

# The Blanket

by Don Davidson

Ruth sat on a rock, admiring the oranges and pinks reflecting off the clouds, set against a background of light blue sky. She thought of what her mother would say: *Your sunset is really beautiful tonight, God.* Ruth had a great view of it, perched near the top of a small hill. She loved being out here. It made her feel so grown up, even though she was only twelve. It meant her family was beginning to trust her with some real responsibility.

Not far away, her older brothers, Asa, Jotham, and Azariah were having a friendly argument about their namesakes. Their father had named them after three of the nineteen kings of Judah, and their mother had told her sons stories from the Scriptures about those three kings. Now they verbally jousted over which of those kings was the greatest. Ruth thought the whole discussion was silly. Those kings had been dead for hundreds of years. Besides, King David was greater than any of them, and Ruth had been named for his great-grandmother.

As night fell, light from the rising, nearly full moon allowed them to easily see the one-hundred and seventeen sheep that were in their care. This included their own family's flock—63 in all—as well as the sheep of several of their neighbors, for which they paid her family a small wage.

Although Ruth had been shepherding for only about a month, she already knew to watch the sheep for any signs of trouble, because they would hear and smell danger long before she did. But tonight all was well. The animals were calm. Most of the little lambs huddled next to their mothers. It made Ruth think of her own mother, who was very sick. Her parents assured her and her brothers that the sickness would pass, but the young girl knew her mother was dying—Ruth could see it in her father's desperate, cheerless eyes. Her own eyes began to fill with tears. She quickly wiped them away and silently scolded herself. *Silly, stupid Ruth. Tonight is not the time to think about that. Tonight I am a shepherdess, and I have my flock to take care of.* She looked toward her brothers.

They were still talking. They hadn't noticed. So she closed her eyes and said a short, silent prayer: *God, please help my mother. Please remove her pain.*

By now many of the sheep were lying down to rest or sleep. A few were grazing, and some were acting as guards, watching for predators. Ruth kept her shepherd's crook close by, just in case. She looked across a narrow valley and saw numerous lights from lamps and fires in the town of Bethlehem. Ruth had been born there, and her ancestors had lived there for

centuries. Her mother's parents still lived there, helping Ruth's father take care of her mother.

Ruth was glad she was not in town tonight, and not just because she wanted to be here, under the night sky. The Romans were conducting a census, so they could make sure everyone paid their taxes. Jewish tradition required all of the Israelites to return to their ancestral home for the census. That meant that a lot of people from out-of-town were in Bethlehem this week, and it was very crowded. Ruth didn't like crowds.

Suddenly the resting sheep rose to their feet and all started bleating loudly and moving down the hill away from Ruth and her brothers. They grabbed their crooks and jumped to their feet, looking around for the cause of the excitement. At the top of the hill, not far away, they saw a man—or what seemed at first to be a man. But this was no ordinary man. A light seemed to shine all around him, a light brighter than the moon.

He had no weapon. He made no attempt to hurt or frighten the youths. Yet Ruth and her brothers remained frozen in place, unable to move or speak. Then the "man" spoke, "Children, I have a message for you from God." Ruth immediately remembered what her mother had taught her about angels: they were messengers from God. Then frightening stories flooded her mind—stories of how angels brought destruction to Sodom and Gomorrah, and how an angel killed 185,000 Assyrians in the days of King Hezekiah. She wondered if she had done something to anger God. She dropped her crook and fell on her face. Seeing her, her brothers did the same.

But the angel spoke softly and kindly, saying, "Don't be afraid." At these words Ruth and her brothers looked up. The angel smiled at them and continued, "You don't need to be afraid. I have a message from God. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." After he said this, the sky was filled with angels, all of them shouting praises to God and singing, "Glory to God in heaven, and peace to all men and women on earth who please him." Then suddenly they were gone.

After a few moments of silence, Jotham, who was the youngest of the three brothers, turned to Asa and Azariah and said, "That was amazing! I can't believe what just happened! What should we do?"

Asa, the oldest, said, "The angel said the Messiah has been born in David's town—Bethlehem. I think we should go see for ourselves. He said we should look for a baby."

"Wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger," Jotham added.

"Swaddling clothes, little brother, not a blanket."

"Wait a minute," Azariah chimed in. "How are we supposed to find this Messiah? He didn't tell us where to look."

"You're right," Asa agreed. "But he did tell us what to look for. We'll just check the stables and the caves, and look for a baby. Bethlehem's a small town. It shouldn't take that long. Besides, what else do we have to do tonight?"

But Azariah quickly raised another objection. "How do we know we can trust him? Maybe this was a wicked angel, trying to lead us into some kind of trap."

Jotham laughed. "Singing 'Glory to God in heaven'? That doesn't sound like a wicked angel to me. I say let's go."

Now Ruth spoke up, "I want to go, too."

"But you're just a little kid," Jotham objected.

"You're only two years older than her, Jotham," said Azariah. "You're not exactly a man yet."

"And you're only 15 yourself, Azariah," said Asa, playfully punching Azariah in the shoulder. Then turning to Ruth he said, "But I do think it would be better if you stayed here, Ruth."

"No," said Ruth, "I want to go see the baby."

Asa stooped down next to her and spoke quietly, and as gently as he could. "Sorry, little sister, someone needs to stay and look after the sheep. They still look a bit frightened, and I don't want them wandering off. Besides, you'll be safer here with the sheep. Bethlehem is full of strangers these days, and some of them look pretty rough. That's my final word."

Ruth knew it was no use arguing. She picked up her crook, then turned and started walking toward the sheep, intending to lead them back up the hill to where they had been safely resting and grazing a few moments earlier. Her brothers started running toward Bethlehem and soon were out of sight.

When they were gone, Ruth let the crook drop to the ground. She sat down on a rock, buried her head in her arms, and began to cry. One of the lambs walked over and nuzzled against her shoulder. She looked up and gave the lamb a gentle hug. She lightly stroked its soft fleece as she tried to stifle her tears.

All of a sudden she was aware of a man standing nearby.

She jumped to her feet and reached down to pick up her shepherd's crook to defend herself. But the man's voice sounded kind as he spoke to her: "Why are you crying, Ruth?"

Ruth was terrified, but she did not run. She held tightly to her shepherd's crook and tried to look brave, despite her shaking knees, as she said, "Good sir, who are you? And how do you know my name?"

"I am Michael, Ruth. I am an angel of the Lord. Now tell me why you are crying."

And as he spoke, he began to glow like the angel Ruth had seen earlier. She told Michael about that angel, and how her brothers had gone to see the Messiah who had been born in Bethlehem.

"But they wouldn't let me go," she added. "I had to stay here."

"Would you like to go, little one?," the angel asked.

"Of course. But I can't. Asa said it would be too dangerous."

"It won't be if you're with me."

"But Asa said I have to stay and watch over the sheep."

"Gabriel can do that. We won't be gone long." And for the first time, Ruth noticed another angel standing behind Michael. They both smiled at her. Then Michael reached out his hand and said, "Come, little one. Let's go."

Ruth set down her shepherd's crook, took his hand, and walked with him down the hill and across the narrow valley toward Bethlehem. As they approached the town, and the ground began to rise again, Michael pointed toward a cave with a flickering light inside. "That's where you'll find the Messiah, Ruth."

"Aren't you going in?," she asked.

"No, little one," he replied. "I'll stay here and stand guard."

Slowly and cautiously, Ruth walked up to the cave entrance and peered in. There she saw a small fire, and near the fire a man and a young woman were reclining. In a manger nearby, a baby was quietly sleeping. He was tightly wrapped in cloths.

"Come in, Ruth," the man urged. "I am Joseph, and this is Mary. We were told to expect you."

Ruth slowly walked toward the fire, and asked, "Sir, who told you to expect me?"

"Why, an angel, of course," Mary replied, "The same one who visited you on the hill side. He told us you would be coming to see Jesus."

"Good Madam, I don't understand. Who is Jesus?," Ruth asked.

Mary pointed at the sleeping child. "Jesus is my baby, the one who is sleeping in the manger. He was born tonight." Mary paused to think about another angel, the one who had told her nine months ago that she would give birth to a very special son. "He is God's Son," she continued. "He has come to show us how much God loves us."

Ruth walked over to the child and gazed upon him. Then he opened his eyes—and smiled at her. And then, right then, Ruth knew that Mary was right. She could see the love in his eyes.

As Ruth stood admiring the child, Joseph stood up and walked over to her. "Would you like to hold him?"

"Could I? Oh yes, sir, very much, sir."

"Sit down," he instructed her. She sat down on some hay. Then he gently lifted the child from the manger and set him in her arms. She cradled his tiny head on her arm as Joseph covered the infant with a blanket and then sat down next to them. Ruth simply gazed at the boy. She thought she had never seen a more beautiful child. And she thought she had never felt such peace.

After what seemed to Ruth like only a moment, but was really several minutes, Joseph said to her, "Let's put him back to bed now." Joseph removed the blanket and set it on the hay, then gently took the boy from her and placed him back in the manger. And now Joseph did something Ruth did not expect—instead of placing the blanket back in the manger, he gave it to Ruth. As he did so, he said, "The angel told us to give this to you. It's for your mother."

Ruth clutched the blanket to her breast and bowed, saying, "Thank you, sir. I know my mother will be very grateful." Then she slowly walked out of the cave. Michael met her outside the entrance and began to lead her toward Bethlehem.

"Good sir," she said, "we are going the wrong way. My sheep are across the valley."

"I know that, Ruth," he responded, "but we must deliver the blanket to your mother first. We would not want it to get lost or soiled."

When they reached Ruth's house, she hurried to her mother's bedside. The sick woman tried to hide her pain as she hugged her only daughter. Ruth's father was sitting in a chair nearby, and had apparently dozed off. The grandparents were in another room, asleep.

"My child," her mother said, "Why are you not out tending the sheep?"

"An angel brought me, Mama. I've been to see the Messiah. He's just a little baby. And his father gave me something for you, to keep you warm—this wool blanket."

Ruth unfolded the blanket and laid it across the bed, then gave her mother another hug. "I must get back to my sheep now, Mama."

But as Ruth turned to leave, her mother suddenly grabbed her arm.

"Wait," she said. "When you put the blanket over me, my pain

vanished, and I can feel my strength returning." As if to demonstrate, she threw off the covers, climbed out of bed, and stood up.

A wide smile burst onto Ruth's face. She ran to her mother and they embraced, clinging to each other as if they had been apart for years instead of mere hours. Then Ruth's mother gently took her daughter's face in her hands and said, "Praise God, child! I feel like I'm healed. We must thank God." They both fell on their knees and gave thanks, and then fell into each other's arms again, laughing and hugging.

Ruth's father woke up, and was dumbfounded to see his wife out of bed and laughing with his daughter, who was supposed to be tending sheep.

"Miriam!," he exclaimed. "What are you doing? You should be in bed!"

"No, I shouldn't, Elijah!," she loudly answered back with a big smile on her face. "I'm healed. Praise God, I'm healed."

The man was confused. "What? How can this be?"

"Ruth brought a blanket, a gift from the Messiah. As soon as she placed it on my bed, I was healed."

The three of them hugged and laughed in joyous celebration, and Elijah kissed his wife many times. The grandparents soon awoke and joined the merriment.

Before long, Miriam began to grow tired, and Ruth decided she should return to her sheep. She went outside, and found Michael patiently waiting. She walked up to him and bowed low. "Thank you for taking me to see the Messiah, and for bringing me here," she said.

"You're welcome, little one. Now come, let's get you back to your sheep. Gabriel shouldn't have to watch them all night."

Ruth and the angel walked back across the valley to the small hill, where the sheep were calmly grazing and resting. As Ruth walked up the hill, Michael and Gabriel both disappeared. Ruth continued until she reached the spot where she had set down her shepherd's crook. She sat on the ground and silently thanked God for all that had happened that evening.

Before long Asa, Jotham, and Azariah returned, loudly praising God.

Jotham spoke first. "You missed quite a sight, little sister. That was amazing!"

Azariah chimed in, "It took us a long time to find the Messiah, but it was well worth it. I never knew I could feel such joy."

Asa walked over to Ruth, sat down next to her, and put his arm around her shoulder. "Don't be too disappointed, Ruth. Maybe I can take you to see him tomorrow."

Ruth looked away to hide a sly smile. "Oh, I'm all right," she said, as her smile grew. *They 'll find out soon enough.*