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ZONDERVAN

Scouting the Divine

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Wonderment

When Scripture comes alive in our hearts, it doesn't inform us as much as transform us. As I read I'm discovering that faith isn't about becoming good—it's about becoming godly characters in a greater Story. Somehow, words on a flat page become the passageway to living encounters with ancient saints and sinners, and with a God who was, and is, and ever will be.

While some dismiss the Bible as a dusty old book, I view its pages as portals to adventure. Not only is the book chock-full of clever plots and compelling stories, but it's laced with historical insights and literary beauty. When I open the Scripture, I imagine myself exploring an ancient kingdom. As I cross the narrow drawbridge into this distant land, I picture a castle with too many banquet halls and bedrooms to count—and enough secret corridors, underground passages, and trapdoors to occupy the most inquisitive visitors for a lifetime.

At every turn I meet kings and queens, scribes and poets, all sharing their stories of courage and faith. With every encounter, I learn something new about their life journeys and am

reminded that the Bible is more than a record of the human quest for God: it's the revelation of God's quest for us.

Some of the accounts are downright despicable and shockingly frank in their disclosures: a father offering his daughters to be raped and a woman who nailed a man's head to the floor. Others are simply astounding: men who wrestled with bears and lions, women and children who saved nations, and an unforgettable man who walked from life into death and back again.

The more time I spend in this ancient land, the more I notice that every person's story—even the most unexpected—is a chapter in the greater Story that reveals God's glory as well as his unabashed love for humanity. At times this narrative is clearly displayed in a queen's words or a prophet's proclamation, but I'm slowly beginning to recognize its more subtle inflections—the tone of a raspy voice, eyes dancing wildly with expectation, a long pause before a painful reply. Infused by the Spirit, the chapters enliven my heart, reminding me once again that the Bible is extraordinary. As I read, the Author changes me—reigniting my imagination and rekindling my hope.

Sometimes a single phrase or sentence echoes in my heart long after I close the cover. Other times I discover a passage that seems like it was written just for my particular situation. On occasion I stumble upon transformation.

Yet many days I feel separated from this ancient kingdom by an impassable moat. The accounts are distant and even dull. Though I relentlessly circle the same story a dozen times, I can't find the bridge to the life-giving truths I know are locked inside. I don't connect. I don't understand. In quiet misery, I

shut the book, secretly hoping and praying that the next time will be better. Sometimes days roll into weeks and months.

The longing for those spiritual aha! moments has become what I can only describe as a dull ache with occasional shooting pains. You've probably felt them too—those twinklings of yearning to connect with a God who, despite prayer and searching, still seems far away.

Some might say it's all in my head; I think it's all in my heart. Deep inside, I long for the sense of wonderment that comes with knowing God, for those occasions when I wake to find the drawbridge down and the King beckoning me into a castle overflowing with life.

Though I pray for—and try to practice—faithfulness, it's been so long I've started feeling antsy. Lately I've noticed that the day-to-day life described in Scripture is radically different than my own. Though I've lived near farms and ranches, my suburban experience is far removed from the agrarian society of the ancient world. In biblical times, the produce of the land was part of everyday life as a source of food, a sign of wealth, and a foundational element of religious life. Yet my modern world is sharply different. What does it mean to know Jesus is the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God when the only places I've encountered sheep are petting zoos and Greek restaurants? How do we learn to wait for the harvest when we live in a culture of easy access? How can I understand the promise of a land overflowing with milk and honey when the only honey I buy comes in a bear-shaped bottle at my local grocery store? Can I grasp the urgency of Jesus' invitation to abide in the vine when I shop for grapes at Costco?

The hunger in my heart and mind compelled me to begin

scouting the divine

scouting the grounds in order to better understand God and his kingdom.

Scouting the Divine tells the story of my attempt to understand some of the nuanced brushstrokes in the portraits of God that I've glanced past all my life. It's an intentional search for ways to move from reading the Bible to entering stories that can be touched, tasted, heard, seen, smelled, and savored. Scripture is sweetness and sweat, bitterness and blood, tremors and tears. Scripture is life—and we are called to live it.

In some ways, aren't we all scouting the divine? Isn't each of us looking for those ordinary and extraordinary moments when God intersects our world?

This story began nearly a decade ago with a shepherd I met in Alaska. My path meandered its way to Nebraska and a farmer's fields before turning west to the residence of a Colorado beekeeper. My latest sojourn was in the vineyards of Napa Valley—though I know this won't be my final stop.

My journey led me alongside people whose experience cultivated my faith. During my time with the shepherd, I watched firsthand as a flock followed its leader with complete trust to new and even frightening places. A farmer reminded me of God's faithfulness and timing. A beekeeper gave me a close-up look at the intricate details of God's creation, while a vintner revealed the meaning of fruitfulness in a way I had never grasped before.

During conversations in warm living rooms and fresh harvested fields, the drawbridge lowered, and the Scriptures opened to me in new and wonderful ways. How does a shepherd understand the twenty-third Psalm? How does a farmer

view the last verses of Matthew 9? How does a beekeeper interpret the meaning of a land overflowing with honey? How does a vintner read John 15? Though the practices of agriculture and animal husbandry have changed significantly over the last few thousand years, our conversations still provided gems of spiritual insight and a catalyst for deeper study and reflection.

Your own pilgrimage, like mine, may have already started. My prayer is that you keep walking.

I'll look for you on the road.

Blessings,
Margaret

Part I

the good shepherd

1.1 | An Unexpected Encounter

The salmon were in full summer swing in Sitka, Alaska, and I was busy tending my aunt's bed and breakfast while she took a much-needed rest. Though the never-ending loads of laundry tempered my romantic notions of life as an innkeeper, I still set the alarm early enough to pick fresh wild salmon-berries, blueberries, and raspberries for rainbow-colored scones. By eight o'clock, my treats were out of the oven, cooled only by a firm pat of butter, and paired with freshly roasted Raven's Brew coffee for the guests to savor.

After several weeks, my morning conversations with visitors became rote. Yes, sleeping when the sun is up takes getting used to. It's true: Alaskans consume more ice cream per capita than residents of any other state. The most authentic totem pole carvings can be found at the museum shop, but they aren't cheap—head downtown for the best deals. If you want the chance to see a bear (or salmon or wildflowers) without being joined by two hundred other plastic poncho-wearing tourists, avoid the local park and head out to the end of



the good shepherd

Halibut Point Road. Oh, and a random piece of trivia you won't find in any of the guidebooks: the house you're staying in used to be owned by televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker.

That last tidbit always sparked an interest from the guests—mostly retired Americans traveling to a state they promised themselves they would visit decades before they actually arrived.

Lynne and her husband, Tom, had dreamed about a trip to Alaska for years. They were in Sitka to explore the Sheldon Jackson Museum, which boasts one of the best Tlingit cultural displays in the state, along with the famed Russian Orthodox Church filled with breathtaking jeweled icons. The first morning we spoke, I offered a local's perspective on the best Mexican joint for lunch and several off-the-beaten-path nooks worth exploring.

During our second morning together, I asked Lynne what she did with her free time in Oregon.

"I'm a shepherdess," she said.

"Uh ... what?" I asked, unsure I'd heard correctly.

"I have more than a dozen Shetland sheep that I breed and care for," Lynne replied.

"Where do you keep them?"

"Behind the house," she said matter-of-factly.

Of course, I thought to myself, that's where everyone keeps their sheep.

Lynne explained that they had a fenced-in area behind their Oregon home where the sheep grazed and a barn to keep

them safe at night. Intrigued, I began peppering Lynne with questions. All the while I knew what I really wanted to ask her, and since I wasn't sure how to bring it in smoothly, I opted for a quick prayer and a crash landing.

"Do you," I asked awkwardly, "ever read the Bible?"

She looked at me suspiciously. "I've read it before."

"I recently read John 10, where Jesus talks about being the Good Shepherd," I said hesitantly, hoping I wasn't sounding like one of *those* people. "Is it really true that sheep know their shepherd's voice?"

The crash was gentler than I thought: Lynne began sharing tales from her shepherding experience, unknowingly drawing rich parallels between shepherding and God. She explained that when a field becomes barren, sheep are unable to find safe, new ground on their own; they need the careful guidance of their shepherd. And when sheep butt their heads in jealousy and competition, it's the shepherd who restores order and ends the fighting. I found myself hanging on her every word, a spiritual appetite welling inside of me to know more. Alas, morning was pressing toward noon, and Lynne and Tom needed to head to the airport.

"I've been collecting writings that offer a spiritual perspective on sheep," Lynne said. "Would you like me to send you the file?"

"That would be an amazing gift!" I exclaimed, though I suspected it might be one of those well-meaning promises that are never kept.

Late in the afternoon, when my housekeeping chores were

finished, I opened my Bible and reread John 10, trying to enter the story with the heart of a shepherd and imagining what the disciples thought as they listened to Jesus. I wondered if I'd ever hear from Lynne again.

Three weeks later, a thick manila folder from Oregon arrived in the mail. As I read through Lynne's collection, I experienced a series of aha! moments. The more I read, the more clearly I understood certain truths of Scripture, but with the passage of time, marriage, and multiple moves, the folder disappeared into my cluttered filing system.

1.2 | Reconnecting

Nearly ten years after I met Lynne, I stumbled upon the manila folder tucked deep in a wooden file drawer of miscellaneous articles and memorabilia at our new home in Colorado. As I flipped through the writings, once again a hunger welled up inside of me. I wanted to live what I was reading. I wanted to sit in a field among sheep. I wanted to watch them interact with each other and their keeper. More than anything, I wanted to shepherd.

I needed to track down Lynne. Getting her contact information was easy—I just typed her name and "sheep" into Google—but would I be able to reconnect with someone I encountered almost a decade earlier?

I picked up the phone. No answer. The message I left was disjointed as I brought up reminders of her visit to Sitka. I expressed an interest in her shepherding, trying not to sound strange—or worse, like a stalker. Hanging up, I whispered a prayer.

Lynne called back later that afternoon. While she clearly

remembered her Alaskan adventures, she barely recalled our conversation. “Is there any way I could spend an afternoon with you and your sheep?” I asked, unsure if I was crossing a line.

“I think we could make that happen,” she offered hesitantly. “But you should wait until the spring rainy season ends—though I need to warn you that it can always rain in Oregon.”

We finally decided the best time for a visit was the weekend after Memorial Day. Lynne and Tom graciously extended their invitation to include an overnight stay in their home. My husband, Leif, and I agreed to bring juicy steaks and gourmet chocolates for dessert.

Making the final left-hand turn into Lynne’s driveway, a gust of panic blew through my chest. Self-doubt tore the roof from my rational mind. *What am I doing?*

I inhaled deeply, hoping to push back the anxiety. Somehow in the preceding weeks I had convinced myself that what I was doing was completely normal. *Of course, I’m going to spend the weekend with a shepherdess I don’t really know, who lives in another state!*

Leif looked at me and rested a hand on my knee. “Are you okay?”

“Totally,” I said, convincing neither of us. “I’m *totally* fine. I’m *totally* not freaking out.”

“You’ve been looking forward to this,” Leif reminded me. “Remember, you love to choose your own adventure.”



the good shepherd

“Look, the sheep!” I interjected.

Through the car window, we spotted more than a dozen sheep enjoying a lazy afternoon in a wide-open green field. They came in more colors and sizes than I had ever imagined. Their fleeces ranged from basic black-and-white to more complex hues that resembled aged rust and even gray dust. As the gravel driveway narrowed, the opening to the field closed and we found ourselves passing beneath a latticework of trees, branches crisscrossing like fingers folded together. Rounding a bend lined with mossy rocks, we saw a two-story wood home perched next to a stream. We parked near the barn, and a cobalt-blue peacock strutted in front of us.

Lynne and Tom met us in the driveway with an affable greeting, welcoming us inside their home. A sideways glance into the living room revealed the home was decorated with Pacific Northwest nonchalance—a tidy blend of natural wood and subtle shades of ivory, lilac, and cherry.

As I began decompressing from the chest-tightening nervousness I experience whenever I meet new people, I began to notice oodles of sheep everywhere. In our room, miniature sheep carvings decorated a tiny tree atop the television. Wooden sheep rested on top of the dresser and on the floor beside the bed. A shepherd’s staff leaned against the corner of the wall. In the bathroom, an acrylic sheep’s face sat on the counter, and sheep-shaped soaps (say that five times fast) lay beside the sink—the kind I knew better than to use.

When I mentioned on the phone that I wanted to visit Lynne, she was concerned that I might be better off with someone who raised sheep commercially. But I didn’t want to spend time with someone who raised sheep for profit; I wanted a

shepherd who loved sheep. Lynne's decor told me I'd chosen well. I had spoken to several people who raised sheep commercially, and they described sheep as more of a nuisance than a delight, a far cry from the love God has for us and that Lynne had for her woolly creatures.

After unpacking, I wandered into the kitchen and found Lynne wiping down the tile counter. The kitchen was part of a great room that included the cooking, dining, and living areas. As I sat behind the counter on an oak stool, I could hear the stream gurgling just steps from the back porch. Spinning wheels, which looked like upside-down wooden unicycles, lined the walls. Lynne must have noticed my interest, which isn't surprising: my face is an open book.

"Spinning was my gateway into shepherding," Lynne explained.

Lynne had enjoyed knitting for many years before deciding she wanted to spin her own yarn. Tom challenged her to go one step further and raise an animal that could provide the raw fiber for her knitting. Starting with a pair of fiber goats, she eventually switched to sheep. She had a special breed in mind, which weren't readily available. Lynne found a farm in Michigan that sold the sought-after-but-hard-to-find Shetland sheep. She ordered three.

"My first sheep were mailed to me sight unseen nearly twenty years ago," Lynne said. "All three sheep were pregnant. Though I had no idea what to do, Rexanna, Cassandra, and Nissa gave birth successfully."

After that first summer, Lynne purchased two rams and her flock continued to grow. "Looking back, I didn't know how



to do basic things like trim hooves or give shots, so I had to call the vet for almost anything and everything,” she said. “Over time, I picked up new skills. When it’s midnight and your sheep is having an abnormal labor and the vet can’t make it over, you learn how to get the lamb out. A bunch of years go by and you end up being sixty-five years old and having a lot of young shepherds calling and asking, ‘What do I do?’ You wake up one morning and realize you’re a shepherd of shepherds.”

I smiled. Over the years I’ve spoken to many pastors who, like Lynne, had grown in their knowledge of God by jumping in and doing what needed to be done. Formal training is great for learning theology and basic leadership skills, but some things you just have to learn by doing. Like Lynne, these pastors experience the triumphs and successes as well as the heartache and isolation that accompany caring for a flock.

“Do you want to go and see the sheep now?” Lynne asked.

I peeked over the counter into the living room. Leif and Tom had slipped into a comfortable conversation on the couch. Encouraged by the go-ahead-we’ll-catch-up-later looks from our husbands, Lynne and I headed toward the barn.

1.4 | Sheep, Sheep, Sheep

Pausing by the front door, Lynne pulled a fleece-lined jacket and a pair of heavy boots out of the closet. I grabbed my own coat out of the guest bedroom but noticed Lynne couldn’t hide a grimace as I slipped on my hiking boots. I followed her across the driveway toward the barn. She popped open the heavy wooden doors, uncorking the overpowering scents of sweet, fresh-cut hay and heavy, pungent manure.