



A Shelby the Shepherd Adventure

YOU
CAN
FOLLOW
ME!

A white compass rose graphic is located on the right side of the page, partially overlapping the text. It features a central point with eight long, thin rays extending outwards, resembling a star or a compass rose.

Wendi Miller

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*This book is dedicated
to the very special readers
who have discovered
– or will soon discover –
the good news that
He is special enough
for everyone.*

THERE'S GOING TO BE A JOURNEY

The day was getting started with a crisp morning and a little extra work for the family of shepherds taking care of their flock of sheep in the fields near Bethlehem.

The walls of the sheepfold at the shepherd family's camp were normally extremely protective, but during this particular night, it appeared one mischievous little sheep had managed to find a way out from under the watchful eyes of the shepherd.

“Shall we count again, Brother?” Samuel and his brother, Nathaniel, both knew this was the wisest thing for a shepherd to do on a morning like this

one. They had just finished counting the family's sheep at the end of the night watch, and they were preparing to count again to make sure they had arrived at the correct number. This was especially important since they both believed they were missing one sheep.

“I would say I know which one is missing, Samuel,” replied Nathaniel to his brother, “but that is still a fine idea.”

Shelby's cousins, Jacob and Samantha—Jake and Sam, for short—were playing close enough nearby to overhear their father, Samuel, and Shelby's dad, Nathaniel, talking about recounting the sheep. They jumped at the chance to sharpen their shepherding skills.

Jake excitedly asked his dad, Samuel, if he could help. “I want to

count, Father! I want to count! Please, may I count?”

Jake’s sister, Sam, quickly joined the conversation. “I want to count the sheep! I’m a better counter than my big brother is anyway!” She might have been a few years younger than Jake—and almost the same age as Shelby, who was still asleep in his family’s tent—but that didn’t stop Sam from keeping up with her brother. He was nearly a teenager, but Sam was not bothered by that at all!

“No, you’re not!” Jake knew he was a very good sheep counter!

“Yes, I am,” Sam replied. “I can steal a piece of bread from your food basket, and you never even notice that it is missing.” She was right, but Jake sure didn’t want to admit it.

“No, you can’t,” Jake said to his little sister.

“Yes, I can,” said Sam as she wrinkled her nose at her big brother, “and I know I can because I just did it yesterday!”

“No, you didn’t!” Jake’s forehead crinkled up as he denied Sam’s claim of bread thievery.

“Yes, I did,” said Sam as she teasingly rubbed her stomach, “and it was delicious!”

Jake quickly became distracted from the family flock and the news of the missing sheep, and he began chasing after his little sister. Even though he was nearly old enough to be considered a grown-up, he still enjoyed having a good amount of fun.

“Such excited volunteers we have, Samuel,” said Shelby’s dad about his niece and nephew.

“I would say you are right, Nathaniel,” said Shelby’s uncle with an amused look on his face. He enjoyed his children’s fun as much as they did. However, their game of chase had now included running in a circle around him, and he was trying not to get dizzy! He calmly asked Jake and Sam to settle down so they wouldn’t be scaring off even more of the sheep.

At hearing their dad’s voice, Jake and Sam quickly remembered how they had offered to help recount the family’s flock.

“I’m sorry, Father. May I count?” Jake asked his question as he was trying to catch his breath.

“No, *I’m* sorry. May I count?” Sam was still trying to catch her breath, too.

“I’m sorrier!” Jake still did not want to be outdone by his little sister.

Sam replied with just as much stubbornness as Jake. “No, you’re not!”

“Yes, I am!” Jake quickly answered back.

Shelby’s papa, Nathaniel, chuckled at his niece and nephew’s friendly sibling competition, so he offered a solution that would satisfy both of them.

They were such eager shepherd’s helpers, he told *each* of them they could count the sheep. “Except you can’t tell each other what number you get,” he said as he explained his plan. “Instead, each of you will come and tell *me* how many sheep you counted, and if you are

right, you will get an extra portion of bread in your breakfast basket. How does that sound?”

Quite satisfied since it would still be like they were taking part in a very important counting contest, Jake and Sam quickly decided it was a great idea.

Then Sam turned to Jake and began talking to him using one of the two homemade hand puppets she had been playing with earlier that morning. She was doing her best to make her puppet speak in a hilariously low voice. “I bet I get finished counting before you do!”

Jake stole the second puppet from off of his sister’s other hand and used it to answer her in a high, squeaky voice. “I bet you don’t!”

“I bet I do,” said Sam, still using her amusing puppet voice.

Jake started chasing his sister around in circles again, the puppet on his hand still talking in a high, squeaky voice. “I bet you don’t,” replied Jake as he tried not to laugh.

“I bet I do,” said Sam as she giggled at her brother’s antics.

Jake was mid-circle when Samuel caught him by the neck of his shepherd’s tunic and took the stolen puppet off of his hand. “It seems you have forgotten what happened the last time you stole your sister’s puppet,” he said to Jake. “If I remember right, you found out that she has quite a good aim with her slingshot!”

Jake quickly straightened right up. He had not forgotten that at all. He had

also not forgotten how long it had taken for him to be able to sit down comfortably again!

Samuel put the rescued puppet on his own hand and started speaking in a high-pitched voice to his son and daughter. “Now, if you don’t get busy, I will do the counting, and I will gladly take the extra portion of bread in *my* basket today!”

Samuel smiled his jovial smile and gave the retrieved hand puppet back to Sam. Jake and Sam looked at each other with wide eyes and big smiles, but still with a *We had better behave!* look on both of their faces. Their father was a good-natured father who loved their fun, and they also knew when he meant business.

“I’m counting!” They both replied in unison, and then they turned their

attention to counting the flock of sheep that still wasn't far from where the family of shepherds had gathered to begin their day. There was, after all, some extra breakfast at stake now!

Nathaniel was still smiling at his niece and nephew as he walked over to Shelby's mom, Anna, where she had been sitting outside their family's tent while preparing the shepherds' first meal of the day. She was tearing some fresh bread apart, adding it to the pieces of cheese and dried fruit she had already placed in everyone's food baskets. It was a tasty meal, and it was typical of what many people living in and around Bethlehem ate.

Nathaniel leaned down and gave his wife a quick hug, and they wished each other a good morning. They had both been enjoying the amusing start to

the day, and Anna shared her observation of the energetic siblings. “I see our niece and nephew are very eager shepherds-in-training this morning.”

“Yes, they are,” said Nathaniel, still amused at their brother-sister antics. “I hope our Shelby is just as ambitious when he wakes up to the news that he is about to do some shepherding of his own. We appear to be missing a certain little sheep.”

Anna didn’t have to guess at which one it was, and she replied to Shelby’s papa in lighthearted disbelief. “Again?”

Nathaniel chuckled in agreement. “Again,” he said. “That Little One is definitely a sheep with a mind of his own. He has no idea that he is not supposed to be able to do the things he does. Not one of my sheep has ever

been able to escape a watched flock like he can. He is certainly one of the most adventurous little sheep I have ever seen!”

Nathaniel was right about that. It had not happened often, but this wasn't the first time Little One had made it out of the family's sheepfold. He was small in size, but he didn't let that stand in the way of his big determination!

Anna was in agreement about Shelby's sheep he had affectionately named Little One. She even commented that Little One was much like their own little shepherd: curious, determined, and possessing enough courage to excitedly accept any invitation to go on a big adventure!

“Ah, yes,” Nathaniel responded to Shelby’s mom. “Little One is exactly like his Shelby.”

“Speaking of our shepherd-in-training,” Anna said, “look what I made for him.” She leaned down and picked up a stuffed sheep toy that had been sitting at her feet. She handed it to Shelby’s dad so he could take a closer look at it. Anna explained that since Shelby asked so often for more sheep to care for, she thought he might enjoy starting with one that wouldn’t make it quite so far when *it* decided to wander off.

Nathaniel laughed aloud and held up the little stuffed sheep so he could admire it.

It was a simple toy about the size of Nathaniel’s hand, and it was made

from some of the light-colored fabric that was left over after Anna had sewn his last new shirt. It was stuffed with some of the softest stuffing Shelby's mom could find, with the outline of a sheep's face and body cleverly stitched right into it. Anna was as good at sewing stuffed sheep as she was at making fresh bread.

“If only the rest of the sheep could be like this one,” said Shelby's father about the little toy as he handed it back to Anna. “It would make our counting so much easier! I like this, Mama.”

“Thank you, Papa. I think Shelby will like it, too,” Anna replied.

Nathaniel agreed. If it had to do with sheep, Shelby would love it!

About that time, Jake and Sam finished up their sheep counting and

ran over to Shelby's dad, playfully pushing each other out of the way to see who could reveal their number to him first.

Sam was the one who declared that they had completed their very important task. "We are done counting, Uncle!"

"I have my number all ready," chimed in Jake.

"And I have *my* number," Sam added.

Nathaniel joined in their enthusiasm. "You are very fast counters!" He knew Shelby's cousins were very excited, and he certainly wanted both of them to have done their best, so he asked them if they had counted carefully so they wouldn't miss even one sheep.

“We didn’t miss a single one, Uncle,” said Jake with certainty.

Sam was just as confident that she had done as good a job at counting as her big brother. “That’s right! We counted every one.”

“Then, I am ready to hear both of your numbers. Whisper yours right here.” Nathaniel leaned down to Sam and pointed to his ear so she could quietly tell her counting results without Jake overhearing. She whispered her number as discreetly as she could. “Ninety-nine.”

Then it was Jake’s turn. Nathaniel leaned in the other direction so Jake could give his counting results. Jake whispered his number, too, not wanting Sam to hear it in case they had not arrived at the same number and she

wanted to change her mind. “Ninety-nine,” he said quietly.

After he had heard both Jake and Sam’s numbers, Nathaniel asked their father how many sheep there were. This made Samuel the official judge in this most prestigious shepherd family counting contest.

“There are ninety-nine, Nathaniel,” said Samuel.

“Congratulations!” Nathaniel excitedly reported the final results to his very eager niece and nephew who had been jumping up and down in anticipation of who was about to win. “You were *both* correct!”

Jake and Sam filled the morning air with shouts of “Yes!” and “Awesome!” as they gave each other a congratulatory high-five. Their correct counting meant

that they had both just successfully completed a vital and necessary shepherding task. Not to mention, they would also get extra bread in their morning food baskets! They were so happy about it that they even did an impressive counting cheer.

Jake got the cheer started. “Who can count like shepherds can?” He cupped his hand to his ear while his sister answered back.

“No one!” Sam really enjoyed doing their counting cheer.

“Who?” Jake enjoyed their cheer, too, and he put his hand to his ear again.

“No one!” Sam answered a little louder than before.

“I said, ‘Who can count like shepherds can?’” Jake cheered again.

This time Nathaniel and Samuel joined in on the fun of answering, right along with Sam. “No one!”

By now, Jake was giggling so enjoyably he almost couldn't finish his part. “Who?” He was trying to cheer between chuckles now.

The other shepherds answered back again. “No one!”

Everyone was laughing now. Jake and Sam did a quick secret handshake, and then they put their hands together in a special shepherd's huddle. Jake motioned to Nathaniel and Samuel as an invitation to put their hands in the huddle, too, and then he quickly counted up for the big finale. “One. Two. Three!”

“Go shepherds!” They all exclaimed their jubilation as they lifted

their hands in the air. Even Anna joined in, though she thought it wise to remain seated over by their family tent so the bread and cheese she had already put in the breakfast baskets wouldn't end up all over the ground.

To finish the cheer in fine shepherding style, Jake and Sam put their hands to their heads like they were rams with horns, and they bumped their heads together like they had seen the rams do. In their enthusiasm, however, they bumped their heads a little harder than either of them would have liked. Rubbing his head, Jake told his little sister that they should consider making up a new ending to their celebration.

Sam thought that was a good idea. "Yes, we should," she replied with a smile while she rubbed the top of her own head.

“Who knew counting could be so dangerous?” Their Uncle Nathaniel liked to lightheartedly tease with the two of them. Then he switched to the more serious matter: the counting contest prize! “Well done, shepherds. There will be extra bread for both of you!”

Jake and Sam did another celebratory high-five. Then Jake put his hands up to his head again as if to do a repeat ending of their shepherds’ cheer, but Sam shook her head and offered her hand for a handshake instead.

Jake gladly agreed and shook the outstretched hand of his little sister. “Let’s eat,” he said.

“Yes, all that counting made me hungry!” Sam agreed that it was, after

all, pretty easy to work up a hardy appetite after counting that many sheep.

Jake and Sam walked over to their Aunt Anna to get their morning food baskets, playfully elbowing each other to see who could be first in line again. Anna wisely handed them their baskets at the same time, adoringly grinning at both of them. She enjoyed being their aunt like she enjoyed being Shelby's mama.

They both thanked her as she handed them their breakfast.

“You're welcome,” replied Anna as she handed Sam a second basket. “And here is one for your papa.” Anna teasingly spoke to Samuel. “Since you also got the right number, yours has extra bread in it, too.”

“Thank you, Anna,” said Samuel with a grin. He had also gotten pretty hungry with all of the counting going on.

“You’re welcome, Samuel,” replied Anna.

Jake and Sam took their food baskets and sat down near their papa and next to each other. Sam had only taken a couple bites of bread when she started looking up and around as if she had seen something. It got Jake’s attention, and he started looking where Sam was looking. Samuel and Nathaniel even started looking in that same direction, too.

“Did you see that?” Sam seemed very excited as she asked Jake the question while she pointed past him and into the hills outside the camp

where they often took their flock to graze.

Jake expectantly looked where Sam was pointing. “See what?”

Sam quickly reached over into Jake’s food basket and took a piece of bread while he was looking away. She held it up for Jake to see once he realized there wasn’t really anything to look at after all. Sam dangled the piece of bread in front of Jake with an *I told you so!* look on her face. “This,” she teased her big brother, “from *your* basket.”

“Hey!” Jake realized quickly that he had fallen for little sister’s creative trick. She really could take a piece of bread from his basket! He quickly retrieved his kidnapped breakfast from her and stuffed it in his mouth before

she could have the chance to eat it herself.

“I can’t believe,” said Sam with a playfully dramatic tone in her voice, “that you ever doubted me.” She had looked to the sky and put the back of her hand to her forehead, nearly falling over backward as she tried not to interrupt her own dramatic acting scene with her giggles.

Everyone laughed at the pair of siblings as Nathaniel walked over to Anna to get his own breakfast. As she handed his basket to him, Anna jested with her husband about *his* counting skills. “And did *you* have the correct number of sheep this morning?”

“Yes, ma’am. I did,” replied Nathaniel.

“Then here is extra bread for you, too,” said Anna as she tore off another piece of bread and put it in Nathaniel’s basket.

Nathaniel was quite pleased to have received his own counting award. “Thank you very much!”

Anna had been working on the still-sleeping shepherd’s breakfast, too. “I will put Shelby’s meal in his shepherd’s bag today so he can take it with him.”

“That is a good idea,” Nathaniel said with his son’s shepherding journey in mind. “And I put his staff away with mine last night after he fell asleep during our night watch, so it is ready for him, too.”

“I don’t think he goes anywhere without that staff of his,” said Anna of

the important tool her young shepherd-in-training had very carefully carved for himself. It wasn't the most intricately carved staff, but it was all Shelby's work, and he really did have a talent for it that was certain to improve as he got older.

Shelby's papa agreed. "No, I don't believe he does. But he knows every good shepherd has to have a staff, and he's so determined to be a good shepherd someday."

"Yes, he is," replied Shelby's mama. Being a shepherd was just about all Shelby talked about. He wanted to be brave and adventurous, just like his papa and his uncle, with as many sheep in his flock as the hillsides would hold. Anna commented to Shelby's dad that she so loved that about their son.

“Me, too, Mama,” agreed Shelby’s papa. “Me, too. Except he will have to learn not to be such a heavy sleeper.”

“Indeed,” said Anna with a smile. “He sure will!”

“You know,” continued Nathaniel, “I remember being just like Shelby when I was his age.”

Anna smiled at her husband. “Were you a heavy sleeper, too?”

Nathaniel grinned as though just a little embarrassed at the memory of his own childhood shepherding days. He acknowledged with a jovial tone in his voice that he was such a heavy sleeper that their home could have fallen down around him and he would have slept right through it. “But, I also remember carving my own staff and dreaming of the day when my flock would be the

largest flock around. Just like Shelby does.”

“Just like Shelby,” said Anna. “Speaking of Shelby, I think he needs some help waking up this morning!”

Nathaniel nodded in agreement about their very sleepy son. “Yes, he does!”

Anna turned her head and called into the family’s tent. “Shelby! Shelby, are you awake in there?” There was no answer from the very restful little shepherd, so Anna tried one more time. “Shelby?”

Anna could finally hear Shelby stretching inside the tent as if to wake himself up. “Yes, Mama. I’m awake,” said Shelby with a yawn. He slowly opened the tent flap, but not quite enough to keep it from falling back

down and catching on the top of his head. He finally wrestled free of it and walked out into the fresh morning air, still wrapped in the warm blanket he had been sleeping under. “I was having the neatest dream about Little One,” he said to his mama.

“Really?” Anna spoke as she tried to get a rather stubborn piece of hair on Shelby’s head to lie back down after his humorous struggle with the tent flap. “Well, speaking of Little One, you have an important job waiting for you. Are you ready to be a good shepherd today?”

A shepherding day? Just the mention of getting to be a shepherd gave Shelby instant energy! “Yes, Mama. I sure am! I will be right back.” Shelby bounced back through the tent flap and into the family’s home as if he

had the energy of ten shepherds! He wanted to be ready in an instant, but it was taking a little longer than an instant.

“I’ll be right there, Mama,” said Shelby from inside the tent. “Hmm. Where is it?” Shelby talked to himself as he shuffled through his things. Then he called out again to tell his Mama that he was looking for his other shoe.

It took him a little bit of searching to find it, but he finally did. It had been hiding under another blanket. “Oh, there it is. On my way, Mama!” But his shoe decided to keep giving Shelby a little bit of trouble. Those silly leather straps could definitely be a challenge, even for a shepherd, and especially for a shepherd who was in a hurry. “Any minute now, Mama!”

Shelby finally made his way back outside. He lifted up his troublesome shoe and happily showed it to his very patient and goodhearted mom. The straps were far from being perfectly laced, but they were close enough that at least Shelby's shoe shouldn't fall off on this important shepherding day. "Found it! Good morning, Mama."

Shelby had been in such a rush after trying to find his stubborn shoe that he came out of the tent needing a little bit of help. His head covering was crooked, and he had not yet managed to put on his belt. His mama removed his head covering and helped him straighten the same stray hair that had lost its earlier wrestling match with the tent flap. "Good morning, Shelby," said Anna to her son. "Are you ready for your day as a shepherd?"

“I sure am!” Shelby’s excitement about his day was not something he could hide, not even for a moment. “I love being a shepherd!”

“Yes, I know you do,” said Mama. “Well, it seems you get to find a lost sheep today. Little One has wandered off again. Your papa and uncle didn’t see him with the rest of the flock when they counted earlier this morning.”

Shelby sighed. “Oh, that Little One,” he said to his mama. “He is always making me work so hard.” Although what Shelby said was true, he quickly realized that he may have made it sound like being a shepherd was a little *too* hard of a job for him. So he changed to a more positive and determined tone in his voice, just like a real shepherd should have. “But, I still love him, and I still *love* being a

shepherd!” Then he spread his arms out as wide as they could go as he continued. “It’s the best thing to do in the whole world!”

Shelby was so dramatic and animated that his sleeves fell down as he was speaking. He quietly pushed them back up, hoping that his mama hadn’t noticed.

But then she asked Shelby if he was wearing one of his papa’s old shirts. She had noticed his sleeves after all.

“Yes, Mama,” Shelby answered. “I needed a bigger shirt because I am going to be a great shepherd any day now, and I wanted to be all ready for it!”

“That’s a very smart thing to do,” Mama agreed, not at all upset with her young son’s idea. She knew that a good

shepherd is always prepared and that Shelby would eventually grow into his Papa's shirt. "You know," she said to Shelby, "I sure do enjoy raising someone as special as you are. It makes my life very happy, and very interesting!"

In fun, Anna poked Shelby in the belly. It made him giggle the scratchy, boyish giggle of a young shepherd his age. He knew he wasn't a little boy anymore, but he was still looking forward to the days ahead when he would be older.

"Thank you, Mama. I know I'm not very old, and I haven't done all of my growing yet, but I sure do want to be a real live, super special shepherd. A good shepherd is ready for anything, you know. You can surprise him, and he won't jump. You can chase him, and he

won't run. That's me," Shelby said as he pointed to himself. "I'm going to be the best shepherd ever!"

Shelby reached his arms out and tilted his head back, just imagining himself as being one of the best shepherds around. It made his sleeves fall down again, but this time he just flapped them around a couple of times and pushed them back up again, giggling again as he did so. "Mama, may I ask you a question?" As he spoke this time, he tried to use the most grown-up voice that he could.

"Of course!" Shelby's mom always enjoyed her conversations with her son.

"Do you think Papa will give me another sheep to care for soon?" That had become one of the most favorite

questions of this very hopeful little shepherd.

His mama, always so gentle when she spoke, replied. “Well, sweet boy, let me ask *you* a question. Do you trust Papa?”

Shelby nodded his head and answered very decidedly. “Yes, Mama. I trust him very much.”

“And do you believe,” Mama continued with another question, “that he is a wise shepherd?”

“He sure is,” Shelby replied as he started counting off on his fingers so he would not forget anything. “He is the wisest, smartest, cleverest, smartest shepherd around!”

“I think so, too,” said Mama, chuckling at her animated son. “And do you believe he loves you very much?”

Shelby grew a little more serious. “Oh, yes, Mama. I know he does.”

“Then, do you believe,” asked Anna very wisely, “that he will know when it is time to give you more sheep to care for?”

“Yes, Mama,” said Shelby trustingly. “I do.”

“Me, too!” Mama reached down by her feet as she confidently answered Shelby. She had been trying her best to hide the new toy she had made until just the right moment, and now was the perfect time. “So, in the mean time,” she said, “how about you give *yourself* some time, and you can take care of *this* sheep

while you are waiting!” She handed the stuffed sheep to Shelby.

Shelby’s eyes got real big, and his mouth dropped open. Shepherds didn’t get a lot of toys, so when they did, it was a very special time. “For me? Mama, I love it!”

Shelby danced around with his brand new sheep and made tiny *Baa* sounds for it. “Welcome to my flock, little sheep! I will be a very good shepherd for you, I promise. And someday, you and I and Little One will have even more sheep to take care of.” Shelby hugged his new little sheep close to him, quite satisfied that the number of sheep in his little flock had just grown.

“Yes, you will,” his mama said reassuringly. She continued

encouraging Shelby as she helped him put his belt and head covering on, getting him ready for his day's journey.

“Someday,” she said, “you will be all grown up with a flock to call your very own. And they will follow you anywhere because you will lead them to fresh, green pastures and quiet waters. They will know it is safe to follow you because you are a loyal, faithful, gentle shepherd. Trust me, sweet boy, time will come and go, and someday, even though it feels very slow right now, your sheep will know you are their friend and faithful shepherd. Just wait and see!”

“Mama?” Shelby was very thoughtful about what he had just heard her say. “I trust you, and I trust Papa, too, but I still hope ‘someday’ is soon. All this waiting is tough!”

“Yes, it sure can be,” Anna replied as she handed Shelby the strapped shepherd’s bag that was just the right size to carry his food. “And it is okay to hope it happens soon. For right now, though, it is definitely happening fast enough for me.” Anna stood and gave Shelby a hug before she walked over to the entrance of their tent where Shelby’s staff had been propped in a large jar just outside the tent opening.

“Well, it looks like you are all ready for your day. Do you want me to keep your newest little sheep with me?” As Anna asked her question, she gave Shelby his staff so he would have everything a good shepherd would need on a day like today.

“No, thank you,” Shelby replied as he gently patted the stuffed sheep he had placed securely in his belt. Then he

took his very important shepherd staff from his mama. “He’s all right,” said Shelby about his little toy sheep. It may have been a stuffed sheep, but Shelby was still very glad to have it as part of his own flock. He told his mama that the little toy sheep could come along so he would get used to all the adventures Shelby was certain they were going to have together.

“That’s a great idea, my smart little shepherd,” Mama said reassuringly to her son. Then she reminded him to be sure and say good-bye to his papa before he headed out to look for Little One, and Shelby reassured her that he would.

“Be safe on your journey, Son,” Anna said as she wished Shelby well. She also gave him a kind reminder as he was on his way out of the shepherd

family's camp. "Remember who loves you?"

"You do!" Shelby always enjoyed it when his mama asked him that.

"Yes, I do," replied Anna cheerfully.

Shelby turned back and gave his mama another hug. "I love you, too, Mama!"

Then, just as he had promised, Shelby made sure to tell his papa good-bye before he left on his shepherding journey. He didn't have to go far since his papa, his uncle, and his two cousins were still gathered close to the family's tents.

"Well, hello!" Shelby's dad enthusiastically greeted him as Shelby got closer. "It appears someone is ready

to have a great day as a shepherd. Are you headed out to find Little One?”

“Yes, Papa, I sure am,” said Shelby hopefully. “I think I will look for him in Bethlehem.” Bethlehem was part of the dream he had been having when Mama woke him that morning, but he felt kind of silly about mentioning it right now. Jake interrupted his thoughts about it anyway.

“Bethlehem?” Jake was whispering to himself, not realizing that he was still speaking loud enough to be heard. It was a good thing he wasn’t trying to give a discreet answer in another counting contest! “Little One would have gotten eaten by a wolf before he made it to Bethlehem.”

Samuel quickly but gently pushed his son behind him, shaking his head as

a reminder to Jake that it was more kind to *not* say things like that.

Sam nudged Jake in the ribs and then put her finger up to her mouth, making a quick “Shhh” sign to her brother. She whispered back, as unsuccessful as Jake was at trying to be quiet. “Just because it is probably true, that doesn’t mean we should say it out loud.”

Samuel spoke up quickly in a wise attempt to change the subject so Shelby would not lose his courage. “Brother,” Samuel said to Shelby’s papa, “do you remember that one sheep we had when we were younger? The one that caused us so much trouble?”

“Yes, I do!” Nathaniel remembered *that* particular sheep very well. “How could I forget *him*?”

The children enjoyed hearing their fathers talk about sheep, especially when they were telling their own stories from their younger years as shepherds. Sam spoke up with anticipation. “Tell us the story, Uncle. Did that sheep run away a lot?”

“No,” replied Nathaniel to his niece, “but we wished he would.” Nathaniel turned to Samuel. “He was an ornery one, wasn’t he, Brother?”

Samuel smiled and nodded his head.

Nathaniel continued the story with an amusing memory. “Do you remember what he would do as soon as he saw that one of us was busy tending to the new lambs?”

“Yes, I do!” Samuel remembered very well. “I also remember being glad when it was *your* turn instead of mine!”

Jake was just as interested in this story as his sister. “What would he do, Uncle?”

“Well,” said Nathaniel, “as soon as my back was turned, he would quietly sneak up on me.” Nathaniel couldn’t help but demonstrate the sheep’s mischievous moves. “Then, out of nowhere, he would come up and push me over with the top of his head. Then, before I could get up and get myself dusted off, he would be off and running so I couldn’t catch him.”

The thought of such a sight made everyone laugh. Samuel laughed, too, even though the same thing had happened to him. “He was definitely a

test of patience. Now what was his name? It was..." He paused a moment while he and Nathaniel tried to think of the sheep's name. They both thought of it at the same time, snapping their fingers in perfect brotherly unison when it finally came to them. "Bruiser!"

"That was it. Old Bruiser," Nathaniel fondly said of the memory. "He was a difficult sheep to love, but he had some of the finest wool of any sheep around, so we learned to forgive him for being so, um, hard-headed."

"Yes, we did, and we had the sore spots to prove it!" Samuel laughed as he made a funny face and teasingly rubbed his sitting place.

By this time, the humorous Bruiser story appeared to have successfully changed the subject away from the

notion that Little One had succumbed to a terrible fate.

“Well, children,” Samuel continued, “it’s time to be going about our day. Nephew,” he said to Shelby to wish him well, “have a safe journey today.”

“Thank you, Uncle,” said Shelby cheerfully. He was certainly excited about his day as a shepherd!

“See you later, Shelby,” said Jake.

“Bye, Shelby,” said Sam.

“Bye, Jake! Bye, Samantha!” Shelby waved to his uncle and cousins as they went to begin their shepherding day, too.

Once they were alone, Nathaniel spoke to his little shepherd-in-training with some optimism of his own. “So,

Shelby, you said you will be going to Bethlehem today?”

“Yes, Papa.” Shelby was glad that his papa seemed as confident as he was about where he hoped to find his wandering sheep. “I have a feeling that is where I will find Little One.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” said Nathaniel. Shelby’s papa was just as kind to Shelby as his mama was. He assured Shelby that a curious little sheep could easily be drawn in that direction with all of the people in town. There were, after all, quite a few extra sights and sounds and pieces of food around with the census going on.

Shelby had never heard about a census before, so he asked his papa about it. “Census? What is that?”

Shelby's papa was glad to help his curious son. "A census is a counting of all the people," Nathaniel said.

"Oh," replied Shelby. He was always willing to ask questions and learn something new. "Why do all the people need to be counted, and why are there so many people being counted in Bethlehem?"

"Well," answered his papa, "do you know how we count the sheep to make sure they are all safe and that none are missing, but we only count the sheep that belong to *our* family?"

"I do!" Shelby was so excited to hear his papa say that a census was about counting. Counting was one of Shelby's most favorite things! "It's fun to count the sheep!"

“Yes, it is!” Shelby’s papa was glad that Shelby enjoyed carrying out the important tasks of a good shepherd. “Well, that is what the census is like. The Roman leader wants to know how many people there are in the land. So, the reason there are so many people in Bethlehem right now is because he asked everyone to return to his own town so they will be counted in the right place for *their* family, and not someone else’s.”

Shelby asked his papa if their family had already been counted for the census, and his papa replied that they had.

“Is Bethlehem the right place for *our* family?” Shelby had very good questions about the census. “It must be. I have lived here my whole life, and we didn’t have to travel anywhere!”

“Yes, Bethlehem is our family’s town,” said Papa. “I have lived here my whole life, too. So did your grandpa, and so did *my* grandpa. We have used these fields to care for our sheep for a very long time. You know,” continued Papa, “many generations ago, Bethlehem was even the town of one of this land’s greatest kings.”

A king? Shelby’s day just kept getting more thrilling. It wasn’t just any ordinary city that would have a future king in it! “Really? Who?” Shelby couldn’t imagine who it was!

“King David,” replied Papa, “and can you guess what he was before he became the king?”

Shelby tried to think about what David had been before he became the king of the land. It had to have been

pretty special to get him ready to be a king, but he couldn't think of something that was *that* special. "No. What?"

"He was a shepherd!" Papa was about as excited as Shelby was.

Shelby was so surprised! "A shepherd? Really? Just like you are, and like I am? And like my grandpa and great-grandpa were?"

"That's right!" Shelby's papa enjoyed sharing the story about some of King David's younger years. He especially liked being able to tell it to his own shepherd-in-training.

"Wow! He must have been a really good shepherd to get picked for being the king." Shelby was right about that!

"Yes," said Papa, "he was a very good shepherd. There was one time that

he even had to keep the sheep safe from a lion. Then there was another time that a bear wanted to get his sheep, and he kept them safe from the bear, too.”

“Really?” Shelby began to think about how brave those things were to do. “Wow! Did *you* ever have to do that, Papa?”

“Yes.” Shelby’s dad had to have courage, too. “I have had to keep our sheep safe from several wild animals.”

“What about Grandpa? Did he?” Just like his cousins, Shelby enjoyed hearing all the thrilling stories about his very own family of shepherds.

“Yes, he did,” replied Nathaniel to his son. “Do you know what else he had to do? He also had to work very hard at keeping me awake during night watches, just like I have to do for

another young shepherd I know.”
Nathaniel playfully leaned into Shelby’s
shoulder.

Shelby had a huge grin on his face
as he declared the exciting discovery
that his family had a lot of shepherd
practice.

“Yes, we have,” said his papa. “We
have each learned what to do to take
good care of our sheep and to keep
them safe. Then we teach the next
shepherds in the family, just like Uncle
and I are teaching you and your cousins.
That is why we often count the sheep. If
a sheep is with the rest of the flock, we
can take better care of it. But, as you
know, sometimes they do still get lost.”

Just like Little One, Shelby thought
to himself. “Yes, they do,” said Shelby.
That was why he was about to take his

day's upcoming journey. "It's hard being a shepherd sometimes."

"Yes, it can be," said Papa.

"But it is also the best job in the world." Shelby certainly did love being a shepherd. Well, at least a shepherd-in-training, for now. No matter what, it always put a happiness in his heart.

"You are right," said Shelby's papa. He enjoyed being a shepherd, too. "It can be scary *and* exciting. But, a good shepherd will stay calm and kind."

Shelby's papa could always be counted on to give his son good advice, and Shelby was quick to listen. "Yes, sir. Calm and kind."

Knowing Shelby had an important day ahead of him, Papa encouraged him to be on his way. "So, Shelby, the calm

and kind shepherd, would you say it is probably about time for you to go bring that lost Little One back home?”

“Yes, it is,” Shelby said. “I’m sure he is missing me and wondering where I am by now.”

“I would say he is. He will be very glad to see you once you find him,” replied Shelby’s dad.

“Thank you, Papa,” said Shelby.

“You’re welcome,” said Papa. He noticed the stuffed sheep that Shelby’s mama had shown him earlier. “I see that you are taking your newest sheep along with you today.”

Shelby patted his new toy that had quickly become his most favorite. “Yes, sir. I want him to get used to how exciting it is going to be when I have

more sheep in my flock.” What a hopeful little shepherd Shelby was!

His papa was, too. “It most certainly will be. I believe you are going to have one of the most adventurous flocks I have ever seen!”

Shelby was so encouraged. “Well, I guess Little One already makes sure that my flock is never boring,” said Shelby as he was thinking about the day ahead.

“That is for sure,” said Papa as he smiled and did a quick check to help make sure Shelby had not forgotten anything he would need. He had his shepherd’s bag and his shepherd’s staff, of course. Plus he had the water container his papa had just given to him to take along. “Well, I think you are all set,” he said when he was satisfied that

Shelby was ready to go. “Have a safe journey, Son.”

“Thank you, Papa,” said Shelby with excitement. “I will.”

“Remember who loves you?” Papa encouragingly asked the same question as Shelby’s mama.

“You do, Papa,” said Shelby as he hugged his dad. “I love you, too!” Then he was on his way after a quick wave to his papa, as well as to his mama who had remained outside their tent to see Shelby off on his journey.

As Shelby walked along past the sheepfold and toward the hills between his home and Bethlehem, he recalled all of the stories he had just heard about troublemaking sheep and counting people and a very brave young

shepherd who would eventually become a king.

“Well, Little One,” he said to himself as he walked, “I sure hope you are in Bethlehem. I can’t wait to tell you all about how it was King David’s town, and how he was even a shepherd! I wonder if his staff was like mine. He had to have been really brave and strong! It must have been so exciting to protect the sheep from a lion and a bear.” Then Shelby stopped walking, pretending as though he had just heard something.

“First, he would have heard the growl.” Shelby set his staff down and removed his stuffed toy from his belt, ready to protect it from whatever dangerous animal had come to take one of his sheep.

“Then his sheep would have said, ‘Save us, brave shepherd.’” Shelby did his best to talk like he thought a sheep would talk, if it could. “And David would have said, ‘Don’t be afraid, my little flock. I’ll keep you safe.’ And then...”

Shelby stopped, and his eyes got real big as if a brilliant idea had just come to him. He returned his new stuffed sheep to its place in his belt, and then he pointed his finger in the air. He had the makings of a great plan.

“If I did something like *that*, I probably wouldn’t be able to count all of the sheep Papa would let me have! I *would* be the best shepherd around! I could even do that now. Maybe I could scare off a hungry wolf.” Shelby growled like he thought a wolf would growl.

“Or I could chase off a big old bear.” Shelby spread his arms out as far as they would go, but only until he realized that would be a much larger bear than he could scare off right now. So he brought his hands a little closer together. And then a little closer. “Well, maybe a baby one,” he said as he did so. “I’ll be brave and strong, and everyone will know they can follow me. Yes, sir! Nothing to it,” Shelby said with a snap of his fingers. “That sure would change and rearrange things!”

As Shelby made that last determined declaration and spread his arms out, the sleeves on his papa’s shirt went flying past his fingertips again. He flapped them around like he was a bird. “Sleeves, we need to talk.”

He pushed his sleeves back up, picked up his staff, and continued on his

way. He had a grand plan now, and that made him more determined—and hopeful—than ever that his days were about to be much different. “Okay,” he said. “On to Bethlehem. Oh, and it is time to eat!”

IT WOULD TAKE A MIRACLE

About the same time as the shepherds were getting started on their day, Bethlehem was getting busy, too. In fact, just outside of town, three friends—the innkeeper, the rug maker, and the lamp seller—were walking together up one of its stone paths.

Each of them was carrying the wares they needed for a successful day in Bethlehem's marketplace, and they were engaged in a conversation about the same census that Shelby and his papa had just been talking about back at the shepherd family's home camp.

“Isn't it a beautiful day?” The innkeeper took a deep breath of the

fresh morning air as she spoke to her friends.

“It certainly is,” replied the lamp seller, “and I bet it will be another busy one.”

The rug maker agreed. “Can you believe the number of people who are in Bethlehem for the census?” The three ladies were definitely amazed at how busy their town of Bethlehem had been.

“I know!” The lamp seller enjoyed that the extra visitors were buying her goods in the town marketplace. “I have definitely sold more lamps and oil than I usually do. I am glad I thought ahead and had more supplies on hand, just in case. And the inn sure has been busy,” she said to her friend. “I have seen a lot of people coming and going.”

“Is it ever!” The innkeeper was astonished at how busy the census had kept her. She had guests sleeping everywhere, many of whom had traveled on very long journeys to get to Bethlehem. She remarked that some guests were even happy to sleep in a very small space on the floor, just so they could finally be inside.

“Yes,” said the rug maker, smiling at the innkeeper, “and *your* guests are coming to me to buy *my* rugs so they will have softer floors to sleep on!”

“I’m glad I could help with your business,” said the innkeeper teasingly to her talented rug-weaving friend.

“Yes, we are so full that I’m afraid I am going to have to start turning people away now. I don’t like to do that, but I just don’t have another bit of room.”

“I wonder how much longer the census taker will be in town,” wondered the lamp seller aloud to her friends.

“I don’t know,” said the rug maker. “I don’t know, either,” replied the innkeeper.

The three ladies were about to resume their walk into Bethlehem to get their days started when they heard someone speaking. There was a group of people who had come up behind them. They were walking on a different path, but it was one that would soon connect to the path going into Bethlehem that the three friends were walking on.

“Are we there yet?” It was the Roman census taker and his census helper! The census taker was being carried in a small but rather fancy

Roman litter, and his litter was surrounded by his Roman guards. The census helper walked alongside the litter. It was a very official-looking little caravan, indeed, especially since they were all dressed in their most impressive and regal-looking Roman clothing.

“Almost, sir,” replied the census helper to his very important census-taking boss.

The census taker could be a little impatient, so it wasn't long before he asked his question again. “Are we there yet?”

The census helper had learned to be quite forbearing with his boss. He often wondered if the census taker became slightly grumpy because he had the habit of getting the laces on his

Roman sandals just a little too tight. Or it could have been that his toga took up an uncomfortable amount of space in the small litter he was riding in. “Just coming up on Bethlehem now, sir. It is just around this corner,” replied the census helper.

As he spoke, the little caravan he was leading came into view for the Bethlehem townswomen. But when the census helper saw the ladies on the adjoining path, he signaled for the caravan to stop. The litter carriers and the caravan’s Roman guards stopped walking, and the litter carriers set the litter down so it wouldn’t become too heavy should their delay be a long one.

They were dressed in their finest royal clothing, too. The litter carriers were wearing their customary short tunics so it would be easy for them to

move around as they carried out their duties, and the guards were dressed from head to toe in all their finest protective Roman gear: the leather belt that carried their swords, the helmets they wore to protect their heads, and the shoes that made it easy for them to keep their balance no matter where they walked. And their spears! No one could overlook the big spears they were carrying!

“Well, if it is just around the corner,” the census taker wanted to know when the impressive little group came to a halt, “why did we stop?” The census taker’s litter had curtains on it so he could have his privacy, as such regal and important people often desire, so he was unable to see the group of ladies on the path his caravan needed to use for its return trip into Bethlehem.

“There seems to be a little bit of a traffic jam up ahead,” the census helper replied.

The census taker was slightly confused. “A traffic jam?”

“Yes, sir,” said the census helper. He had such good manners.

“Well, what is it?” The census taker tried to take a guess as to what had stopped his caravan. “Another herd of sheep? I can’t believe how many sheep there are around Bethlehem. I think there must be more sheep around Bethlehem than there are roads leading to Rome.” That was a lot of roads! In fact, many people who lived in the area often commented that *all* of the roads led to Rome.

“I would agree,” said the census helper. “But, no, sir. It’s not sheep.”

“Well, whatever it is,” replied the census taker with a little more impatience than he’d had the moment before, “shoo them out of the way. I have places to go and people to count! I want to finish up the census today.” He wasn’t being mean. However, it was obvious that he was anxious to get moving again.

“Yes, sir,” replied the census helper. “Me, too, sir. But, um, I’d rather not hurry them. I’d rather let them move on their own. I’ve heard if you try to make them move faster than they want to, it can be, uh, dangerous.” They truly weren’t dangerous. It’s just that the census helper was actually just very timid and shy, and he didn’t know what to say to the ladies.

“Dangerous?” Now the census taker was even more curious. He

wondered what could be ahead of them on the path that would be so dangerous as to delay his very full schedule, so he opened up the curtain on his litter. It was just enough to poke his head out and see what it was that his helper was talking about.

“Hmm,” the census taker said when he looked out of his curtain and spotted the ladies. “Yes. I see what you mean. Well, I hear if you run toward them and wildly flap your arms, that will scare them off. Or are you supposed to curl up into a ball and make yourself as small as possible? Oh, I don’t know. Just go do some shooing.” The census taker stuck his hand out of his still mostly-closed curtain and made a “shooing” motion to his helper. Then he closed the curtain again and waited.

“Yes, sir,” replied the census helper hesitantly. Though quite a regal man himself, he walked reluctantly away from the litter his boss was riding in and approached the group of Bethlehem women rather slowly.

“Um, excuse me, ladies,” he said with a small wave as he walked toward them. “Um, will you be moving along soon? You see, we, um, we have to be getting into Bethlehem to continue working on the census, and...” His voice trailed off because he had been distracted by the wonderful items in the ladies’ baskets that they would be selling that day in the Bethlehem marketplace. He may have lacked courage about some things, but that was quickly forgotten for the moment!

“Oh my, are those lamps? I love lam...I mean...my wife loves lamps!”

He looked through the lamps and the small jars of oil in the lamp seller's basket and held one of the jars up to his nose so he could try to detect the oil's scent. "Oh, is that lavender?"

"No," replied the lamp seller.

The census helper tried again. "Is it vanilla?"

"No," replied the lamp seller with a smile. She was getting rather amused at the census helper's guesses.

"Well, it's delightful," he said.
"What is it?"

"I call it 'Oil of Gladness!'" The lamp seller replied to the census helper with a delighted chuckle.

"I'll take it. Oh, and that rug!" The census helper put the jar of oil back into the lamp seller's basket and shifted his

attention to the items the rug maker was carrying. One might not have guessed it could be true, but he was a very good shopper. In fact, he was always taking lovely things home to his wife after he had been on his official travels for Rome. She really did enjoy pretty lamps and fragrant oils...and beautiful rugs. “This is fantastic work,” he said to the rug maker as he examined one of her creations. “Did you do this?”

“Thank you. Yes, I did,” replied the rug maker.

Unfortunately, the census taker was also beginning to notice how good of a shopper his helper was. He stuck his head back out of the litter curtain and cleared his throat in an attempt to get his census helper’s attention, but it didn’t work.

“It’s wonderful,” said the census helper to the rug maker about the rug that had caught his eye. “Do you fill custom orders? I’d love this in a four-by-six.”

The rug maker replied that she might have one that size at her shop in town.

“Oh, good,” replied the census helper. By now, the census taker had cleared his throat a second time, but the census helper still had not heard him. It was difficult to distract him when he had found something he thought his wife might enjoy. He did, however, hear the little bell attached to the litter that the census taker finally rang. “Oh, um, excuse me ladies,” said the census helper when he heard the bell. “That’s for me. I will be right back.”

He began to walk back toward the caravan, but turned around for just a moment and pointed to the rug he had been admiring. “Don’t sell that,” he said to the rug maker with a smile. Then he sheepishly walked back over to the census taker’s litter. “You, uh, rang for me, sir?”

“What are you doing?” The census taker wanted to know why his morning was still being slightly delayed.

“Well, I was shooing them away, sir.” He tried to sound convincing to the census taker, but the census taker wasn’t convinced, and he commented back to the census helper that it looked a little more like shopping than it did shooing.

“Oh, that. Well, you see, I was just getting to the shooing part,” said the census taker’s helper. He really was!

But, his wife really did like lamps, and rugs, too! Besides, with all of the counting that had been going on in Bethlehem, he had not found the time to get a gift for her yet. “I was using the um, shop-then-shoo approach. Yes, the shop-n-shoo.”

“The shop-n-shoo?” The census taker still wasn’t convinced, although he was secretively just a little impressed by his helper’s quick—and comical—thinking. He just couldn’t admit it, especially not since he was in charge and had to be so regal and professional.

“Yes, sir,” said the census helper.

“Never heard of it,” said the census taker. He was having a little trouble trying to sound doubtful without letting it slip that he was actually also a little amused with his helper. He did, after

all, still have a very busy day of counting ahead of him.

“Oh, really?” The census helper knew that he really did need to be moving their little caravan along faster than he had been with his shopping and shooing. “Um...well, that’s because it is brand new, but I *think* it was working.”

“Yes. Yes, I am sure it was,” replied the census taker. “Well, I think I will use my own approach now. It’s brand new, too.”

“Oh, how exciting!” The census helper was glad that he might have some help getting the caravan on the move again. “Of course, sir. What is *your* approach called?”

“It’s called the ‘letting-my-census-helper-keep-his-job’ approach,” replied the census taker.

“Oh,” said the census helper with an excited response, not really noticing what the census taker had actually just hinted at. “Oh,” repeated the census helper when he figured it out. “Oh. Yes, of course. I like that approach much better, sir. That is a very good approach. Thank you, sir. Um, sir?” Even though the census helper could have been in just a little bit of trouble, he still really did want to take something home to his wife. “While you are over there, could you ask her to hold that rug for me?”

“I don’t think so,” said the census taker. That would have just slowed things down, and he wanted to be in his census-taking place in the middle of the town of Bethlehem as soon as possible.

“You don’t think so,” said the census helper in reply as the census taker made his way over to the group of

Bethlehem townswomen. “That is perfectly fine, sir. I’ll just wait right here.” Then he said to himself, “I really wanted it in a four-by-six anyway.”

The census taker walked regally over to the group of women. He was cordial and greeted them with a slight nod of his head as he did so. “Hello, ladies.”

The three Bethlehem friends returned the greeting of the Roman census taker with their own kind “Hello.”

“Will you be moving along soon?” The census taker didn’t hide his busyness. “We’ve just been out for my morning walk, and now I need to be getting back into Bethlehem to complete the census.” Then, without meaning to do so, the census taker also noticed the

same rug the census helper had been admiring. “Oh, that *is* a nice rug,” he commented. But then he cleared his throat to keep himself on task. “Yes, as I was saying, I need to be getting into Bethlehem as soon as possible so I can finish up all my counting.”

The rug maker answered on behalf of her Bethlehem friends. “Yes, we were just headed that way, too.”

“Oh, good,” said the census taker. “That is good, then. Thank you. Have a good day.”

As the census taker turned to go back to his caravan, the lamp seller quickly spoke up. “We had actually stopped to talk about you.”

“Oh, I see.” That got the census taker’s attention, for sure, so he decided the census could wait just another

moment. He just couldn't help himself! He was in a hurry, but he could also be persuaded to delay things a bit if he thought he might be about to receive a compliment. "And what were you saying? All good things, I hope." He looked into the sky with a look on his face that suggested he could be quite pleased with himself.

"Well," replied the rug maker, "we were just wondering how much longer you will be in town."

"Oh, that," said the census taker. He wasn't sure if the question was leading to a compliment or not, so he just answered the ladies in a matter-of-fact kind of way. "Well, Bethlehem is pretty small, so I would say I shouldn't be much longer."

“Small?” The innkeeper had some surprise in her voice. “You think Bethlehem is small?”

“Well, yes, I know it is.” The census taker was pretty certain now that he wasn’t going to receive a compliment, even though he had been truthful about the little town. “After all, I *have* been doing all this counting,” he replied to the innkeeper. “In fact, it’s so small, I might even have to count some of you twice, just so it will look like I was here. I’m surprised Rome is even bothering with it. But they want *everyone* counted.”

“Did you say you might count some of us twice? But, that is dishonest,” said the innkeeper.

“That’s my *business*,” said the census taker. He figured he might as

well be honest with the ladies about that part of his job. After all, it was common knowledge about some of the Roman rulers and workers that they could, at times, be rather untruthful with how they counted the people, and also with the amount of money they collected from them. “Numbers are my business. I live by the numbers. I get paid by the numbers. I get a *bonus* by the numbers. I like numbers.”

The census helper had remained over by the census taker’s litter, but he was still close enough to have overheard the conversation going on. “He *really* likes numbers,” he said to the group of ladies from where he was standing.

The census taker continued. “Yes, I really like numbers. I believe what I see in the numbers, and what I see is that Bethlehem is small.”

“Well, it may be small,” replied the rug maker in defense of her little town, “but it has been told to us for a very long time that Bethlehem will someday be very great.” What she said was true. It had been spoken of in the land through many stories that had been passed down from family to family for several generations.

The census taker was still doubtful that what she said could be possible. “Great? No, I don’t think so.” He turned and asked for his helper to bring him the census scroll that he had been using as he counted the Bethlehem people. When the census helper retrieved the scroll from the storage trunk on the litter and handed it to the census taker, the census taker unrolled it and began to study it.

“Let’s see. Um, yes. Just as I remembered. The census numbers I have just don’t agree with what you are saying, and I know numbers. So, I’m afraid I just can’t believe that Bethlehem will be great. That, kind lady, would take a miracle.” The census taker started to roll the counting scroll back up, but then he raised his hand as if he had something even more memorable to say.

“Oh, just a moment,” he said. “I feel a rhyme coming on.” He cleared his throat and instructed the census helper to take down the words he was about to say. He was certain they would be quite important, and he wanted to make sure they were recorded.

“Yes, sir,” said the census helper. He turned to the Roman guards and motioned for them to remove their helmets. Then he nodded to the census

taker so he could continue. The census taker took a deep breath and began to share his impromptu poem.

“Bethlehem. Oh, Bethlehem,” said the census taker. Then he turned and asked his helper if he was getting it down.

The census helper pointed to his head and reassured the toga-wearing poet. “Yes, sir,” he said, “I have it all up here, sir.”

“Okay. Very good,” said the census taker. He shifted how he was standing so he could be even more important-looking as he began his poem again.

“Bethlehem. Oh, Bethlehem.
You’re so very small.
I don’t think you’ll ever be
so great among them all.
Bethlehem. Oh, Bethlehem.
If you want to ask me why,

I can say that it's because
the numbers never lie."

After he delivered his rhyme, he turned to the group of ladies with a smile that said he was, indeed, quite impressed with his own poetic talents. "I like to rhyme."

The census taker's supportive helper—and biggest poetry fan—opened his eyes and began to clap. "He likes to rhyme," he said as he turned to the guards and litter carriers and signaled to them that they should clap along with him. "It was brilliant, sir," he said to the census taker as he wiped a "tear" from his eye. "It was one of your best. And just off the top of your head like that, too!"

The census taker didn't hide his pride about his new rhyme. "I know. I

know. Thank you. It just kind of came to me. ‘Bethlehem. Oh, Bethlehem.’”

The lamp seller wasn’t quite as impressed. “The numbers never lie, huh? Mr. Might-have-to-count-some-of-you-twice?”

“That’s right,” replied the census taker.

“Well, maybe it will take a miracle,” said the lamp seller, undeterred from her optimism about her most beloved Bethlehem, “but we have heard stories of miracles from our families, too.”

Both the rug maker and innkeeper spoke up in support of their friend and in defense of their town. “That’s right! Yes, we have!”

“In fact,” continued the innkeeper, I’ll even give *you* a poem!” She smiled and took her own regal stance, playfully mimicking the poet who had just delivered his verse. “Take this down. Are you taking this down?” The innkeeper winked as she asked the lamp seller her question.

The lamp seller smiled and winked back to her friend as she pointed to her head. “I have it all up here.”

“Okay,” said the innkeeper, “here we go. One small coin makes rich the one who found it.”

When she heard those first words, the rug maker quickly dangled her coin bag in front of the census taker. That certainly got his attention! “Coins?” Without even thinking about it, the

census taker reached for the coin bag. “I like coins,” he said.

His helper took the census taker by the back of his toga and gently pulled him away from the enticing bag of coins, slightly embarrassed that his otherwise even-keeled boss would lose his composure over the little *jingle-jangle* sound. “He likes coins,” said the census taker’s helper apologetically.

The innkeeper smiled and gave her poem a fresh start. “As I was saying...”

“One small town can change the world
around it.

One small child can change a family.
One small coin makes rich the one who
found it.

One small seed becomes a giant tree.
We don’t know just how He’s going to
do it.

One thing we know for sure, God keeps
His word.

When He makes a promise, He sees to
it,
and tells the grandest story ever heard!”

The innkeeper made a slight curtsy when she finished speaking, and her friends started clapping. One of the Roman guards even joined in with the census helper so they could express their own congratulations. That is, until the census taker turned around to them with a surprised *Stop that!* look on his face.

“Yes, sir,” said the lamp seller.
“One small act can bring big change if there is just a little kindness in it.”

“That’s right,” agreed the rug maker as she pointed heavenward and wiped a genuinely heartfelt tear from her eye. “He hears the smallest sigh as a prayer, if there is even just a tiny bit of

faith wrapped in it. Then, all of a sudden, you are looking at one small miracle!”

“Yes, indeed. All it takes is one small miracle!” The innkeeper spoke with the delightful joy that her own poem had just inspired. “Well, good day, gentlemen.” Then, as she and her friends turned to make their way into town, they waved a friendly good-bye to the census taker and his caravan.

“Thank you, ladies!” The census taker’s helper waved back to the three women that he had found to be quite warm and cordial. He had been so busy helping with the census that he had not noticed if the ladies’ shops were close in proximity to their census table, but he was hoping to himself that they were. He turned to the census taker, still speaking approvingly of the verse he

had just heard. “That was a lovely poem,” he said to the census taker. “Wasn’t that a lovely poem?”

The census taker had to remain professional when he spoke, so he responded that he supposed it was, if one liked that style of poetry. “There was that beautiful line about coins and being rich.” However, so as not to appear too overcome with emotion, he quickly changed the subject. “Now, speaking of coins, the census is waiting. Time to be moving along.” And with that, the census taker got back inside his litter and closed the curtain.

“Okay. You heard him, gentlemen. Let’s be on our way,” said the census taker’s helper to the rest of the caravan.

The litter carriers picked the census taker’s litter back up and began moving

slowly and carefully forward in the direction of Bethlehem. Then the census taker began speaking to himself. He had forgotten that while the curtain around his litter may have offered him some privacy, it certainly was not soundproof! It was not nearly thick enough to keep others from overhearing what he was saying.

“Now, how did that go? Ah, yes. ‘One small town can change the world around it. One small child can change a family. One small coin makes rich the one who found it.’” The census taker sighed as he began thinking about coins again, and when the census helper heard the sigh, he raised his hand as a signal for the caravan to stop.

“One moment please,” the helper said to the litter carriers and the Roman guards walking alongside the litter.

“Did you say something, sir?” The census helper wanted to make sure he did not ignore his census-taking boss.

Fearing he had been caught actually enjoying the creative little poem the townswomen rhymed about their beloved Bethlehem, the census taker stuck his head out of the litter curtain and quickly came up with a diversion.

“No,” he said in what he knew to be a useless denial. “Um, I mean, yes. Yes, I did. I said that this cart is too *small*, and I would like to order a larger cart once we get back to our home *town*, because I think this one was made for a *child*. And...” He paused as he tried to think even more quickly for the rest of an acceptable and—he hoped—a believable response. “And you will have to take enough *coins* when you go to pay for it.” He breathed a sigh of relief as if

he had just been personally questioned by Rome's highest leader himself.

“Yes, sir,” replied his helper, even though he really knew what had been said. “I thought that is what I heard you say.”

In order to divert the conversation even further, the census taker continued with his grand story. “Of course that's what I said! I've heard the newer model has more leg room and a larger trunk. That will come in handy in case I find a rug I like. Or...something like that.”

Ah, yes. The Bethlehem rug maker's rug! That got the census taker's helper distracted enough to play along with the change of topic. He remarked that it truly was a fantastic design on the rug they had seen. It had been well-made, and they both agreed that they

really liked the colors she had used. Then one of the litter carriers interrupted their conversation. “Excuse me, sir,” he said. “The road is clear now.”

“Oh, um, yes. Thank you,” the census taker replied to his litter carrier. Then, knowing he needed to carry through with actually buying the new litter he had spoken of prior to their conversation about the beautiful rug, he asked his helper if he had gotten all the information down about the proposed upgrade to his regal transportation.

“Yes, sir,” said the helper as he pointed to his head again. “I have it all up here, sir. Order a larger litter.”

“Yes, that’s right,” replied the census taker as he closed his curtain again. He was pretty pleased with

himself, delighted that he seemed to have avoided any trouble at all. “Okay, good. Let’s move along now. On to Bethlehem.” Then, he rang the little bell on his litter as the signal to move ahead.

“You heard him, gentlemen,” said the census taker’s helper. “On to Bethlehem!”

Then the little Roman caravan was on its way again.

LOST AND FOUND

It didn't seem long after all the merchants had gotten settled in with their items to offer for sale in the marketplace, and the men and women and children went about their daily tasks, that morning quickly turned into midday. Still, the normally quiet town of Bethlehem had stayed busy with the hustle and bustle of buying and selling and news-sharing.

The potter worked at his potter's wheel, getting his next creation ready for drying so it could be used in someone's home for whatever its very important purpose would be. It was easy to tell who he was, even when he wasn't sitting at his wheel for a

moment. His hands always seemed to be covered with the various clays that he used to fashion his bowls, jars, and pitchers.

The fabric dyer, who wore a piece of colored cloth on his tunic that signified his trade, carefully dipped a large cut of fabric into a beautiful purple dye. It was such a rich color, it was sure to eventually be suitable for royalty itself.

The blacksmith had his tools neatly lined up and ready for use during his day, too. At his shop, he was heard before he was seen. The unmistakable *bang-tap-tap, clang-tap-tap* sound of his hammer shaping the slightly softened metal let all the passersby know that he was hard at work. A new apprentice was hard at work, too, as he watched the blacksmith's methods carefully. He

was eager to learn the trade of such a skilled craftsman. The blacksmith in Bethlehem was certainly one of the finest in the whole land.

Some of the townsmen who frequently gathered to discuss the affairs of Bethlehem had to sit far away from the blacksmith's shop so they could hear each other speaking. They liked to talk of business and other matters as they watched the activities of those who visited the various merchant booths, as well as of the other people who walked about.

There were those who passed through town with bundles of sticks they had gathered and packed onto their donkeys. Children walked through, too, holding their dolls or slingshots in one hand while their mothers had a good grasp on the other

hand. Everyone was dressed simply and much like Shelby and his family were, in their long tunics and head coverings that were suitable for the work their days would require.

A blind beggar often sat in front of one of the shops, too. He hoped every day that he would be taken care of by the generosity of the Bethlehem people, and he always was.

There were the Roman guards with their long spears who were scattered around the town, also, including the extra ones who were called in to be on duty during the current people-counting, coin-collecting time.

It was the normal day-to-day activity of the town that made so many people appreciate little Bethlehem, even

in the middle of the unusual activity of the Roman census.

It was within that scene that the census taker's helper wound his way through the people in Bethlehem as he made his way back to the census table. He was carrying a lamp, a small jar of oil, and a rug like the one he had admired earlier that morning when the census taker's caravan had come up behind the three Bethlehem townswomen as they were all on their way into town to conduct their business affairs.

Still holding his purchases in his arms while he stood as close to the middle of the crowds of people as he could, the census helper called out with the purpose of getting everyone's attention. "People of Bethlehem!"

He was unsuccessful. “My, you’re a busy little town,” he said to himself. “Oh, Bethlehem!” He called out again a little louder, though still unheard over the town’s sounds.

Setting his rug down and turning to the blind beggar who was sitting close by, the census helper picked up a tambourine-like instrument that the blind man often used to soothe himself and to entertain the townspeople in the hopes that he could collect more coins from them. Shaking it loudly, the census helper tried one more time to garner the attention of those passing by.

“Bethlehem!” This time he shouted as loudly as he could, and it finally worked! The people stopped doing what they were doing and gave him their attention. Then, with his thanks, he returned the music-maker to its owner,

after which he addressed the crowd of people as if he were making the important announcement of a limited-time special offer.

“Attention, good people of Bethlehem! If you have not registered for the census, there is currently no waiting at your *friendly* neighborhood census table. Register now, and you will be back to your normal routine in no time. Furthermore, on behalf of Caesar Augustus and your very own census-taking team, we thank you for your *generous* support.”

Most of the Bethlehem families had already registered for the census, so after they heard the census helper’s announcement, they returned to the tasks they had been tending to in the moments before.

The census helper picked his rug back up and walked on over to the census taker's wooden table. There was already another rolled-up rug there, so he set his rug and other purchases down next to it.

“It looks like you did some shopping during our midday break,” remarked the census taker when he noticed the rug and other items his helper had been carrying.

“I did,” the census helper replied, “and it looks like you did, too, sir.”

The census taker agreed that he had. He wanted to return home to Rome with a purchase for *his* wife.

About that time, a husband and wife walked up to the census table, and the census taker's attention was drawn

back to his duties. “Ah! People! Back to the numbers. I like numbers.”

“He likes numbers,” chimed in the always-helpful census helper.

The census taker proceeded to ask the husband how many were in his family, to which the man replied that there were two of them. Then the census taker looked behind them and noticed a small boy standing there. “Two? I see three.”

“Three?” The husband turned around to see that there was, in fact, a little boy who had walked up behind him and his wife. “Oh! No, he’s not with us.”

The census taker appeared to be a little doubtful of the man’s answer, considering that a little boy standing alone at the census table wasn’t a

normal occurrence, but he proceeded with his counting duties anyway. He wrote a number on his census scroll and then turned the scroll around for the man to sign. He spoke abruptly to the man as he pointed to the scroll. “Sign here. Pay this.”

The man commented that the amount was quite large for just having two people in his family, but when it came time for anyone to pay the money that was being requested by someone working for Rome, they knew that it was futile to object very strongly.

“Are you questioning my numbers?” The census taker was unapologetic and unwilling to negotiate. “I *know* my numbers. I *like* my numbers. Numbers are my business. So, sign here, and pay this.”

The man signed the scroll and gave the census taker a small leather pouch with coins in it. This was the census taker's favorite part of his job, and he hugged and patted the little bag before he removed the coins and slowly and carefully counted them.

“One small coin makes rich the one who found it,” he said as he counted, recalling the verse from the poem he had heard earlier that morning. “Yes, indeed,” he said as he returned the coins to their bag and threw the bag on top of the other bags sitting on the census table. He then excused the couple and turned his attention to the little boy who was still patiently waiting for his turn.

The census taker wondered what a small child would want with him, and he didn't hide his confusion. “Next?”

The little boy stepped closer to the census table, taking a deep breath and speaking to himself as he did. “Calm and kind, Shelby. Calm and kind. I think fighting a lion would be easier than this. But I want to prove somehow that I can be brave!”

Was that Shelby? Yes, it was Shelby! He had made it into town a little earlier and had been looking all around for Little One. He hadn’t found his lost sheep yet, but then he spotted what he thought could be the census taker’s table.

Shelby hadn’t forgotten his plan of wanting to do something very brave so he could have more sheep in his flock, and he hoped that going home with the report of speaking to the census taker might help carry his plan along a little more quickly. So, he stepped up to the

table and introduced himself. “Hi! I’m Shelby.” He wasn’t feeling as brave as he was trying to sound, but he gave it his best anyway.

“Hello, Shelby,” replied the census taker.

“How are you today?” Shelby asked his question pleasantly.

Still confused, the census taker replied. “I’m fine, and I’m busy. Are you lost? You are a little young to be registering for the census.”

Shelby chuckled because he knew that was true. Still, he was starting to feel a little braver, so he continued. “My papa said he already registered, and no, I’m not lost. My *sheep* is lost, and I have been looking for him all the way here. He recognizes my voice, so he would

come to me if he heard me calling for him. But, I'm not lost. I'm a shepherd!"

The census taker still didn't quite know what to do with the little fellow in this most unusual encounter. "Well," he said to Shelby, "I'm afraid this isn't the Lost-and-Found table, for people or sheep." Then he leaned forward toward Shelby as if trying to be intimidating to the little shepherd. "Do you know who I am?"

Shelby was so hopeful and determined about his mission that he didn't notice the census taker's demeanor, so he just kept talking, as he often did.

"I sure do!" Shelby snapped his fingers as he spoke. "My papa just told me this morning about you being in Bethlehem. You're the...um...Oh, I *know*

I remember. Yep!” It seemed to have come to him—almost. “You are the *senseless* taker.”

“No, I’m not the *senseless* taker. I am the *census* taker,” he replied to Shelby. While he spoke, the census taker also turned around and threw a *You might wish you hadn’t laughed!* glance at his Roman guard and census helper who had gotten tickled with Shelby’s mistaken—yet very amusing—answer. He continued as he turned back around to Shelby. “And I’m afraid I don’t help with lost sheep.”

“Oh, I know,” Shelby said. “I just came by because I wanted to meet you.”

“You wanted to meet me? What on earth for?” The census taker was certainly intrigued by this little guy. You might have even guessed that he

could have actually been starting to like Shelby. At least, maybe a little bit.

Shelby had gotten distracted by the census taker's table and didn't answer the question right away. He picked up one of the little coin bags. "That's a neat bag," he said, giving it a good shake. "It jingles! What's in it? The bag I am carrying just had my breakfast in it, and bread and cheese isn't very noisy, so it didn't make a neat sound like this one does."

The census taker may have been starting to like Shelby a little, but not so much as to let the staff-toting young boy play with the coins he had collected, so he quickly took the little bag away from the very curious shepherd as he answered Shelby's question. "Taxes," he said. "Wonderful, amazing taxes. I like taxes."

Always wanting to learn, Shelby asked what taxes were. His papa had explained that morning about counting the people, but he hadn't mentioned anything about taxes and little jingling bags.

The census taker wasted no time in talking about the coins he liked so much. "Just a little something we collect from people when they register for the census," he told Shelby. "You'll find out soon enough. Now, why, exactly, did you want to meet me?" The census taker was still quite curious.

"Because you and I are a lot alike!" Shelby continued. "We *both* have very important jobs."

Now the census taker was even more intrigued, but he also believed that Shelby might be mistaken. So he asked

Shelby how a Roman census taker and a Bethlehem shepherd could be alike at all. Shelby had no problem giving his very observant answer.

“Because we both count things!” Shelby liked counting sheep apparently as much as the census taker liked counting coins. “Counting is an important part of being a shepherd, just like it is for a *senseless* taker. I mean, a census taker.”

Shelby went on to describe how his papa and uncle were always counting the family’s sheep and that he and his cousins sometimes got to help. That’s how they kept their sheep safe. “Is that why you count people, to keep them safe?”

The census taker wasn’t sure how to answer that question, and neither was

the census helper who could only shrug his shoulders. Shelby wasn't to be deterred in talking about counting, though, and he asked the census taker how high he had to count and if he had to count a lot when it came to counting people.

“Sometimes,” the census taker responded, softening a little more toward all of Shelby's questions since he liked counting, also. “How high do *you* have to count?”

Shelby answered with a sigh. “Right now, I just count to one. No, wait!” He had remembered the little toy his mama had given him just that morning.

“Now I count to two,” Shelby said enthusiastically. “My mama just gave me another sheep for my flock this

morning before I left.” He patted the little stuffed sheep that was still tucked safely and securely into his belt. “So, two,” he said. “Well, I guess I’m back down to one again, for now. But when I find Little One, I’ll be back up to two. You know, being a shepherd is hard work. At least *this* sheep won’t wander off like Little One does.”

Feeling just slightly jovial now with all of the counting talk, the census taker displayed a bit of unusual lightheartedness. “So, if Little One is the name of your other sheep, are you naming this one Little Two?” That made Shelby laugh!

“Little Two! I hadn’t thought of that.” It was a fun name, and quite appropriate. “You are so funny! Do you have fun with all of your counting?” Shelby thought the census taker must

really enjoy himself. “I mean, you get to go to different places and meet so many different people.”

The census taker told Shelby that he had never thought of his job quite like that. He only knew he liked numbers, and he liked them a lot.

“Hey, I like numbers, too!” Shelby and the census taker both really did like numbers. “In fact,” said Shelby as he took another moment to describe some of his shepherding hopes, “I want to have so many sheep to count that they fill the whole countryside. We even have a counting cheer we do back home. Do you want to see it?” Shelby hadn’t participated in it that morning when his cousins had done it, but he still knew how it went.

Shelby demonstrated the cheer for the census taker. The census helper and the Roman guard enjoyed it so much that they did part of it along with Shelby. The census taker had to remain professional-looking, though, and he declined Shelby's invitation to join in. He did tell Shelby he thought it was clever, though.

The census helper agreed that it was a witty little cheer, and he commented to the census taker that he thought they needed their own clever census cheer, but the census taker didn't agree. He quickly changed the subject back to Shelby's lost-and-found mission and the young boy's reason for being in town.

“So, if you still want to keep doing your counting cheer, maybe you should

get back to looking for your lost sheep now?”

“You’re right! I should!” Shelby had been chatting for a little while. “I was having so much fun I lost track of time. Well, I’m glad I got to meet you, Mr. Census Taker.” Shelby reached his hand out to shake the census taker’s hand. He was a little clumsy at it, but he knew it was the respectable thing to do.

The census taker reached out and shook Shelby’s hand. “Well, I’m glad you got to meet me. Everyone else around here does not seem very happy to see me,” he said.

Shelby remembered the advice his papa had given him about being a good shepherd by also being calm and kind. He thought his papa’s wisdom might help the census taker, too.

“Well,” said Shelby, “maybe if you were a little less grumpy when you are counting them, the people wouldn’t mind you being around so much.”

Shelby had learned to be truthful, but he was still learning how to be a little more tactful. Then Shelby leaned in so he could whisper something about the Roman guard. “And this one looks kind of scary.”

“He’s a guard,” said the census taker, also leaning in and whispering back to Shelby. “He is *supposed* to look scary. That is how he keeps *me* safe.” He turned to look at his guard who, just moments before, was having quite a bit of fun helping Shelby with his counting cheer. The guard quickly stood back at attention, but he smiled and winked at Shelby as he did so.

Shelby replied to the census taker that his guard didn't have to look mean to be a good guard, because his papa guarded the family's sheep and still smiled all the time.

"Is that so?" The census taker remarked that he would keep in mind the things Shelby had said. "I need to return to work now, little boy. I hope you find your lost sheep."

"My name is Shelby," he respectfully reminded the census taker. "I am Shelby the Shepherd."

"I hope you find your lost sheep, Shelby the Shepherd," said the census taker. Surprisingly—even to the amazement of his own normally grumpy self—he actually really did!

Shelby thanked him for the well wishes and told him that he was sure he

would find Little One. As he spoke, Shelby picked up his shepherd's staff that he had set to the side to do the counting cheer, and then, with a happy wave, he told them all good-bye.

They waved back, and the census taker's helper commented that he thought Shelby was a very cute, cheerful—and talkative—kid.

The census taker agreed, but he also remembered that Shelby had just said he was grumpy. He asked his helper if he, too, thought he was grumpy. But when the census helper asked if he really had to answer the question, the census taker thought it a wise thing to say that he didn't.

After Shelby left the census table, he found a small stool to sit on so he could think a bit and make his next

plans about where he might find Little One. He also wanted to remind himself of everything he and the census taker had just talked about. He wanted to be sure to remember every detail when he told his papa about it later after he had found Little One and returned home.

Meanwhile, the census taker and the census helper continued to talk at their counting table about how they seemed to have had a successful census.

“I would say it at least appears that we were doing more than shopping and cheering and chatting about lost sheep while we were in town,” said the census taker as he looked at all the coin bags in front of him. “I still say Bethlehem is small, but I think Rome will be pleased when I turn in what we have collected.”

“You do know how to take good care of your numbers, sir,” replied the census helper.

As the census taker and Shelby had been talking about their similar counting tasks, the census helper had busied himself with looking around at all of the people going by the census table. He noticed that almost all of the faces around town were starting to look familiar, and he wondered if they had reached the end of those they had not yet counted. He asked the census taker for his thoughts about preparing to return home to Rome.

The census taker was in agreement. “I’d say we have counted just about everyone by now.” Then he noticed a man and woman whom they had *not* counted. “Except them,” he said as he pointed to the young couple. “I know

we haven't counted them yet. They are not included in my numbers, and I know my numbers."

"Yes, sir. You are right, sir," said the helper as the man and woman walked directly up to the census table. "You do know your numbers."

The census taker turned his attention to the man and woman. "You've just made it," he said to the man. "We were just talking about closing down the census. How many in your family?"

Though obviously very tired, the man replied with gratitude. "Yes, sir. Thank you," he said. "As you can see, we have had to take our time on our journey. It was a rather uncomfortable one. There are just the two of us, sir. For now." As he spoke, the man gestured to

the woman. She also appeared to be very tired, but quite understandably. She was going to have a baby!

“Yes, I see,” said the census taker. “It looks like it could be three at any time.” He was always aware of his numbers.

The man replied with a smile. “Yes, I believe the child won’t be waiting much longer to make his appearance.”

“*His* appearance?” The census taker wondered how they could be so sure. “Certain it will be a boy, huh?”

The man smiled at the woman as he answered the census taker’s question. “Yes, sir. Yes, we do have reason to believe it will be a boy.”

“Well, either way, just be glad *he* isn’t here yet, or I would be counting *him*, too.” The man thanked the census taker and told him he was very kind.

Kind? That observation made the census taker comment to himself that with all of the cheering and talking about lost sheep and cute kids, he was tired and wasn’t acting like his normally grumpy self at all! He shook his head at himself and wrote down the man’s number.

“Sign here. Pay this,” he said to the man. The man signed the census scroll, and when the census helper reminded the census taker what Shelby had said about being grumpy, he smiled a little bit too large of a smile and said, “Oh, yes. Um...please.”

When the man was finished and had given his coins to the census taker, the census taker told him and the woman with him that they could be on their way. He also turned and quickly commented to the census helper that smiling hurt his face!

The census helper tried to be encouraging. “Well, it was still progress, sir,” he responded to his boss. By then, another man and woman had come up to the table, so the census helper was all business again, especially when he learned that this particular family had five children. He didn’t have to give a forced smile this time! He told his helper that he would take his chances with a smile in this case, because this new number was quite a big, happy number!

The Roman census taker certainly liked numbers.

Not too far across the still bustling center of town, the innkeeper had to deal with quite a few numbers of her own. As she had commented to her rug-making and lamp-selling friends earlier that day, her inn was so full of visitors who were in town for the census that she was going to have to start turning people away. Unfortunately, that would include the man and expectant woman who had left the census taker's table and would knock on the door of her inn.

“Are you doing okay? Do you need to rest?” The man had wanted to make sure his wife was comfortable—at least as comfortable as she could be with a baby on the way—before he inquired about if there was room for them in the inn. So he found a small wooden stool

for his wife, set it in front of the inn, and steadied her as she sat down.

“Yes, this will be fine,” she replied to her husband. “I really hope the innkeeper has good news for us.”

The man agreed. “Me, too,” he said. He knocked on the door of the inn, and when the innkeeper opened it, the man asked her if there was any more room in the inn. Gesturing to his seated wife, he even said that they would be willing to sleep anywhere.

The innkeeper had been afraid this would happen, but she had no choice but to give the answer she had feared she would have to give. “No. I’m afraid the inn is all full. I am so sorry. Bethlehem is busting at the seams with people right now because of the census.

I doubt you will find anywhere under a roof to spend the night tonight.”

The innkeeper was especially saddened that she was not only turning away a young couple who had obviously traveled a great distance, but that they were also about to be new parents! So she thought as quickly as she could about a way to offer at least some kind of assistance, and she came up with what she hoped would be a helpful solution. “There is a place down the path with a manger in it,” she sympathetically told the man. “It may not be the first place you would want to be, but at least it will give you some shelter and keep you out of the cool night air.”

The innkeeper apologized again for being unable to help them more, but the man still thanked her for telling them

about the place with the manger, acknowledging that she had been as helpful to them as she could be. Then, though he didn't want to do it, the man turned around from the door and prepared to tell his wife the news.

While he had been talking to the innkeeper, however, the man was unaware that someone from Bethlehem had just come up to his wife with a small animal of some kind. It was wrapped in a blanket, so it was hard to tell at first what it was, but it obviously didn't belong to the person carrying it. As the man approached, he asked about the little critter. "What have we here?"

The person replied, uncovering the animal and showing obvious concern for its care. "It seems this little sheep has lost his shepherd. I was walking down the path, and he followed me out from

where the manger is. I just don't want to see him get hurt, especially with all of these people around.”

It wasn't the man and woman's sheep, but the man did agree about not wanting it to get hurt. “Actually, we have just been pointed in that direction because of the inn being full. After she has rested a bit longer, that is where we will be going. I am happy to take him with us, in case his shepherd is looking for him there.”

The person carrying the little sheep was thankful to have been offered some help. So, with the gratitude of the helpful person who had found him, the little four-legged ball of wool was handed over to the man.

As this went on not far from the inn's door, Shelby had stayed seated on

his little stool as he made his plans for where he should look next for Little One. He had even thought about the dream his mother had woken him from that very morning.

Shelby had still not shared the details of his dream with anyone, fearing they would think he was silly, but he had remained certain that he would somehow see it come true. He even encouraged himself to believe it just a little bit more. “Okay, Little One,” he said aloud. “Where are you, you silly sheep? If the dream I was having this morning is real, you should be...right there!”

As Shelby spoke, he turned around to face the inn for the first time since he had sat down. Then he looked up.

Wait a moment! Was he seeing what he thought he was seeing? He was! It was just like in his dream. Could it be? It was. It was Little One! He had really been found!

Shelby was so excited that he didn't know what to do first. He wanted to run right up to his little sheep, but he also was a bit hesitant because he was not quite sure what to say. However, he couldn't wait another moment, so he walked right up to the man who was now holding the sweet Little One.

“Well, hello. Are you looking for this lost sheep?” The man courteously posed his question to Shelby when he had gotten a little closer.

Shelby was thankful the man seemed to be such a kind man. “Yes, sir. I am,” he replied. “I'm Shelby. He is my

sheep, and he wandered off from our home. I have been looking for him! I call him Little One. He's part of my very own flock. Well, he is the *only* part of my very own flock, except Mama did give me *this* sheep before I left earlier today." Shelby patted the stuffed sheep that was still tucked into his belt. "I hope to get more sheep to call my own really soon. Right now I just help my papa."

The man who was holding Little One spoke pleasantly to the wonderful little shepherd. "Helping is a very important job, too, and I thought you might be the shepherd of this Little One. Is that right? You call him Little One?"

"Yes, sir," Shelby said. "I named him Little One because he is small, like I am." Shelby dropped his head when he said that. It was obvious that he was a

little embarrassed that he had drawn attention to not being all grown-up just yet, but the man was still very gracious and acted surprised at Shelby's words.

“Oh,” the man said. “Well, I had not noticed that about either one of you. I *did* notice that staff of yours. In fact, as soon as I saw it, I knew that you must be quite a good shepherd.”

“Really? Thank you, sir.” Shelby was so pleased that someone had noticed his staff. He looked it over as he continued. “I carved it myself, and I don't go anywhere without it. It helps me do things that the other shepherds can do, even though they are bigger than I am. And it really comes in handy when I have accidentally dropped the water pail into our family well.” Shelby excitedly demonstrated the *swoop* maneuver he sometimes needed to do to

rescue the water pail. It nearly made him fall over! “It’s pretty special to me,” he said when he had stopped twirling around and regained his balance.

“I would say so! May I?” The man smiled and held out his hands to Shelby so he could take the staff to admire it. Shelby handed the staff to the man so he could examine it more closely.

“Well, it is a fine staff,” he said to the very talented shepherd. “You see, I get to work on rather valuable projects in *my* business, too, so I can tell this staff was made with a lot of love and care. Only the best shepherds have a staff like yours. Your Little One is a very fortunate sheep.” He handed the staff back to Shelby, who was quite surprised to receive such a compliment from someone who wasn’t even in his own family!

Shelby thanked the man for his kind words.

“You’re welcome! Now, may I ask you a question? I can tell you are a wise shepherd, and I could use your help,” said the pleasant man.

Shelby was so excited that someone had asked for his help. “Anything,” he said. “You can ask me anything!”

The man gestured to his wife as he spoke. She was still seated, trying to rest as much as she could. “Well, she and I are here for the census, and we have just been told that the inn is full. The innkeeper did say there is a place close by where we can find shelter, though. It has a manger in it, and she said we could stay there tonight. Would you happen to know where it is?”

Shelby was sorry the man and woman had received such sad news about there being no room in the inn. It made him even more thankful that he could at least say that he *did* know where the place with the manger was. He had been in town before when he was helping his papa, so he was able to tell the man that it was just down the path a little bit and that it wasn't far away at all.

The man was grateful to hear the good news that they would not have to walk very far to get there. He told Shelby that he was very glad to have been found by the little shepherd.

“Me, too.” Shelby thought it was very special to have received such a compliment. “I’m glad I could help you, sir. You might think I am a little silly, but I even had a dream that I would

find you.” It was the first time Shelby was ready to share about his dream with someone—which surprised even him. For reasons he could not explain just yet, he had felt safe to do so with this soft-spoken man and his wife.

“Really?” The man seemed curious, and that gave Shelby a little more courage.

“Yes, sir,” Shelby said. “It was just this morning. Do you think I am silly?”

“No,” the man replied. I don’t think you are silly at all.” The woman agreed.

Shelby turned to her when she spoke. “Wow, you are going to have a baby!” Shelby was quite surprised!

The woman smiled at Shelby’s innocent exclamation. “Yes, I am.”

“That is why I don’t think you are silly,” the man said to Shelby. “You see, I also had a dream, and it was about this baby. I was told in my dream that he will be very special and will help to save his people.”

With such news of someone else also having a dream, Shelby didn’t know whether to be more relieved or excited, so he decided to be both!

“Wow! Really?” He turned back to speak to the woman. “If he is going to be so special, does that make you scared? That sounds like a big job. Since I am not grown yet, almost every job is a big job for me, but that sounds like a *really* big job!”

The woman thought so, too. “It *does* sound like a big job, doesn’t it? I have to admit,” she said, “I was scared

at first. I wondered why I had been chosen for something so special. Then an angel told me not to be afraid. He said I am loved and that I am not alone, and I know that is what matters.”

That made Shelby’s heart feel so good. His mama was always saying things like that, just like she had that very morning before Shelby left to begin his shepherding adventure. He told the woman that good mamas must say things like that, and that she was going to be a good mama. Then he realized something else. “Wait. Did you say you saw an angel?”

“Yes, I did,” the woman replied. She and her husband smiled at each other. After hearing that, Shelby could just look up into the sky. By now it had begun to show the signs of the end of what had turned out to be quite a day.

Shelby just tried to imagine what it must have been like to see an angel.

The man interrupted Shelby's thoughts when he asked his wife if she was rested enough to go find the place with the manger. He knew she would be pleased to get settled in for the night.

The woman had a thankful look on her face, and she nodded to her husband. She was grateful to have a place to stay. The man then helped her to her feet, and he turned to talk to Shelby as he did.

“Do you have a long journey home, Shelby?” He was genuinely interested in the little shepherd's well-being.

Shelby remarked that it all depended on how often Little One decided to stop and eat along the way!

The man chuckled. “Well, he feels like he has already had quite a bit to eat today!” He was still holding Little One in one arm as he assisted his wife with the other, and he had an idea. “How about I carry him for you so he won’t run off again? And, kind shepherd, would you be willing to help Mary?”

Oh, so that was her name. Shelby thought it was as pretty a name as his own mama’s name of Anna. “Yes, sir. I am happy to help.”

“You can call me Joseph,” the man said.

Shelby told Mary and Joseph that he was really glad he got to meet them. It also meant a lot to him that they had shared some really special things that had happened to them, too.

Shelby was still trying to imagine what it would be like to see an angel, when Joseph spoke up and told him they were ready to go to the place where the manger was. “So, lead on, young Shelby. You and your special staff.”

“Yes, sir,” said Shelby as he pointed down the path. “It is just this way.” Shelby asked another question as he gently led Mary down the path. “Mr. Joseph, do you know what the baby’s name will be when he gets here?”

“Yes, we do,” Joseph replied. “I learned that from my dream, too. We will be calling him Jesus.”

All the way to the place with the manger, Shelby was thinking again about his own dream and the special news Mary and Joseph had received about the baby that was about to be

born. He was so excited to be able to help his new friends.

Once they got to the place with the manger, he waited until Mary and Joseph were settled in as comfortably as they could be, and then he—and Little One—began their return trip home.

At the same time, Bethlehem had been ending its day also. The shops began closing for the evening, and, convinced that they had seen all they were going to see in Bethlehem, the census taker and his helper made their plans to leave the next morning.

It was definitely a most unusual day in Bethlehem. Some even said it was a little surprising.

Surprising, indeed.

SPECIAL ENOUGH

When Shelby and Little One finally arrived home, it was already nearly dark. Shelby wanted to tell everyone all about the events of his day right away, but he was also very hungry, so he went directly inside to eat first.

While Shelby was eating, his papa and uncle remained outside where they discussed the family's sheep, and Shelby's cousins quietly played nearby. Their shepherding day at home had gone well, just like Shelby's had in Bethlehem.

"I pray it will also be a calm night watch for you," said Samuel to Nathaniel.

“I’m sure it will be,” Nathaniel said. “The air seems very peaceful tonight.” It truly did.

Samuel agreed. “Yes, it does.” He also commented that he saw that Shelby and Little One had made it back safely.

“Yes, they did,” said Shelby’s papa. “Shelby was definitely ready for his evening meal. I would say he is probably finishing up his *second* helping by now.”

This made Shelby’s uncle laugh. He knew the feeling, especially since Jake and Sam could really work up an appetite after they’d had as busy of a day as Shelby did. “Did Shelby find Little One in Bethlehem, like he had hoped?” Samuel had remained optimistic that Shelby’s plans would work out just as he wanted them to. He

appreciated his little nephew's determination. He knew it would make him a good shepherd someday.

“He sure did,” replied Shelby's papa. “Little One was why it took so long for Shelby to get home. It seems they have matching appetites tonight, because Shelby said Little One was constantly stopping to eat along the way.”

Samuel commented that it sounded about right for a growing sheep, and a growing boy.

After Shelby finished eating, he and his mama came out of the family's tent. Shelby was anxious to tell about his day, and that meant he could also help his papa with the night watch of the sheep. He was carrying his staff again, knowing that a good shepherd

was always ready for a shepherding day...or night!

“Well, good evening, family!”
Nathaniel warmly greeted his wife and son as they drew near.

Shelby said hello to his papa and his uncle and cousins. “Good evening, Shelby,” replied his uncle. “Did you have a good day?”

He most certainly did! Shelby’s day was one of the best he had ever had. He was confident that his papa would soon allow him to have more sheep in his own little flock, after he was able to tell all the details of his stories. “Yes, Uncle. I sure did. I got to meet the senseless...I mean, the census taker. And I found Little One. Well, *I* didn’t. Someone else did. But that is okay. And I got to help a

really nice man and woman who didn't have a place to stay tonight.”

Shelby's uncle complimented Shelby for his kindness. Shelby said that it was a lot of fun to be able to help them. He truly did like to help people.

Anna felt the same way about her little shepherd. “You are a good helper, Son,” she said to Shelby. “Speaking of help,” she said as she turned to Shelby's papa, “we just came to see if there is anything else you need for your night watch of the flock.”

Nathaniel said he believed he was all set, though he knew Shelby would also like to be invited to help. “I *could* use another set of eyes on the sheep for a little while, if a certain shepherd hasn't already had too many adventures for one day.”

Shelby didn't believe he could ever have too many adventures. "I would love to help, Papa!" He asked his mother's permission to stay out with his papa to help with the night watch, and she agreed that it was just fine.

"Then I will stay right here and be all ready to help keep a good night watch." Shelby had leaned over on his papa's shoulder, obviously already quite drowsy. It might have been more of an exciting day than he realized. He was just about ready to drift off to sleep.

Nathaniel winked at Anna and smiled at his young son. "Well, then I definitely have everything I need to keep watch tonight."

Samuel could tell Jake and Sam were getting tired also, so he wished his brother a good night, and he told Shelby

again that he was glad Little One was found and that Shelby and the little sheep had returned home safely. Jake and Sam agreed. They were good cousins, and they enjoyed being fellow shepherds-in-training with their younger family member.

Without opening his eyes, Shelby thanked his uncle and cousins for their kindness about Little One being found in Bethlehem. He was grateful to have such a wonderful and encouraging shepherding family.

Anna was thankful, too, and she wished everyone a good night with sweet dreams.

“Thank you, Anna. You, too,” replied Samuel. He looked at Shelby. “It appears someone else will be starting his dreaming pretty quickly.”

“I didn’t think it would take long after his exciting day,” said Anna.

“I would say so! See you in the morning, family,” said Samuel.

With their well wishes spoken, everyone began going to their separate places for what they thought would be just as quiet and ordinary a night as it usually was.

But then, something utterly amazing happened! All of a sudden, an angel appeared and began speaking to the family of shepherds!

At first, none of the shepherds knew what to do. It was an almost indescribable sight, even a little frightening, and the men jumped into action to protect their families by standing in front of them. Shelby even woke up quickly and had his staff at the

ready in case he needed to help out. But then the angel spoke to them.

“Do not be afraid,” he said. That voice! It was so strong and so comforting at the same time! “I am here with good news for you. Today, in the city of David, a Savior has been born. He is Christ, the Lord. And this will be the sign that you should look for. You will find the baby wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger.”

Then the shepherd family saw even more angels—so many they could hardly begin to count all of them! All of the angels praised God and said, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among men with whom He is pleased.”

After that, the angels returned to the heavenly place from which they had

come, leaving as quickly as when they had first appeared.

In the blink of an eye, the night became still again, and everyone in the surprised family of shepherds just stood in awe for a moment. They were stunned and excited all at once at the most miraculous thing any of them had ever seen! After a moment, Nathaniel was the first to speak. “Glory, glory, glory! What just happened? What did we just see?”

Even though he was fearful at first, Shelby realized quickly what had happened and began jumping up and down and dancing around and swinging his staff in the air.

“We just saw angels!” Shelby was so elated that he just kept saying it over and over again as he danced about. “We

just saw angels! We just saw angels! We just saw angels! Oh, wow, I wish I could tell Mary and Joseph.” Then he stopped mid-celebration, quickly making the connection between what had just happened and what he had learned earlier that day in Bethlehem.

“Wait,” he said as he turned to his papa. “Papa, we have to go to Bethlehem. Right now! I know where they are!”

“Who, Son?” That’s right! Nathaniel did not know who Shelby was talking about because he had not yet heard the rest of the stories of his son’s extraordinary day!

Shelby almost didn’t know where to start. “Well, the angels said the baby is in the city of David, and you told me this morning that David’s city is

Bethlehem. So I just know it is Mary and Joseph! Mary was going to have a baby, and Joseph said it would be a very special baby. And Mary said an angel told her not to be afraid about him being so special. And I helped them get to the place with the manger because there wasn't any room left for them in the inn. It has to be them, and I know where they are, Papa! We just have to go and see them!"

Shelby was so excited and so certain. It helped his papa know that they should do exactly what Shelby was saying they should do. "Well," he said in agreement with his shepherding son, "how can you argue with that? Yes, I think we should go, Shelby!"

Shelby was overjoyed! "Oh, yes. Papa! We have to go right away!" He swung his staff around and started

jumping and dancing again. “We just saw angels!”

Samuel couldn't help but to feel the same way. He had been a little frightened, too, but now he was nearly as excited as his nephew was. So were Jake and Sam. “Yes,” said Shelby's uncle. “Absolutely, yes! With news such as this, I agree. We must go and see this for ourselves!”

“May we go, too?” Jake and Sam certainly didn't want to miss out on such an exciting journey.

“Yes, of course you can!” Samuel was delighted that his son and daughter also wanted to be included.

Then Shelby's cousin, Sam, asked a very good question. “Who will watch the sheep?”

“I will,” volunteered Anna. “What a wonderful thing it is that has happened. Please, hurry and go, family!” Shelby was glad his mama was able to watch the sheep. She was a very good shepherdess, indeed. After all, someone had to help his papa when the other little helper in the family had fallen asleep during the night watch. Shelby thanked his mama.

“You’re welcome, Son,” Anna said. “Now don’t wait another moment to be on your way. What amazing news this is!”

Everyone thanked Anna, and then they began their trip to Bethlehem to see for themselves the wonderful news they had all just been told. Anna wished them safe travels and got her own staff so she could watch the sheep while they were gone.

Shelby was still so excited that he could have run the whole way. “Oh, how I wish shepherds could travel like the angels do. I don’t think Bethlehem has ever felt as far away as it does right now!”

Shelby’s uncle agreed with his nephew. “You’re right, Shelby.” Then he grew thoughtful. “You know, with news about such a special baby, I wonder why the angels didn’t appear to someone grand, like a king. Why did they pick shepherds like us to tell about him when we aren’t considered the most important people you could tell?”

“Because *this* baby,” Shelby insightfully answered as they all continued walking as quickly as they could toward Bethlehem, “is special enough for *everyone!*”

Nathaniel hugged his young son.
“Yes, my big-hearted Shelby. He must
be. Indeed, he must be.”

THERE'S BEEN A CHANGE

Back in the town of Bethlehem, its people didn't know yet of the special event that had taken place there, and that a family of shepherds had been on its way as swiftly as possible after they received the news from heaven itself!

All along their journey, Shelby and his papa, uncle, and cousins had been unable to stop talking about what the angels looked like and how many of them there might have been. As soon as they got into town, the first thing Shelby could say was that he could hardly wait to see the baby and to tell Mary and Joseph the story!

He easily led the rest of his family directly to the place where the manger

was. The shepherds were unsure of what they would find, but as soon as they came down the path, Joseph recognized Shelby.

“Oh, Mary, look who has come back!” Joseph spoke gently to the new mom who was resting next to the manger where she had carefully laid the newborn baby. “Come in, Shelby. Please come in. It is so good to see you again! Who have you brought with you?”

Shelby was so pleased that Joseph had remembered him. “This is my papa,” he said to Joseph, “and my uncle and my cousins.”

“Welcome!” Joseph warmly greeted the shepherd family. “I am Joseph, and this is Mary. And this is Jesus, who has just been born tonight.” The travelling group of shepherds could

tell that, although they were tired, this sweet family was quite happy to have finally been able to welcome the very special baby into the world.

Shelby couldn't wait another moment to share how they had received the news. "We already heard about it because *angels* brought the news about him being born! Angels!" Shelby continued with more of the jubilant details. "We were with the sheep, and angels came to us. One of them had told us not to be afraid, even though I still was, a little, and he told us all about the baby! I just knew it had to be baby Jesus. We were so excited, we came right away. Can you believe it? We got to see angels!"

Joseph had not forgotten the special stories that he and Mary and Shelby had shared with each other

earlier in the day. He nodded and winked at Shelby. “Yes, I believe it. I believe with all of my heart that you have seen your very own angels, Shelby. Please, come. Come and see baby Jesus.”

Joseph opened his arms to invite Shelby and his shepherd family in so they could gather around the manger. None of them had wanted to disturb the new baby. Upon hearing Joseph’s invitation, though, they truly felt safe to draw nearer.

They all reverently gathered around the manger. Shelby knelt down as close as he could possibly get. “It is just like the angel told us,” said Shelby’s papa to Mary and Joseph. “He said we would find the baby in a manger in the City of David, and that the baby would be wrapped in cloths. Glory to God in the highest. I am amazed.”

“Me, too,” said Jake in agreement with his uncle. “Thank you for showing us how to get here, Shelby. You are a really good shepherd.”

“Yes, indeed he is,” replied Mary about her young friend. “Thank you, Shelby. We are so glad you came back to see us.”

“Thank you. Me, too,” replied Shelby. “I just knew it had to be baby Jesus.” Then he went on with a special request. “Is it okay if I talk to him?”

“That is a sweet thing to do, Shelby,” Mary said. “I am sure he will like it very much.”

Shelby smiled and spoke gently as he greeted the new baby. “Hi, baby Jesus. Welcome to the world! Well, this isn’t all of it. Right here where you are is a place with a manger in it. The rest of it

is out there. Not everyone is born in a place like you were, but I still think you will like it here. I'm Shelby, and I am a shepherd. I take care of sheep. Right now I don't have very many sheep to take care of, but my mama says I will someday. I will take them to green pastures and quiet waters so they don't get scared, and I will keep them safe and be real nice to them. I like being a shepherd. Oh, and I got to see angels tonight! At first it was kind of scary, but then it was just this really great surprise! And they told us all about you! So we came to meet you right away. I am really glad I got to meet you, Jesus."

"Thank you, Shelby," said Joseph as he wiped tears from his eyes. "Those were very kind words." Shelby had just spoken what was on everyone's mind

and heart, even though he didn't realize it at the time.

“Yes, they were, Shelby.” The things Shelby had done and said had gone straight to Mary's heart, too. She knew she would think about them for a very long time.

“Thank you,” said Shelby. “I know baby Jesus could grow up and work in the family business, but do you think maybe he might want to be a shepherd, too? I could even help him find lost sheep, since I have already had some practice at that.”

“Yes, you could,” Mary replied with a smile. “I have seen how good of a job you have done, too! For baby Jesus, I know whatever he will become, I will enjoy watching him, just like your mama must enjoy watching you.”

She certainly did. Shelby was quite a special little shepherd.

“I know you must be tired,” said Shelby’s papa, “but is it okay if we share this wonderful news? I believe there are many out there who will find what we have seen and heard to be as marvelous as we do.”

“That would be a wonderful thing to do, thank you,” said Joseph in reply. “And thank you for coming to see us. It was a pleasure meeting all of you. Shelby, I am so glad we got to see you again.”

“Me, too,” said Shelby as he and the others with him prepared to leave the place with the manger. Then Shelby asked his papa for just another minute with Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus. He walked back up to Joseph and

handed Joseph his special staff. “If baby Jesus does want to be a shepherd when he grows up,” he said to Joseph, “he will need one of these. I want him to have mine.”

Joseph took the staff in his hands, overcome with gratitude for such a generous gift. “Thank you, Shelby. I know how much this means to you.”

“It’s a little big for him now,” said Shelby, “but he will grow into it. I just wish I could give him more.”

“Oh, but you have, Shelby,” said Mary. “Look how many people you have helped find the way here to see him. That was a very brave and generous thing to do. When he is old enough, I will be sure to tell him all about you.”

“You will?” Shelby was surprised all over again. “Thank you! Maybe he and I will see each other again someday, and we can be friends. I can even show him how to use the staff!”

Mary smiled a kind smile at Shelby as she spoke. “Maybe you will, Shelby. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Shelby hoped it would be possible...someday. “I have a feeling I would like that very much. I am so glad I met you.”

“Shelby the Shepherd,” said Joseph genuinely, “we are glad we got to meet you, too.”

Shelby knew it was time to leave now, so he hugged Mary and Joseph and took just another moment to peek into the manger at the new baby. He almost did not want to leave, and at the

same time, he also wanted to help tell others about Jesus being born and about the angels who had delivered the very special message of the good news.

Shelby's papa, uncle, and cousins were waiting for him when he came out of the place with the manger. They were still talking about how grand of a night it had turned out to be!

"I am so amazed at what we have just seen," said Nathaniel.

"I agree, Brother," replied Samuel. It is too grand not to share it."

At that heartfelt declaration, they began talking to some of the people who were still out and about in Bethlehem, including the Roman guard who was standing outside the door of where everyone in the census-taking caravan was staying.

The census taker stepped outside only a few moments after the shepherd family had shared their news, and he asked the Roman guard about his night. “What is going on now?”

“Some shepherds were just saying something about a baby in the manger. And angels,” replied the guard.

“A baby? In the manger?” After a moment, the census helper remembered what had happened during their people counting and coin collecting earlier that day. “Ah, yes. There was a couple who registered for the census earlier who was expecting a child to be born. What else did you say?”

“Angels,” said the guard.

The census helper wondered if he had heard the guard correctly. “Angels? Well, who can believe that?”

Nathaniel had walked back by the two of them at just that time. “Oh, it is absolutely true,” he exclaimed to them. “We were watching the sheep, and an angel appeared to us and told us he had good news about a very special baby that was just born. Then he told us where we would find him, and it was all true!”

“But, why are you telling *us* about him?” The Roman guard was genuinely intrigued and curious about this most unusual news.

“Because, as my son so wisely put it,” answered Shelby’s papa, “he is special enough for everyone. Just come and see for yourself!”

About that time, Shelby walked up to stand next to his papa. The Roman guard remembered him. He had

personally enjoyed the young shepherd's counting cheer. "Hey, it's Shelby the Shepherd. I say, 'Who can count like shepherds can?'"

"No one!" Shelby was so excited to have been remembered by the guard! He had thought the guard was kind of scary, but he wasn't quite so scary right now.

The census helper asked Shelby about the news that was being shared. "So, did you see these angels everyone is talking about?"

"Yes, sir. I sure did!" Shelby was so glad to get to tell the story again. "It was scary at first. Then it was really exciting! I've just seen the baby Jesus, too. Everything was just like we were told it would be. One of the angels said he would be in the manger, and he would

be all wrapped up in cloths. And he was! You just have to go and see!”

The census helper couldn't resist such an enthusiastic little witness.

“Well,” he said, “since you put it that way, I believe we will. It was good to see you again, Shelby!”

“You, too, sir. Bye,” said Shelby.

“Stay safe, and take good care of that flock of yours. Thank you for telling us this special news,” said the Roman guard as he gave Shelby a high-five. He had really liked Shelby's counting cheer!

The census helper had waited for the guard to tell Shelby good-bye. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the guard to the census helper. “Just say the word.”

“Well,” said the census helper, “maybe the women we spoke to this morning got their one small miracle after all. Let’s go see!” Then the census helper and Roman guard made their way down the path to the place where the manger was that they had just been told about.

Shelby and his papa would soon join back up with Shelby’s uncle and cousins who were still sharing the good news. For the moment, Shelby and his papa were able to be alone in the quiet of the night.

“Well, Son,” said Shelby’s papa, “we have had quite a surprising day, haven’t we? I can’t wait to tell all about what we have seen and heard once we get back home.”

Shelby eagerly agreed. “Mama will be so excited to know that everything was just like the angel told us it would be.”

Nathaniel knew that Anna would so enjoy hearing all of the details of the special journey that they had just made. He asked Shelby if he would like to be the one to tell his mama all about it. Shelby said he would like that very much, and he thanked his papa for letting him do so. Then Shelby grew very thoughtful.

“Papa, I was just thinking about something,” he said.

His papa asked Shelby what was on his mind.

“Well,” began Shelby, “I was thinking. If it is okay with you, I might wait a little while before I get a bigger

flock of my own. I mean, since I gave my staff to baby Jesus, I'll need some time to carve a new one."

Shelby's papa was so moved by the way his little shepherd had just displayed such wisdom. He certainly wasn't quite the same little boy who had left their family's home just that very morning.

"Yes, Son," said Shelby's dad, "I think that is a very wise idea, and it is just fine with me. Every good shepherd has to have a nice, sturdy staff, and I would be happy to give you time to carve a new one." Then, Shelby's papa paused as he gave Shelby the staff *he* had just been carrying! "So, how about you use *this* one for now, and I will use one of my extra ones that I have at home. After all, I am still going to need my best helper, and we can just watch

Little One and the rest of the flock together while you are working on your new staff.”

Shelby almost didn't know what to do with such a grand possession.

“Really, Papa? Thank you! Thank you so much! And I can still watch Little Two all by myself. He should be easy to keep an eye on.” Shelby was still carrying his new stuffed sheep securely in his belt. Just as he had promised, he had kept it safe through all the adventures of their day.

Shelby's papa was pleased to give his young shepherd such an important gift. “You can even keep my shirt, too,” he said to Shelby with a smile. He continued. “So, that is Little Two? I like that name. Little Two. It suits him. You know, David was very young when he was chosen to be the king. So, he had to

wait a little while, too. While he was waiting, though, do you know what he did?”

Shelby was curious. “No. What?”

“For a little while, he just kept being a good shepherd,” said Shelby’s papa.

“Really?” It pleased Shelby to hear his papa say what he had just said.

“Then, that is what I will do, too. Papa?” Shelby had another important question.

“Yes, Shelby?” Papa was glad to answer any questions Shelby had. He could tell Shelby had a lot on his mind after everything that had happened.

Shelby had definitely grown thoughtful again, and he wasn’t quite sure how to put it into words this time. So he did the best he could. “Do things

feel different to you? I don't really know how to explain it, but they feel different to me. Better, somehow. Like a whole bunch of love got here all at once."

Shelby's papa had noticed it, too. "You don't have to try to explain it, Son. I know exactly what you mean," he told his very insightful son.

Shelby continued. "And if angels got to tell us about him being born, I think baby Jesus is going to do something really special when he is all grown up."

Nathaniel agreed with his son. They were unable to imagine what it would be, but there was something so unmistakably different in the air that they were sure it would be one of the most significant things ever.

Although they could not quite explain it just yet, there had somehow been a very big change. There was just something that had made them quite certain about it. “You are right about that, too, Son. I believe we will always remember the day we met Jesus.”

“I do, too, Papa,” said Shelby. He had the same peaceful feeling in his heart as his papa. “I do, too.”



Did you notice the
HIDDEN GEMS?

While Shelby the Shepherd is a fictional character that was brought to life in a fun way, his story is still based on many Bible verses, and the hints pointing to those verses are tucked away throughout the script and songs of the musical as well as in the book,

YOU CAN FOLLOW ME!

So enjoy finding all the HIDDEN GEMS, just like you were taking part in a surprising treasure hunt!

THERE'S GOING TO BE A JOURNEY (From ACT I SCENE 1)

“And how many are there, Samuel?...There are ninety-nine, Nathaniel.” (Nathaniel and Samuel)

Luke 15:4 Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?

“If I remember right, you found out that she has quite a good aim with her slingshot.” (Samuel)

“And I’ll put Shelby’s meal in his shepherd’s bag today so he can take it with him.” (Anna)

1 Samuel 17:40 Then he (David) took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine (Goliath).

“Well, it seems you get to find a lost sheep today. Your papa said that Little One has wandered off again. He and Uncle didn’t see him with the rest of the flock when they counted earlier this morning.” (Anna)

Ezekiel 34:16 I will search for the lost and bring back the strays.

“So, in the mean time, how about you give yourself some time...” (Anna)

Proverbs 22:6 Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.

“That is why your sheep will follow you.” (Mama, *Someday – Mama’s Song*)

John 10:4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

“Fresh, green pastures, quiet waters, too.” (Mama, *Someday – Mama’s Song*)

Psalm 23:2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.

“You’ll be a gentle leader; you’ll be wise and humble, too.” (Mama, *Someday – Mama’s Song*)

Matthew 11:24 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Zechariah 9:9 See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey...

“And then his sheep would have said, ‘Save us, brave shepherd.’ And David would have said, ‘Don’t be afraid, my little flock. I’ll keep you safe’...” (Shelby)

Luke 12:32 Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.

“You can follow me, wait and see. Our lives are going to change someday.” (Shelby, *There’s Going To Be A Change*)

Isaiah 11:6 The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

David as shepherd and king. (Nathaniel and Shelby)
1 Samuel 16, 17

IT WOULD TAKE A MIRACLE (From ACT I SCENE 2)

“Well, Bethlehem is pretty small, so I’d say I shouldn’t be much longer.” (Census Taker)

“One small town can change the world around it.”
(Innkeeper, *One Small Miracle*)

Micah 5:2 But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old from ancient times.

“One small child can change a family.” (Innkeeper, *One Small Miracle*)

Matthew 18:4-5 Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.

Ephesians 3:14-15 For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

“One small coin makes rich the one who found it.”
(Lamp Seller, *One Small Miracle*)

Luke 15:9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.”

“One small seed becomes a giant tree.” (Lamp Seller, *One Small Miracle*)

Mark 4:31-32 It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.

“Where once were only locks, now there are keys.”
(Innkeeper, Rug Maker, Lamp Seller, *One Small Miracle*)

Luke 4:18, Isaiah 61:1 *He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners...*

Revelation 1:18 *I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and hades.*

“Where once were only pieces, now there is something whole.” (Innkeeper, Rug Maker, Lamp Seller, *One Small Miracle*)

Isaiah 61:4 *They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.*

“When He makes a promise, He sees to it.”
(Innkeeper, Rug Maker, Lamp Seller, *One Small Miracle*)

2 Corinthians 1:20-22 *For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.*

LOST AND FOUND (From ACT II SCENE 1)

Blind Beggar's tambourine

Psalm 150:1,4 Praise the LORD...praise him with tambourine and dancing...

"He likes numbers." (Census Taker Helper)

Isaiah 53:12 ...because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.

"Well, I'm afraid this isn't the Lost and Found table, for people or sheep." (Census Taker)

Luke 19:10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

"But you know, he doesn't have to look so mean to guard you. My papa guards our sheep and he smiles all the time." (Shelby)

Matthew 25:21 His lord said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord."

"But I did notice that staff of yours. In fact, as soon as I saw it, I knew that you must be quite a good shepherd!" (Joseph)

Psalm 23:4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Joseph and Mary's dreams and angel visits about Jesus being born and about His name and His life.

Matthew 1:18-23 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophets: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel – which means "God with us."

Luke 1:26-38 In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will

reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child (John the Baptist) in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.” “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

SPECIAL ENOUGH

(From ACT II SCENE 2)

The whole of the story.

Luke 2:1-20 “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; 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.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this

thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

“Because this baby is special enough for everyone.”
(Shelby)

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

THERE'S BEEN A CHANGE

(From ACT II SCENE 3)

“I know baby Jesus could grow up and work in the family business, but do you think maybe he might want to be a shepherd, too? I could even help him find lost sheep! I’ve already had some practice at that.” (Shelby)

Micah 5:4 He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD...

Isaiah 40:11 He tends his flock like a shepherd...

Luke 2:49 And He said to them, “Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?”

John 10:11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Hebrews 13:20-21 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will...

1 Peter 5:4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Revelation 7:17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water...

“Oh, but you have, Shelby. Look how many people you helped find the way here to see him.” (Mary)

John 14:6 Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

“You have to come and see.” (*Come and See* lyrics and title. Also, Nathaniel is the name of the shepherd [Shelby’s papa] who is now inviting others to “Come and see.”)

John 1:46 *“Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?” Nathaniel asked. “Come and see,” said Phillip.*

“Are you ready?...Yes, sir. Just say the word.”
(Census Taker Helper and Roman Guard)

Luke 7:6-7 *So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him, “Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed.”*

“Do things feel different to you? I don’t really know how to explain it, but they feel different to me. Better, somehow. Like a whole bunch of love got here all at once.” (Shelby)

John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

Romans 5:5 *And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

“Our hope was rearranged today.” (Cast, *There’s Been A Change*)

Romans 15:4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

Blind Beggar’s sight restored by the Special Visitor
(Adult Jesus in the musical)

Luke 4:18 He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind.

Luke 18:35-43 As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” He called out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stopped and ordered the man be brought to him.

When he came near, Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” “Lord, I want to see,” he replied. Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God.

Matthew 11:4-5 (ref. Isaiah 35:5-6) Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”

The Roman Centurion

Matthew 27:54 So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

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