs." And near the end of his ministry, Peter passed the role along to the other spiritual leaders when he wrote:

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers...and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away... Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. I Peter 5:2-9

The admonition is relevant for us today, evidenced in the fact that the Latin word for "shepherd" is "pastor"—the word used to describe spiritual leaders.

So, on this first day of the New Year that is heralded in many places with "**watch-night**" services, I am challenged by these watchful shepherds of Bethlehem.

Challenged by Peter's admonition to be on the alert because the enemy of our souls is intent to "kill, steal and destroy." Challenged to be faithfully carrying out the duties God has given me so that "when the Chief Shepherd appears"—the second time—I will, like the Bethlehem shepherds, be filled with rejoicing at His appearing.