

She paused on the goat track partway up the hill and looked back down. Her father settled her little brother against his hip and waved at her to go on, making shooing motions with one hand. Her little brother imitated their father, and she smiled. Laughing, her father shook his head and turned back toward town. She heaved a sigh and turned around, facing uphill, and—almost as nimbly as the nearby goats—made her way to the crest of the hill.

Her uncle was sitting on a rock, facing into the valley on the other side of the hill. She walked quietly around until she stood in front of him, tilting her head to one side, examining his face carefully. He looked—different. While there was a deeper calm about him than usual, she noted the signs of worry in his eyes, the slight frown on his lips, even as he brought his attention back to her.

“Little one,” he said, and held out his hand toward her.

She hesitated. “What’s wrong?” he asked, straightening up and starting to rise, as if he might need to run somewhere—to run to help someone, maybe, or to run *away* from someone.

She waved him back down. “Nothing. Well—I mean—Daddy knew you were here and sent me to bring you back. He said something like, ‘He’s stewed out there long enough.’” She examined him carefully. “Are you done stewing?” she asked, with just a hint of a twinkle in her eye.

Her uncle barked a laugh and reached out for her, hauling her up onto the rock next to him. She giggled and snuggled against him.

“I’m not *quite* done stewing,” he admitted to her, and then he grew silent.

She didn’t mind his silences. She liked to be quiet, too, and think about things. They were a lot alike, even her mother admitted that, although she usually rolled her eyes when she said it. Her grandmother said it was because he had been very much like her at a similar age, so eager to learn more about God that he had wandered off when he shouldn’t have.

She let her gaze wander down the hill as her uncle’s had, and she, too, watched the shepherd at work, gathering his flock for the evening. He was separating the sheep and the goats with the help of his dog.

“See that shepherd?” asked her uncle after a few minutes. She nodded. “Do you know what he’s doing?”

“Yes,” she said. “The goats get too cold at night, their coats aren’t like sheep’s fleece. So he has to keep the goats together to stay warm.”

“That’s right.” The silence fell between them again.

“Is it because of cousin John?” she finally asked.

“What?” asked her uncle, clearly being dragged back from other thoughts.

“Your stewing. Is it because cousin John is in prison?”

“That’s part of it,” he said.

She sat up and turned so she faced him. “I know that you’re doing things like he did,” she said. “Preaching. Teaching. And Samuel saw you heal someone. Not even cousin John did *that*.” She stared at him intently, as if willing him to perform a miracle right then, in front of her. “What’s going on, Uncle Joshua?”

He smiled gently at her. “I’m not sure you would understand--” he began, but she cut him off.

“I understand a lot. I listen a lot. I can figure things out.”

“Yes,” he said. “I know. I know how it is, little one, believe me, I know.” He looked down at the shepherd again. “Tell me what you know about creation,” he said.

She shrugged one shoulder and drew a deep breath. “You said that God loved the world so much, the world and all of its creatures—including people—came into being. You tell us that everything we have and everything we are is because of God’s love for us and creation, and we should share with others as a way to share God’s love. You say that one day, God’s world and our world are going to be one world, and then we’ll be with God and with all of the people we love who have died.”

He nodded and smiled at her. “That’s a pretty good summary of my teaching so far,” he said. “You really *do* listen, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she said solemnly. “That’s why I know that you and Daddy don’t agree about your teaching and going to Jerusalem.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “I am shocked that you would listen to conversations not meant for your ears.”

She raised an eyebrow in return. “You don’t LOOK shocked,” she said.

He shook his head and smiled at her. She knew he couldn’t stay mad at her.

“Well, little one,” he said, “I believe that I am here on earth because God sent me to do some very special things in order to remind people that God created us and God loves us. God wants nothing more than to spend time with us and love us; and God wants to have people who want to spend time with Him and love Him, in return. But some of our religious leaders don’t agree with what I’m teaching, or the way I do things. And sometimes, those other people enforce their beliefs through harsh words and actions.”

“Like arresting cousin John,” she said.

“Exactly,” he said. “The point those people miss is that God asks us to love one another; to care for one another. Not to judge one another or to be like those sheep down there, pushing and butting others out of the way of the good grass and living water.”

She snuggled back against him again and closed her eyes tightly before asking the question that was burning within her. “Uncle Joshua---ARE you the Messiah?”

He grew very still, and it seemed that she could feel his heart thundering through her shoulder, where it rested against his chest. “That is a very dangerous question to ask, little one.”

“I know,” she whispered. “But what I’ve heard, and what you’ve taught us—I think you are. I think you *are* the Messiah,” she said, very quietly. “Sent to lead your people to victory over the Romans.”

“Hush!” he gently reprimanded her. “It is *not* safe to speak that way, little one, not for you or your family.”

“Or you,” she added.

“Or me,” he agreed. He leaned his chin on the top of her head. “You’re almost too tall for me to do this anymore,” he said, and she heard a note of sadness in his voice. “Some people say the Messiah is like King David, a great general, a great leader, who will overthrow *any* oppressors of our people.”

“What do YOU say about the Messiah?” she asked.

“That the Messiah comes to serve, not be served. That he comes to reconcile all of creation to God, not just *some* people. That at the time when God’s world and our world become one, the Messiah will judge among the people from a throne of glory. And just like the shepherd separates the sheep and the goats, the Messiah will place the ones who have helped others at his right hand, welcoming them into the joy of the kingdom, because anyone who does such good in the Messiah’s name to others is doing it to the Messiah. And those who have *not* helped others will be placed at his left hand, banished from community with God, because through their neglect of others, they neglected the Messiah, as well.”

She was silent, thinking. Finally, she said, “So the Messiah is more like the *shepherd*-king David, not the *warrior*-king David. Watching over people like a shepherd watches over the sheep, like David did when he was young like me, not fighting with them and slaying them, like the warrior he grew into.”

He chuckled. “Yes, that’s another way to see it.”

“Yep. You’re the Messiah,” she said, utterly convinced.

Her uncle heaved a very large sigh but didn’t reprimand her again. The silence stretched longer as they watched the shepherd and his dog gather the goats together in a small pen with a rough wooden shed to protect them from the chill creeping into the late afternoon air.

“You’ll be leaving soon, then?” she finally asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

“I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too, little one. More than you could know.”

“Can I come with you? I’m getting better at cooking, and Mommy wouldn’t miss me, I’m sure. I could keep house for you.”

“Thank you, but I won’t have a house, little one—I’ll rest wherever I can find shelter, with friends or family. It’s not a life for a young lady like you.”

She slipped her arms around her uncle and hugged him tightly. He hugged her back and kissed the top of her head. She began to cry quietly.

“Uncle Joshua, I’m afraid,” she whispered.

“So am I, little one. But God is holding us close, and we are safe with God, no matter what else may happen. Don’t forget what I’ve taught you—it’s very important. It’s important that you teach others to love as God loves us. Otherwise, we won’t all be gathered together with God when the time comes.”

She drew a ragged breath and sat up, dabbing at her face with the hem of her sleeve. “I don’t want anybody I love to be with the goats,” she said, giving a crooked smile.

He smiled gently back at her and took her face between his hands, wiping her tears away with his thumbs. “Will you promise me something?” he asked, his eyes searching hers.

“Yes,” she said, solemnly.

“Don’t ever forget our time together. And never stop arguing with Rabbi Joseph.”

She smiled and nodded. “I won’t; he likes arguing too much. And I could never, *ever* forget you, no matter how long you’re away from me!” She hugged him tightly again and he held on to her as if he were drowning and she was the rope tossed in to save him. In the silence, they heard footsteps pounding up the track.

“Joshua! Joshua!” called her father.

Her uncle stood, pulling her up next to him. “Here, James!” he called back.

She whirled around as her father jogged up to them. Breathless, he leaned his hands on his knees and tried to catch his breath. “Word just came---” he panted.

“John—they’ve killed John. Two of his disciples came with the news, looking for you.”

She drew a deep breath and hugged her uncle tightly as he and her father prayed for their cousin. Her uncle patted her back and took her hand, leading her away. The two men spoke quietly as the three of them descended the hill together, her father and uncle helping her over the roughest spots.

At the bottom of the hill, she looked back and forth between the two men she loved as they each held one of her hands and walked along. She knew that something had changed forever that day, even though she couldn’t say *what*, exactly, that was.

She listened—with her ears and with her heart. As they drew closer to her home, her uncle said he must be away that very night.

As she stood with her mother and grandmother and watched him, her father, and her cousin’s two disciples walk down the road that led toward Jerusalem, she felt her heart break----and she didn’t speak one word.

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