

# *The Shepherd's Song*

*by David Cirillo*

Thanksgiving had just passed, and with Christmas lurking around the corner, it was a particularly bad time for Jerry Hastings to lose his job.

Jerry worked in general maintenance for a property management service in the Saint Louis area, and his firing happened as such things often do. His boss had one idea, Jerry had another. They sat and discussed their differences, and in a fit of passion, Jerry accused his boss of being a thick-skulled nitwit. His employment ended forthwith.

It's fair to say, even before the firing, Jerry was a down-on-his-luck guy. He lived paycheck to paycheck, rented a shack of an apartment, divorced his wife many eons ago, and had a retirement plan that meshed neatly with his death. Being suddenly unemployed did not improve his prospects.

Yet while his life resided in a state of disarray, it should *not* be assumed Jerry was a bad guy. He wasn't. Even as he struggled with his own finances, he gave his parents a hundred bucks a month to help with bills, and for Christmas, he threw on another two

hundred plus a basket from Hickory Farms. Salamis, cheeses, crackers. So certainly not a terrible guy, but certainly a man terribly lost.

The night he got fired, he sat on his ratty blue-green couch, sipped on a Busch Light, and cursed himself. Not only would his parents miss their special Christmas gifts, his own Christmas would be ruined. Normally he treated himself to chocolate covered cherries and Oberweis egg nog and a freshly cut tree, but without a job, the bills would quickly pile up, meaning the Christmas goodies would be a no-go this year. All because of his big mouth.

“You gotta get your mind straight, you jerk,” he said to himself. “You’ve done this before and you’ll do it again if you don’t get smart.”

He finished off the beer and slammed the bottle on the coffee table. A walk, that’s what he needed. The cold December air would do him good, would calm him down.

As it turned out, it didn't calm him down. He couldn't stop thinking about his life mishaps: the many jobs he lost, a horribly failed marriage, a life filled with too many angry words and too few inspired moments. At his age, closer to 50 than 40, he started to doubt that he'd ever get things right, figuring his life would continue to go as it always had,

a continuous and endless string of disappointments.

He didn't know how long he'd been walking, settling deeply into his holiday gloom, when up ahead he noticed the bright glow of Christmas lights; he figured he'd give it a look. As he got close, he realized the lights framed the wall of a church, or at least attempted to. "A very poor job," he said. "What God-hating communist did that?"

The lights were crooked, and while they spattered the side of the church with a booming light, they ignored the steeple. Jerry gave the grounds a glance and noticed the other parish buildings weren't lit up. It made the clumsily lit church appear as though a poor-man's beacon in a boarded-up slum.

"I wish I had a crack at that," Jerry said. "I'd make it look like a Picasso, not the work of some boozed-up hobo."

"Hello, friend," a voice said.

The voice seemed to come from the bushes, and it had. A man emerged wearing a long navy coat. Beneath it he wore a black shirt and white collar, a priest. The haphazardly hung Christmas lights reflected in his hazel eyes, and a bushy, red beard covered his face.

"Hey, padre," Jerry said. "Didn't see ya there."

"Trying to get the Christmas lights up. The

parishioners want a festive setting and that's what I'm trying to give them."

"No offense, padre, but you're not doing a great job."

"So I surmised," the priest said and laughed. "I'm Father Leo, pastor and resident hobo here at St. Luke's."

"So you heard that comment, huh? No offense meant, padre. I'm Jerry Hastings."

"I heard your hobo comment and no offense was taken; you got it just right. Decorating is not my strong suit, but it seems you know something about it."

"I know a lot about a lotta things. I'm a fix-it guy. Lights are pretty easy, as long as you got a good hammer, a solid ladder, and the right hangers."

"Got a hammer and ladder but not sure about the hangers."

"Hangers are key. You can't just use nails, they don't hold the lights in the perfect place. You want something the lights can latch onto. Makes 'em all line up and look nice."

"I wouldn't mind having a little help if you don't mind."

Jerry shrugged, "I'd love to, padre, but it's a dog eat dog world out here, and I'm a man without a job."

You hear what I'm saying?"

Father Leo nodded, "I'll give you twenty bucks to help me for half an hour. Not a bad wage, right?"

Jerry agreed to help. They covered the bushes around the rectory in bright white bulbs, but Jerry said they probably shouldn't tackle the church that night.

"It's like I said, we need the hangers, and since we don't have 'em, we might as well stop now. I'd rather not do a thing if we're gonna do it wrong."

"I couldn't agree more."

Father Leo opened his wallet and handed him twenty dollars.

"Jerry," Father said, "why don't you stop by the rectory tomorrow. I can definitely use more help with the lights, but I might have other projects, too. You said you're out of a job, didn't you?"

"I did. I wasn't lying."

"Maybe we can help each other out. 9 a.m. sound good?"

"It's fine by me," Jerry said, "but look, padre. These days I'm not much a man of God. I don't want you throwin' no holy water on me or anything like that, if you catch my drift."

Father Leo laughed, "No holy water. Just stop by. We'll talk, and you can decide if you want the work."

"Fair enough," Jerry said.



"I'd like to offer you a job," Father Leo said. He and Jerry stood on the stoop of the rectory looking out over the parish grounds. It was a cold morning, but the sun was shining brightly. Jerry thought the parish grounds looked less slumly in daylight.

"Sure, I'll do it. Twenty an hour is my rate; I don't expect you to pay me forty like last night. I should be able to get the steeple lights up in a few hours. Four max, assuming your ladder's no dud, so that would be eighty dollars total. I think that's fair."

"No," Father Leo said. "That's not what I meant."

"Look, I can't take less than eighteen an hour, and even then, I'm giving you a priestly discount. Come on, padre. How about some Christmas spirit?"

"You misunderstand," Father Leo said. "I want to offer you a real job. A full-time job."

"How many lights you need me to put up?" Jerry laughed. "But look, are you serious? You want to give me a job?"

"I do," Father Leo said. "I need a fix-it guy around here—that's what you called yourself, right?"

"I did."

"But if you come to work for me, there are some

conditions. This is a church, and that means certain things are expected.”

“I don’t pray much, like I mentioned yesterday, but I’ll say a Hail Mary now and again.”

Father Leo smiled, “Jerry, I appreciate a sense of humor, but if you want the job, I need you to take me seriously for a minute.”

“Okay, I didn’t mean nothin’,” Jerry said, posing like a child reprimanded. “Tell me what I have to do.”

“First, you need to understand something. For as long as you work here, you’re always on probation. You disparage the Lord, you’re fired. You make filthy jokes or curse excessively, you’re fired. Anything you do that could cause scandal, you’re out.”

“Tough business around here,” Jerry said, “but I respect it. Rules are rules and I’m good with that. Grew up around a church, so I know how to act.”

“What church?” Father Leo asked.

“Up the road, Our Lady of the Snows.”

“Good,” Father Leo said. “So you’ll act respectable.”

“Not a problem.”

Father Leo went through a few more things. Dress code, work hours, the mission of the church, the code of ethics, notions of charity.

When he finished, Jerry said, “Father Leo, I ain’t no

bad guy, cross my heart. I got fired from a few jobs because I got a smart mouth and I like to do things the right way—most of my bosses didn't. But I'm a good employee, and I won't bring disrespect to your church."

"Our church," he said

"Yeah, of course, sure."

Father Leo then said, "I have two more conditions before I will hire you. I'm going to tell you right out, no other job has these requirements, but Jerry, I'm the shepherd here, and I have to do what's best for the flock."

"This sounds ominous, padre."

"It's not, but the conditions are necessary. You ready to hear them?"

"Hit me."

"First, you need to go to confession. Doesn't have to be with me, but with one of the parish priests."

Jerry shook his head, fear in his eyes as though a pride of lions moved on his position. "I don't know about that."

"Then have a good day," Father Leo said. He turned and headed up the rectory stairs, and Jerry learned something right then that all parishioners of St. Luke's already knew: Father Leo didn't trifle.

"Okay, okay," Jerry said. "Confession. Fine. Just



once or every day or what?"

"Once, for now," Father Leo said. He stopped and turned to face Jerry but kept his distance. He was ready to end the conversation and go inside if it came to that.

"What else?" Jerry asked. "I'm not joining no choir, so don't ask. My voice sounds like Ethel Merman while eating crackers."

"Definitely not the choir, we're covered there. What I want you to do, Jerry, is each day before work sit in the chapel for thirty minutes. I'm not paying you for that time, you understand? I'm not saying you have to pray or do anything holy, but no electronics and no disturbing anyone who might be there. You can bring a book and read or sit in silence. But thirty minutes a day. Unpaid."

Jerry shook his head. Thirty minutes? In a church? Father Leo may as well pour scalding water down his back.

"Look," he said, seeing the resolve on the priest's face, "I said yesterday, I'm not too religious. How about I just donate thirty minutes of free work time? Huh? That way you get extra work, and I'm not... uncomfortable."

A quick smile crossed Father Leo's face; he couldn't help himself, he liked Jerry. Still, he wasn't budging.

“Jerry, I’m going to level with you. When I heard your voice last night coming at me from the dark, I felt an angel tugging at my heart. Somehow I knew you were a troubled soul in need of a helping hand. The more we spoke the surer I was of this, and after praying on it last night and this morning, I decided to offer you a job.”

“And I appreciate that.”

“But, Jerry,” Father Leo said, “that doesn’t mean I don’t have reservations. You’re a little gruff, and that normally doesn’t mix well with church employment.”

“I understand that,” Jerry said. “If I were you, I’m not sure I’d hire me.”

“Exactly,” Father Leo said, “and that’s exactly why I must insist on you sitting in the church. When I asked God what to do, confession and church were the answers. I can understand how you might not like it, but more than your free labor, I want this. So what do you say, Jerry? One confession, church thirty minutes a day, and you got a job. Sound good?”

Jerry shook his head. He didn’t like it, but again, he didn’t dislike it. “How much you say this gig is paying?”

“Eighteen an hour.”

“I was hoping for at least twenty,” Jerry said. “That eighteen come with health benefits?”

“You stick around for three months, you’ll get full health and dental. I know you want more pay, but we’re a church. Budgets are not overflowing.”

Jerry kicked at the cement stairs and shook his head. “Padre, I won’t lie to you, I need the job, and I’m going to accept your offer. But if something better comes my way, I might take it. You okay with that?”

“Of course I am,” Father Leo said, extending his hand. “So welcome to St. Luke’s, Jerry! It’s great to have you part of the parish.”

“Thanks, padre. I appreciate your good will.”



Jerry would have liked more money, but in his heart, he felt good about working for a parish. Something about it felt right, and not only that, he’d be able to help out his parents this Christmas. They’d get their extra cash and a Hickory Farms gift basket, assuming he didn’t screw it up. Unfortunately, with Jerry that was always a possibility.

But before he worked even one minute in his new job, he had to sit in church for thirty minutes—Father Leo insisted he do this even on day one. As he sat in a pew in the last row of the church, Jerry stewed about his undue burden. Why did he have to give away

thirty minutes of his life every day? Maybe he'd be okay if Father Leo paid him, but to sit in church for free? Come on! He wondered, *Wasn't this breaking some labor laws?* Or more to the point, didn't the Ten Commandments have something to say about thievery? Thou shalt not do it, that's what Jerry remembered, yet wasn't Father Leo stealing both his time and money?

The thirty minutes went by quickly, mainly because suffering injustice helps pass time. When Jerry finished his church sentence, he checked in with Father Leo to get his first-day orders, but before that happened, the priest asked, "How was your time in church?"

Jerry figured he'd shoot straight: "I thought about how unfair you are."

"I get it," Father Leo said, "but you agreed to this, right?"

"Under duress, but yeah, I agreed."

"A condition of employment is hardly unfair," Father Leo insisted.

"Okay, I get it, I signed up for this. But you asked me how it went, and I didn't want to lie. I'm not complaining, just answering a question."

"Very well. I accept your evaluation, but remember, don't get lax. Thirty minutes every day."

“Count on it, padre. So what do you say, let’s get to work.”

Father Leo took Jerry on a tour of the parish grounds. The medium-sized church made of red brick sat near the rectory, also made of red brick. Off to the right of the rectory was a small cemetery, maybe fifty headstones, the final resting places of the first parishioners from nearly a hundred years ago. Across the church parking lot was the K-8 school, and lastly, on the edge of the grounds behind the school hunkered a usable though rugged soccer field.

“This is your territory,” Father Leo said. “It might not seem like much, but everything’s old, meaning things break and need fixing.”

“Call me Mr. Fixit,” he said.

“Thanks,” Father Leo said, “but I’ll probably just call you Jerry.” He gave Jerry a little shove to let him know he was joking.

Jerry noticed a few sore thumbs Father Leo didn’t mention along the tour. The grounds had a fair amount of tangled shrubbery, and the sidewalks and parking lots had fallen into disrepair, not to mention the bare spots scattered throughout the parish lawns and the wild, unruly trees.

“Looking a little sloppy around here,” Jerry said. “Lots to do, but good thing is, I can do it.”

“You’re just seeing the outside, my friend. Like I said, this is an old parish. How are you with with plumbing, electrical, furnaces, air conditioning?”

“Not certified, but I can do ‘em.”

“I got parishioners who will consult with you or who can certify your work when it’s done. What I want to hear from you is that you can do it right. No electrical fires. No flooding. No toxic fumes pumped into our buildings. There’s a school here with children, so we don’t play games.”

“I’ve done it all,” Jerry said, “and you’ll come to learn about me, if I do something, I do it right. Well, not marriage, I didn’t do that so well. But work-wise, you can count on me.”

Father Leo flashed a smile, “Marriage is a little tougher than plumbing.”

“Amen, padre.”

Father Leo led him to the school to give him an inkling of what was needed on the inside. The classrooms had wall and ceiling problems, the cafeteria was in disrepair, and the basement, once used as an event space, could barely be trusted for storage.

“About as bad as I expected,” Jerry said, noticing water stains on the downstairs drywall.

“We have a mouse problem, too,” Father Leo said.

“Well who doesn’t?”

Father Leo led him back to the rectory where the two sat on the stoop.

“I know there are a million places to start,” Father Leo said, “but I want the outside decorated first. Christmas is closing quick. The kids, the parents, they want to see some Christmas spirit, and quite frankly, I do, too. The rectory basement has the lights and decorations. You’ll need to setup a proper manger in the church and school. We have a small budget if you need to buy a few items to fill things out.”

Jerry’s head turned left and right as he scanned the property.

“You’re kidding, right?” Jerry asked. “With this place in such a mess, you want me to put up decorations?”

“This is a church first and foremost, and at present, nothing is in dire need of being repaired other than the spirit of Christmas. I look around here, and I don’t feel the season. You know? I want kids when they visit and cars when they drive by to know that we love God and we love the baby Jesus.”

“Well that’s a tall order,” Jerry said. “I mean, I can pretty it up, but it feels like I’ll be putting lipstick on a pig.”

Father Leo let out a loud laugh, got to his feet, and

slapped Jerry on the back, “Well then, you make that pig as pretty as she can be!”

Father Leo handed Jerry a few master keys, one to the rectory, one to the church, one to the school.

“I have plenty of priest stuff to do, so I’m turning it over to you. You can handle this, yes?”

“I can. I’m not sure I’ll make Jesus proud, but if I make you happy, I’ll be happy.”

“Make this place a festive celebration of our Lord.”

“All right, then,” Jerry said.

Father Leo headed towards the church, leaving Jerry on the stoop, and already Jerry liked this job. He was used to nitpicking bosses who micromanaged everything. Guys on power trips who wanted to be the king pin, the head honcho. At least for now, Father Leo wasn’t like this, other than forcing a confession and making him sit in church, but if that was the worst of Father Leo, Jerry could take it, no problem.



It took several days for Jerry to finish lighting St. Luke's, the hardest part being the steeple. He needed a better ladder, which cost a few hundred dollars.

“Don’t you worry,” Jerry told Father Leo, “it’ll have a thousand other uses. No one in history ever



regretted buying a solid ladder.”

Even with a fine ladder, he had to screw in the hooks, line them up, keep the lights even and tight, and do it all with temperatures hovering in the mid-30s. Knowing Father Leo wanted some instant Christmas spirit, he worked early and late to get it done. By the time he finished, multi-colored lights outlined the church and trees while white bulbs decorated the rectory and shrubs.

The next day he worked on the manger scenes in both school and church, then went about getting walkways alit with red and green lights. In addition, he setup a few artificial trees in the church gathering space and one in the school, both new purchases.

“Why do we need all these trees?” Father Leo asked, his budget getting squeezed.

“Giving trees. Secret Santas. Seems to me back when I was a youngster, charity and good will always revolved around a Douglas Fir.”

Father Leo couldn't argue, and approved the purchases, as well as a pile of ornaments and lights for the trees.

The thing Jerry did that most impressed Father Leo was the star of Bethlehem. He found an unused length of pipe in the school basement and gave it a silver coat of paint. He then bent a hanger into the shape of a star,

looped white lights around it, and mounted it behind the church manger.

Father Leo couldn't say exactly why he liked the star so much. He'd seen a hundred such stars in his life, not made of pipe and wire, but he'd seen enough. Somehow, though, what Jerry did held a deeper meaning. He didn't go to a store and get one, nor did he use the frazzled one he found in storage. He took discarded, common items and put them to better use.

Father Leo said to himself, "Maybe I like it so much because what Jerry did with the star is what God does with us."



"So how has your church time been going?"

Father Leo asked this question for the second time one week into Jerry's employment.

"Don't you worry about me, padre. We made a deal, and I sit in that church everyday like I promised."

Father Leo said, "So not so tortuous anymore?"

"It's going okay. You didn't require a miracle if I remember correctly, but it's been easier than that first day."

"Easier is good," Father said.

Jerry said with a shrug, “I don’t put much stock in easier. But look, padre, here’s something you might like to hear, maybe this is what you’re fishing for. This morning I was sitting in a pew staring at the nativity, and all of a sudden something hit me smack in the face. The Jesus in the manger is a baby. Just a helpless little thing.”

“Indeed. And what of it?”

Jerry shrugged, “Well that’s it. I mean, I’m not stupid, I’ve known all along Jesus was a baby, but sometimes a thing just hits you, you know? That man on the cross was once a cooing, burping, pooping, crying child. It’s just weird.”

“It’s humility,” Father Leo said, doing his best to hide his smile.

“It’s something, padre, that’s for sure.”



People complimented Father Leo; they’d never seen the grounds look so festive. Father Leo gave all credit to Jerry. “We got a new handyman who has a much better eye for beauty than your pastor!”

Father Leo relayed the messages of praise to Jerry, who thanked him. “I appreciate appreciation,” Jerry said. His mother often said that, and Jerry always

thought it was clever.

“So Jerry,” Father Leo said, “what do you know about furnaces?”

“Some but not enough.”

“The school furnace is clanking, that’s what the teachers and principal tell me. Could you give it a look?”

Jerry confessed, “I’m going to need to read some manuals before I do anything. Furnaces are simple machines but not anything you want to screw up.”

“Don’t forget, I know people who are happy to consult. I can give you a number.”

“I’ll put that in my back pocket just in case, but if you’re okay with it, I’d rather read up. I’ll learn it better if I figure it out myself.”

“I’m fine with that, but if you get in over your head, you make a call.”

“Bet on it.”

Father Leo started back towards the rectory, but Jerry stopped him.

“I thought about the shepherds today in church.”

Father Leo stopped and turned. “What about them?”

“Well look, I don’t mean to be disparaging, so don’t take this personal.”

“I probably won’t.”

“But those shepherds were simpletons, right? No education, not real smart folk. Hard workers, yes, but people in the world, they didn’t really know or care about shepherds.”

“That’s pretty accurate.”

“In other words,” Jerry said, “they were a lot like me.”

Father Leo felt his face change, from mild amusement to a mix of awe and sadness. He hadn’t expected Jerry to say that and didn’t know how to reply.

Father Leo mumbled, “Jesus called himself the good shepherd.”

“Oh, don’t feel bad for me,” Jerry said. He could tell Father Leo didn’t know how to respond. “I’m actually bragging a little here.”

“How so?”

“The baby Jesus had simpletons nearby when he was born, when he lived, and when he died. It seems to me that no matter what the world thinks, people like me are around when it counts.”

“That’s a healthy way to think about,” Father Leo said, though he wondered: Is this handyman a deeper philosopher than anyone might ever guess?



Jerry read the manuals, researched on the Internet, and called an expert suggested by Father Leo; he needed to be sure he got it right. With a building filled with students and teachers, he wasn't taking chances.

On the second day of fixing the furnace, something went wrong, and Jerry didn't know what. It might be electrical, it might be gas, but whatever wasn't working, he thought it best to shut down the furnace. He told Father Leo; Father Leo spoke with the school principal, Ms. Martin.

Around 10 a.m., with the school getting cold and the hammering and clanking in the basement distracting both student and teacher, the principal went downstairs to check on things.

"Are you about done?" Ms. Martin asked, already knowing the answer as she eyed a pile of tools and parts on the floor.

"Not exactly. This thing needs a good cleaning, but I'm not yet sure that's all it needs."

Jerry didn't look at her when he gave his response.

"Is there anyway you can take a break and maybe finish this after school?" Ms. Martin suggested.

"No can do," Jerry said. "Things will only get colder upstairs if I don't get this fixed. You think it's bad now? Whoa, boy, you haven't tasted cold!"

“Yes, I understand,” Ms. Martin answered, frustration creeping in. “But you understand, I have a school to run, and these kids have a hard time concentrating, even without your symphony of hammers.”

Finally, Jerry looked up and noticed her folded arms and fierce eyes, her horn-rimmed glasses and a serious bun of brown hair atop her head.

“Look, I got my orders. Fix the furnace. Ain’t no sense arguing over this. I’m doin’ my job, and what’s done is done. If you got a problem, talk to Father Leo.”

“I think I’ll do just that,” Ms. Martin said, spinning around and stomping off.

Twenty minutes, Jerry sat across from Father Leo in his rectory office. It was a simple space. He worked at a basic, black-wood desk and on it sat a computer, printer, and crucifix. On a shelf in the corner he had two snow globes, one with a lively Christmas village and the other with a nativity.

“Why were you rude to Principal Martin?” Father Leo asked sternly.

“Me, rude?” Jerry asked. “Seems you need to ask *her* that question?”

“She said she went downstairs to politely ask if you would put the furnace job on hold till after school. She thought it was a reasonable request, but you

wouldn't even listen. Then you sassed her, that's what she said."

"Sassed her?"

"Her words."

Jerry shrugged, "She did ask me to stop working, and I told her I couldn't, I had a job to do. I guess I told her to talk to you if she had a problem, but I wasn't sassing. It's just how I am, I say things as they are. Don't like to waste too many words."

Father Leo let out a big sigh, then opened a manilla folder that rested under his hands. He removed a disciplinary action form and handed it to Jerry.

"Do I need to fill this out?" Father Leo asked.

Jerry gave the form a peek and pushed it back, "That's your decision, boss. You told me to fix the furnace and that's what I was doing."

Father Leo saw the sadness in his face, the slump of defeat in his shoulders. Father Leo's anger subsided as he understood there was something more going on here.

"I don't want to fill out this form, Jerry. I've been happy with your work, and I thought you were happy here."

"What makes you think I'm not? Heck, I sit in a church everyday so I can keep this job. That should tell you something."



Father Leo returned the disciplinary form to the folder.

“I want to get this straight, Jerry. You don’t think you were rude to Ms. Martin at all, is that right?”

“That is correct.” Jerry wouldn’t look at Father Leo, didn't feel it was right to make eye contact. Father Leo might take it as a challenge.

Father Leo continued, “You understood Ms. Martin’s points, right? School’s going on; kids need to learn. It’s fair that she wanted you to wait till school ended, right?”

“Fair enough, sure.”

“Yet you refused to accommodate her wishes.”

Jerry sat up, fidgeted, still unable to make eye contact with the priest.

“That’s true but it ain’t,” he said.

“What does that mean?”

“Well, you told me to fix the furnace, so even with her being so persistent, the fact was that you asked me to fix the furnace. So what do I do, not do my job and get fired? The truth is, I couldn’t accommodate her wishes.”

“But Jerry,” Father Leo asked, frustration seeping in, “couldn’t you have discussed this with Ms. Martin? Couldn’t you have called me and asked if it was okay to take a break, especially because you understood it

was a reasonable request?"

"I considered it," Jerry admitted.

Father Leo let out a big sigh, "I just don't know about this, Jerry. You're a great worker, but I still have that bad feeling I had a few weeks back, that if you keep working here, you're going to cause trouble." He paused, "I hoped this wouldn't be the case, prayed it wouldn't, but I don't know anymore. For something so small to be such a big deal, I just don't know."

Jerry could feel heat rise in his face and up to his ears. He always got stirred up when he perceived injustice; he couldn't let it go without saying something. In fact, he had something snarky on the tip of his tongue, something about Ms. Martin being a half-wit, but he stopped himself before saying anything. No reason to get mad. No reason to say anything stupid. Why? Because he liked this job, he wanted to keep it. He would not react, not this time. For once, he would learn from his mistakes.

"Father Leo, may I say a word?"

He noticed Jerry didn't call him padre. "Of course."

"Here's the truth. You gave me one job, to fix the furnace. Now look, I know there's lots of things to do around this place, but you keep giving me one job at a time, and that says to me, if I don't do it right, I'm fired. So a principal or duke or the Pope swings by

and tells me don't fix the furnace, I keep fixing it because if I don't, I get my pay docked or get fired. Only when I hear it from you do I stop fixing the furnace, that's my mindset, and that's why I didn't stop my work when Ms. Martin asked me to."

"Oh," Father Leo said, his face brightening, a sudden revelation hitting him square in the eyes. "So the problem isn't you, it's my management."

"Who said that?" Jerry asked. "I never did. I like you just fine as a boss."

"No, you certainly didn't say it, but I am. I hired you, Jerry, but I didn't take a minute to understand you. I made assumptions without trying to unveil the truth, and that's downright rude. For that, I apologize."

Jerry watched his face, expecting some kind of gotcha punchline. When he saw Father Leo wasn't kidding, Jerry shrugged, "Well I don't know what you're talking about, but it sounds like I'm not fired, so I'll take it. And I'm relieved we finally figured it out, that all this was your fault."

Father Leo laughed, and even Jerry smiled.

"Jerry, I got a plan. Maybe you'll like it, maybe you won't, but it's the right thing."

Jerry nodded; he was in.

"First, you go and apologize to Principal Martin.

You said you shoot straight?"

"I do."

"You tell her you're sorry, that you meant no offense."

"I didn't."

"Still, she took offense, and while I understand the situation, my guess is you were a little rude."

"That's not a thing I intended, so I can apologize for that."

"Perfect," Father Leo said. "After that, come back here and we'll put together a to-do list. A long one. A mile long at least. When I hired you, Jerry, it wasn't a temp job. I think you'll be clear about that by the end of the day."

"That's how I like it. Things to do, not enough time to get it done."

"One more thing. Let's avoid situations like you had today. I want you to be the sheep, so whenever something arises that could cause a conflict, like today with Ms. Martin, be calm and passive. Listen and be kind, then come talk to me."

Jerry nodded, "You're the shepherd and I'm the sheep. Got it."

"Yes," Father Leo said. "That's exactly what I mean."

"Seems easy enough."



The apology with Ms. Martin went as Jerry expected. He said he was sorry, and Ms. Martin lectured him about the importance of education and the troubles with running a school, especially with unnecessary distractions. Jerry listened and agreed with all she said and issued a last apology, assuring her that he and the padre had worked out a plan to avoid such problems in the future. Ms. Martin thanked him for the apology, a kind gesture, and promised that no grudge or bad will would be harbored.

Back at the rectory, Jerry and Father Leo made a lengthy to-do list with enough items to keep Jerry busy for the next year, assuming nothing new popped up. Jerry then asked Father Leo for several hours off since he would be working late that night on the furnace. Permission was granted.

Jerry arrived at the school after dark, a light snow falling, and he couldn't help but stop and admire the Christmas lights. Yes, he did the decorating, but that didn't take away from the beauty. The church had an angelic glow, and the un-shoveled walkways shimmered red and green.

As Jerry headed into the school, he thought of his

youth. Like most others his age, he loved Christmastime, and one of his fondest memories was playing a shepherd in the school Christmas play. He didn't remember much about it, mostly having a crook and wearing a gray cloak, but there was one thing he did recall: the appeal of the shepherd's life. It seemed heavenly to him to live a simple life on the edge of society while still having the means to make a living. However, while that Christmas was filled with joy, his happy, youthful memories didn't last much longer. The next year Dad lost his job, and right after, Mom fell into a deep depression. It would be years before the family chaos was tamed, and by the time that happened, Jerry was long gone, the hopeful and peaceful yearnings of an eleven year-old shepherd having long since evaporated.

It took Jerry several hours to finish the furnace, but shortly before 1 a.m., it was done. He cleaned up the mess quickly and started for home but noticed a light on inside the church. A new day had begun; Jerry could get his thirty minutes of church time done right then, then go home and sleep in a little. He used his key and let himself in.

It was dark inside other than a small e-candle burning in the center of the altar—Father Leo probably forgot to flip off the switch. With no one

around, Jerry went close to the front rather than his normal spot in the back and slouched into the third pew as the fake light gave off a pleasant glow. His eyes wandered to the nativity, then to the two shepherds outside the manger. Several sheep rested beside them prostrate before the Lord.

Jerry's thoughts turned to his ex-wife. They never had kids, and he was thankful for it. Not because he didn't want a family, he did, but because of his broken life. Never, not for one second, did he believe he could offer a child peace, stability, and happiness. And what kind of man would bring a child into such a world? A bad man, that's who, and Jerry knew or believed or wanted to believe he was not a bad man.

And yet at that moment, he regretted it, not having a child. But why? Because of the sheep and shepherds? Because of that holy family residing in the nativity? He couldn't answer the question but sat there for a long while captivated by the scene before him.

As he sat transfixed, he suddenly felt light-headed. Breathing became difficult and he wondered what was up? A heart-attack, severe anxiety? Was this the end of him?

He stood up and closed his eyes, holding the pew to balance himself, and after several more difficult

breaths, his lungs filled with air. His eyes opened slowly and went straight to the sheep and shepherds, and his heart felt a peace and elation it had never known.

He checked his watch; forty-seven minutes had passed since he arrived; it felt like seconds.

The cold air felt good on his face during the walk home. When he had nearly reached his apartment complex, a strange and unexpected thought entered his mind.

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me,” Jerry said. Then added, “Where did that come from?”

He knew, though: the Bible of course. Somewhere in John’s gospel. But why? Why did he remember that verse now?

“I need to get to bed,” he said. “The mind gets strange when it doesn’t sleep enough.”



“Why don’t you come to Christmas Mass?” Father Leo asked. It was December 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Jerry shrugged, “Don’t know. Haven’t been in a long time.”

“Just think about,” Father Leo said. “By the way,



first job of the day, go talk to Ms. Martin.”

“Oh boy,” Jerry said. “Did I insult her again?”

“Nope. She has a few jobs for you, and I told her you’d be happy to help.”

“She wants *my* help?” Jerry asked, surprised.

“Requested you by name.”

Jerry went straight to her office, and she stood, greeted him, asked him to have a seat. Her office was filled with clutter. Mounds of papers on the desk and floor, overflowing filing cabinets. Jerry thought she would be more organized and desperately hoped she didn’t require his help organizing this nightmare.

“The heat’s working,” she said. “No clanking, no noises. Just warm air.”

“I worked on it till 1 a.m.,” Jerry said.

“Thank you,” Ms. Martin said. “I was tough on you before, but now I understand better. You care about these kids, just differently than me.”

Jerry nodded, his simple thank you.

“I spoke to Father Leo this morning,” Ms. Martin said, quickly changing the subject. “The school needs an overhaul, and Father and I are convinced you can do it.”

“Do what?”

“All that needs to get done,” Ms. Martin said, smiling. It was the first time Jerry saw her smile; *not a*

*bad looking gal when she's not grumpy.* She produced a folder from a drawer and tossed it on the desk. "I've been compiling this for years. It's all the things that need to be done to get this place the way it needs to be."

Jerry flipped through the folder. "It'll take years to do all this. Maybe a decade. No more than a century, for sure."

She smiled again, "I've been told you might be here that long, so it shouldn't be a problem."

Jerry shrugged, "I can handle it, no problem."

"I'd like to sit down with you and triage this. I know, I know, you have other things to do, but I'd like to get to this sooner than later. Yesterday, if possible."

"Not sure I can turn back the clock," Jerry said, "but we can give it a look right now if you want."



That night around 1:00 a.m., Jerry returned to the church and let himself in. The e-candled burned. The nativity scene was right there. That afternoon he put up two Christmas trees behind the altar and hung angels from the ceiling. Protectors of the good, that's how Jerry saw them.

He sat in the front row and shifted his attention

from nativity to the altar to the trees. Every so often he glanced at the shepherds.

For a full hour, he just sat and let the beauty and peace of the season surround him. Just weeks ago, he'd lost his job, saw no way out, no way home. But now?

The next day, Christmas Eve, he visited his parents in the afternoon and gave them \$300. He also delivered two Hickory Farms gift baskets, one for each of them. They loved it.

"This is all too much," Mom said.

"No way," he answered. "For once, it's been a good Christmas for me. I want it to be extra good for you two."

"Well it is, sweetheart, it is."



Christmas morning arrived and Father Leo processed in at 10 a.m. He gave the blessing and noticed someone sitting in the back dressed in a blue suit, his black hair slicked over to the side. It was Jerry.

*Didn't see that coming,* Father thought. He smiled, unable to stop himself, and then proceeded with Mass.



Jerry felt Father's eyes on him for a brief moment. He saw happiness and joy in them. A little surprise, too, but mostly joy.

*Well why shouldn't I be here? Going back to church can't hurt, right?*

But somewhere inside, he knew it was more than that. Something else was at work. He might be a simpleton but he wasn't dumb.

There was a reason he got fired from his last job, a reason he took a late night walk, a reason Father Leo happened to be hanging Christmas lights. Those weren't just random acts, just like it wasn't random that Father Leo asked him to sit in church for thirty minutes a day.

The hand of God, that's what it was. For here he was, a man who just weeks ago felt the goodness and hope of life slipping away, sitting at church on Christmas day, the wandering soul who in a wink had found his way home. And how did it happen so perfectly and so quickly? The answers were right there before him on the altar. Priest, shepherd, sheep, and Jesus, all parts of the hand of God.

"Thank you," he whispered to the One he knew was listening, "for letting my shepherd find me. You bent my ears the right way, and I heard the shepherd's

song.” He paused, wiped his eyes, and said, “And by your grace, I recognized His voice.”

*The End*