

Children's Stories

from  The
Village
Shepherd

Vol. III

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CHILDREN'S STORIES FROM THE VILLAGE SHEPHERD
VOLUME III

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Alma, a lifelong friend

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Foreword

Volume III of *Children's Stories from the Village Shepherd* is based on the gospel readings from Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary, that is the Sunday readings mostly from Matthew's gospel which are set to be used week by week in churches across the world.

Our little pixie friend Praxis returns in several of the stories, Bushman the squirrel who is immensely proud of his tail makes an appearance, as does Ahmed the camel, who carries his master to the stable at Bethlehem. And after that first Easter, the donkey becomes aware of the cross he always carries on his back.

Once again there are a number of stories featuring children at school, especially children who are lonely or frightened, sad or bullied, and stories about children in families who are teased or misunderstood, or indeed, loved.

In this volume several of the stories mention God or Jesus, but again I have been at pains to try to keep a light touch so that the stories can be read by Christians and non-Christians alike. Each story has a message, but if you want to marry the message to the Bible passage you may have to do some digging of your own to discover the theme I have used from the gospel reading.

A word of warning: Although all of the stories can be enjoyed by adults, some are not really suitable for young children. These have been clearly marked under the title of the story, so they can be pondered over when the children are in bed! Even so, the only one I might have qualms about children reading is "Greater Love Hath No Man" on page 81. This is a chilling account of an incident in a prisoner of war camp, and although I have written it in my own words, it is not a story original to me.

Again, my aim has been to present Christian thoughts and themes in a way that is accessible to adults and children, and to stimulate some thought about the deeper issues of life. I also wanted to present some of those issues, which can seem trivial to adults but matter to children, in

a positive light, showing that the God within us all, displayed so very clearly in Jesus Christ, still can and does help us in our lives today.

My prayer is that you and your younger people enjoy these stories and that they encourage you to think about and engage with the God who is deep within you.

Mole's Great Escape

Matthew 24:36-44

Mole shouted his warning to Fox and rabbit, but Fox hardly paused as he chased rabbit, and rabbit ran loppidity spit with his white tail bobbing in their air, and laughed as he passed Mole.

Nobody bothered to listen to Mole. Nobody seemed to care that the universe was coming to an end. Even the earthworms who would surely be crushed by the diggers, simply shrugged and went on tunneling.

Mole ran and ran and ran as the huge diggers trundled over his field. He didn't stop running until he reached the woodland. Then he fell all in a heap under a pile of leaves.

"I say," came an indignant sleepy voice. "This is my home. What are you doing here?"

Mole sat up, as a sharp needle jabbed him in the back. "I'm sorry," he said to the bundled hedgehog, "but don't you know the universe is coming to an end?"

The Hedgehog stretched himself out and snorted and snuffled. "Your universe may be coming to an end, but mine is going on for a very long time. Now do you mind moving while I get back to sleep?"

Mole tiptoed out of the leaves and walked slowly through the wood. He thought he might call on his second cousin, Milly. But he didn't think he'd tell her that the universe was coming to an end, for here in the woodland everything was calm and peaceful.

Mole realised the hedgehog was right. Although it had felt like a huge disaster of earthquake proportions to Mole himself, few other creatures were affected by the diggers. Perhaps the universe wouldn't end immediately. As Mole knocked on his second cousin's door, he reflected that God was still in his heaven wherever that might be, and all was right with the world.

The Annual Nativity Play

Matthew 3:1-12

Roddy was plunged into gloom. It was that time of year again — the time of the annual nativity play. Roddy hated it. For a start, he had only once been chosen to actually feature in the play. That was the year he had to wear his dressing gown with a stupid tea towel on his head, and say one line: “Look! Let us follow that shining star!” Only he’d pointed to the star and forgotten the words. The audience had started to laugh, and the teacher said afterward that “the whole *feel* of the play had been lost.” Roddy was never invited to be in the play again.

That left only one option, the choir. He didn’t want to be in the choir either, since he hated singing and his voice never came out anywhere near the note. But apart from the ten or so children in the play, all of the rest of the class formed the angelic choir. Last year, Roddy had stood in line and refused to open his mouth. Unfortunately, his mother had had her eyes glued on him throughout the play and was furious with him afterward. Phrases like: “letting the whole family down” and “what-ever do you suppose Mrs. Taylor thought?” kept emerging for days (Mrs. Taylor being the mother of one of the shepherds, and a close neighbour of Roddy’s family). It very nearly spoilt Christmas for Roddy.

And now it was that time of year again. Roddy’s teacher called for volunteers to act in the play. There was no shortage of eager hands, so Roddy sat back and dreamed of the new Game Boy he was hoping for on Christmas Day. When the main characters had been chosen, Roddy’s teacher moved smoothly into her pep talk with the rest of the class, assuring them that the choir really was the most important part of the whole production. Roddy yawned and continued to sit back. He wasn’t that gullible.

He realised the teacher was talking directly to him when he became aware of a hush in the class.

“... important part of the work,” his teacher finished. Roddy as-

sumed she had been talking about the choir.

“I *hate* singing!” he growled.

“If you’d been listening,” his teacher said crisply, “you’d know I was asking you to be responsible for all the scenery.”

Roddy stared at her. What did she mean?

As though she’d heard his thoughts, his teacher continued, “You’ll need to gather a group to work with you, and you’ll need to decide what scenery you’re going to use. Then come and tell me, and if I agree, then you’ll be responsible for making it. Will you do it?”

Roddy felt a strange excitement seep into him. He loved making things with his hands, and he loved painting. He began to picture the scenes of the play in his mind, and already he began to see exactly what he wanted to do. He nodded enthusiastically.

But his teacher hadn’t finished. “One word of warning, Roddy. You are responsible for the largest part of the preparations. You need to make sure everything will run smoothly. If you get it wrong, the whole play will be a disaster.”

Roddy didn’t care. He ran home and told his family all about his important role. “It’s up to me to get everything properly ready,” he said proudly.

Three of his friends were keen to help him, although two of them only wanted to get out of anything else. But they all set to work with a will, drawing up plans, deciding on props, working out changes of scene.

They were busy throughout Advent. It was harder than they thought, for as soon as they decided on something, one of them would argue for something entirely different. In the end, Roddy was forced to take the decisions himself, which meant that the whole responsibility rested on him. If the production fell flat, and the audience hated the props, it would all be his fault.

When two of his team pulled out with just two weeks to go, Roddy got quite grumpy. But he went on working hard. Painting and cutting, drawing and polishing.

When the day of the play arrived, Roddy was really nervous. He was so afraid the scenery would fall down, and everybody would laugh,

and the play would be ruined again because of him. But it went like a dream, smooth and very moving. He found that this year, he enjoyed the play more than he'd ever thought possible.

Afterward, everybody clapped the cast and the choir, and Roddy felt a bit left out. His work had been in the background, and nobody really noticed it. But then his teacher called him onto the stage. She said it was the best scenery they'd ever had, and the play had only gone well because the way was prepared so brilliantly by Roddy. She said she hoped he'd do it again next year.

It was the proudest moment of Roddy's life. He smiled and nodded and bowed to the audience and felt like the herald who prepared the way for Jesus.

And he just couldn't wait for next year!

Adrian's Swimming Coach

Matthew 11:2-11

There wasn't much that Adrian was good at, except swimming. He learned to swim when he was little more than a baby, and he loved it. When he was seven he joined a swimming club. It was there that he first met Mr. Stevens, the swimming coach.

Adrian got on well with Mr. Stevens. Somehow Mr. Stevens was really encouraging. He taught Adrian the best way of making his strokes and Adrian began to win at many of the galas he attended. Mr. Stevens was strict but fair. He refused to put up with any nonsense, and he made all the youngsters work really hard. Some of the youngsters complained, but Adrian noticed that Mr. Stevens himself always worked harder than any of them.

Adrian felt he could rely on Mr. Stevens. When Adrian had the flu coming on and didn't really feel like swimming, Mr. Stevens was very understanding and sent him home to bed. And when he fell and hurt his ankle, Mr. Stevens knew exactly what to do. But when he was just fed up, and wanted to slope off home early from swimming practice, Mr. Stevens was furious with him and made him stay. Adrian didn't much like facing Mr. Stevens' anger. But after his anger, Mr. Stevens asked Adrian whether there was anything wrong. And he was really understanding when Adrian told him he felt fed up with all the work. He talked to Adrian's parents, and made sure Adrian had a holiday. After that, Adrian was full of enthusiasm again.

Mr. Stevens was just the sort of person Adrian felt he would like to be when he grew up. He was dedicated to his work, kind and understanding and gentle, and he cared about all the children.

But one day something went wrong. Suddenly, Mr. Stevens wasn't there any more. All the parents looked very serious and whispered amongst themselves. Adrian strained to hear what they were saying, but he didn't understand what was going on.

Then he heard the local news on television. Mr. Stevens had been arrested! One of the girls from the swimming club had accused him of molesting her. Just then, Adrian's mum came in and very quickly switched off the television. Adrian asked her what "molesting" meant. She said one of the girls had told the police that Mr. Stevens had touched her in the wrong sort of way.

Adrian was aghast. He couldn't believe Mr. Stevens would ever do anything like that. But when he got to the club the other children were talking about Mr. Stevens rather nastily. Adrian began to wonder whether they were right. He felt very confused. He had been so certain Mr. Stevens was a really good person. Now he didn't know what to think.

When he got home, he talked to his parents about the problem. "How was Mr. Stevens with you?" asked his father.

"He was always great!" Adrian said.

"And with the other children?" asked his Dad.

Adrian nodded. "With everybody," he said firmly. "He was always the same with everyone, and he was brilliant!"

"Then you must decide by what you've seen and heard," said Adrian's father. "You know in your heart whether he was a good or a bad person. You must stick with what you know."

A day or two later, Mr. Stevens was released without charge. Apparently the girl who had accused him had been really angry and jealous because she hadn't been chosen to be in the swimming team. She'd thought this would be an easy way to get at Mr. Stevens. But when the police began to question her in detail, it became very clear that Mr. Stevens was completely innocent.

Adrian was delighted. He felt a little ashamed that he had ever doubted Mr. Stevens at all, but he knew he would never doubt him again.

The Special Christmas Gift

Matthew 1:18-25

Matty was very excited. Along with his older brother and sister, he had woken very early on Christmas morning to find a bulging Christmas stocking lying at the foot of his bed. There were lots of small toys in the stocking, a notebook with felt-tip pens, a diary, and a pencil sharpener. His excitement grew as he plunged his hand right down to the toe of the stocking. He knew what he would find, because it was the same every year, but somehow that made it all the more special. Yes, there they were, the chocolate money, the apple and the orange. With a sigh of contentment he laid everything out on the bed and started to unwrap a chocolate penny.

Christmas was the best day in the year. The whole family would go to church in the morning, then after Christmas dinner (which went on forever) and the washing up, everyone would gather round the Christmas tree and the giving out of presents would begin.

There was a huge pile of presents under the tree, and Matty knew there were a lot for him, because he'd peeked at all the labels. But there were lots for everyone else as well, and he'd put all the presents he'd bought for the family, with the others. He'd had difficulty with some of his gifts. He couldn't decide what to get for Grandma, so in the end he'd made her a calendar out of a last year's Christmas card, and added some ribbon so that she could hang it up. His brother and sister, who had bought perfume and talcum powder for Grandma, had jeered at him and teased him. But Mum had hugged him and told him Grandma would be delighted because he'd taken such a lot of trouble over making his gift.

After that, he wouldn't let anyone see any of his other presents. There was one special gift he kept secret even from Mum, but he spent a long time wrapping it up so that it was exactly right.

In the afternoon, Matty was allowed to give out the presents, be-

cause he was the youngest. He made sure everybody had one, then when they were opened, went round again and again and again! It took ages until all the presents were given out and unwrapped, and all the family had a pile of gifts by their chairs.

Then there was only one gift left. It was wrapped in gold paper and had been carefully placed in the middle of the Christmas tree.

“What about that one, Matty?” asked his dad.

Matty shook his head. “That’s not for any of us.”

“Don’t be stupid,” began his brother and pulled the gift out of the tree. “‘To God, with love from Matty,’” he read on the label and burst out laughing. “You can’t give a present to *God*, you silly baby!” he exclaimed.

Matty felt tears spring into his eyes, but his mother put her arm round him. “Of course you can!” she declared. “I think it’s a lovely idea. God gave us Jesus at Christmas, and that’s why we give each other presents. I’m glad Matty wanted to give a present to God.”

“What’s in it?” asked Matty’s sister.

They all looked at Matty. Then his mother said gently, “Should we open it for God, Matty? After all, he can only use our hands and feet now. But if you want, we could take it to church and lay it on the altar.”

Matty thought for a bit, then he said, “It doesn’t need to go to church, ’cos God’s with us here, isn’t he? You can open it for him Mum, if you like.”

Matty’s Mum eased off the sticky tape and undid the gold paper very carefully while the whole family crowded round. Inside was an empty tissue box.

Matty’s brother made a face. “It’s just an old box,” he said in disgust. “There’s nothing in it! What would God want with that?”

“It doesn’t matter what it’s like,” Matty’s dad said firmly. “None of the rest of us gave anything at all to God. I’m sure God loves Matty’s present.”

But Matty said, “It’s not empty. I filled it with all my hopes and dreams, to give them to God. He can see them, even if you can’t.”

There was a sudden silence, while everybody forgot all their new

things and thought of God. Matty was sure the room filled with light, and he felt happier than he'd ever felt before. Afterward his Mum and Dad said everyone went quiet because the angels were passing by, and Matty knew then that God had received his gift and that He loved it. And Matty's Mum hugged him, because she knew in her heart that because of his special Christmas gift, his hopes and dreams would be kept safe forever.

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