

The Journey to Jesus (Carols by Candlelight)

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[0 : 00] Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. So we're going to think together for a few minutes about this journey to Jesus.

We're going to follow this journey of the wise men. I imagine for many of us it's very familiar.

Perhaps you've been to a nativity play or you've participated.

It's the kind of scene that we maybe still get on our Christmas cards. So that if pressed, we are probably able to say, yes, we know they traveled somewhere from the east, most likely Persia, towards Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem.

But do we know why they traveled? That's a far more interesting question to think about. This remarkable event. What is it that makes these men go on this journey of great distance, hundreds of miles in the days before easy public transport, with great cost and at great risk, uncertain of what they would find.

And yet they go. And in their going, it becomes for them a journey to Jesus, a journey that's going to change their lives. So we're going to consider their story.

[1 : 18] We're going to get beyond the familiar to think about some really important but perhaps hidden truths that we find within. We're going to do that by thinking, first of all, about the star.

Okay. Matthew chapter 2, verse 2, we have the Magi saying, Where is the one who's been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

Ever since 44 BC, when Julius Caesar died and at his funeral, a new star was seen in the sky, connecting kings with stars, was very much in fashion.

Now, what star was it that the Magi followed this particular moment in time? We don't know. But there are some things that we do know.

When we read our Bibles, we know God is the one who made the stars. God names the stars. God sets the course for all the stars, including this one. Lots of people would have seen this star in the sky, but for the wise men, it's hugely significant because it is for them reverently.

[2 : 29] Revelation. God is speaking. God is saying something to them, and their life would never be the same. And this is remarkable because there are a few things, not many things that we know about these wise men, but we know for a fact.

They were very wealthy. They could give gifts that included gold. They were highly educated. They were wise men. They lived in a very different society, a very different religious system where they had many, many gods, and yet they are ready in a moment to leave it all behind, to follow this star, to follow God's revelation.

Why is that? It's God, as it were, He's lifted the roof off. In this moment, He has broken into their world. God was going to break into the world in the sending of His Son, Jesus, but He's broken into their story, telling them there's something more, there's something greater.

And we find the Magi then following God's light where it leads. And, you know, this is revealing to us something that God loves to do.

God loves to make Himself known, just like light breaking through the darkness. He wants to reveal Himself to men and to women and boys and girls, and He does it in so many different ways.

[3 : 51] For the wise men, it was through the shining star. For the shepherds, it was through the choir of angels. For me, it was much less spectacular.

It was a Saturday afternoon in a very ordinary church event when I all of a sudden realized that Jesus had come to pay for my sin and to be my Savior. I've been reading a book with lots of different stories.

There's a chap by the name of Francis Collins involved in the Genome Project. He's the geneticist who first sequenced DNA. He tells his story of being a medical student, no interest in Christianity,

but then he began to talk to patients, Christian patients suffering terribly, but with real hope. And that prompted him to think about the Christianity he'd rejected without ever opening a Bible. And he came to faith in Jesus. For David Suchet, perhaps most famous for playing Poirot on the TV, he found himself 40 plus years ago in a New York hotel room taking a bath. And for the first time in his life, he was thinking about the afterlife, asking questions about resurrection that he'd never asked before. And that led him to pick up a New Testament. And in that New Testament to discover a worldview and a love that he'd been looking for most of his adult life without finding.

[5 : 20] But then he found Jesus. The light of Jesus is shone in lots of different ways. Sometimes it's through personal conversations with Christians. Sometimes it's as we face difficult circumstances.

Jesus has revealed himself even in dreams. Because our Creator wants us to know that he is real. And he wants us to know him personally.

And so the shining of this star isn't just a nice event in the Christmas story. It reminds us that we are made for more than this. We're made for more than the nine to five.

We're made for more than eat, sleep, repeat. We're made for more than the crazy busyness that keeps us consumed with the here and now. In fact, the Bible will tell us.

God has set eternity in our hearts. And perhaps one of the reasons why we can find ourselves restless so often is because we're looking for satisfaction in things that are less than God.

[6 : 24] But here's what made the Magi leave it all behind. God spoke, revealed something of his truth. They listened. And in that listening, there was the beginning of a journey of enjoying life with him.

So that's the star of the story. Let's think now about the king. Because the search takes them to Jerusalem, the center of power in Israel.

And they ask that question, where is the one who's been born king of the Jews? Now, maybe we've heard this loads of times. And we think, well, of course, that's the question that gets asked. But it's an amazing question. Because at this point in time, Israel, of course, is a tiny nation.

They're being ruled by a puppet king. It's really Rome that's in charge. They are insignificant as a nation, both politically and economically. So why in the world do the Persians come looking for their king?

Well, Matthew has already told us, and they're going to learn, something of the remarkable identity of this king. He is, after all, Emmanuel.

[7 : 28] None less than God with us. Fully God, fully man. The one who came to save us, to save us from our sins. And as the question is asked, where's the one who's been born king of the Jews?

And as they open up their Old Testament, they're looking for the prophecy. And that reveals this promised king would be a shepherd. One who would guide his people back home to God.

Sounds like comfort, doesn't it? This king will be the God who is with us. The God who would save us. The God who would be a shepherd to guide us home.

And yet the truth is, the reality of Jesus as king is one that often challenges and offends. Because kingship always implies there is only one who sits on the throne.

There is only one who can claim all authority. Only one who can call the shots in our lives. And deep down and by instinct, most of the time, we want that to be us.

[8 : 34] And not God. I think that explains King Herod's reaction. We didn't read the whole story. Herod, first of all, tries to dress up. He's really keen to go and find the baby Jesus so he can worship.

But actually his plan is to kill baby Jesus. Because he is a king who is determined to remain on his throne, whatever the cost.

Maybe that partly explains why Jesus can be opposed or rejected in our own lives. Because we want to be in charge. We want to call the shots. It seems very limiting to our freedom. To have to owe our loyalty or obedience to another.

Maybe you've had that reaction. Maybe that's your reaction to Christianity and to Jesus today. Well, let me encourage you this Christmas season to consider this king.

The king who's revealed in the Bible. The one who turns everything upside down. He is a king who comes in weakness. He is born in a stable. To an unimportant family.

[9 : 37] And he spends his time, not with the rich and powerful, but often with the hopeless, the outcast, the outsider. At the end of his life, Jesus doesn't ascend to a throne, but to a cross.

Jesus doesn't use his power for self-interest. Rather, in love, he lays down his life as a sacrifice. This is what God with us does.

He dies to forgive us and to save us from sin. He comes in weakness, extending grace to weak people. And in this, it's very different.

It makes Christianity very different to every other religion or worldview that's going around in our day or in any day. Religion will always say, use your power, use your effort to reach the standard, to make the grade, to get up the ladder towards God.

But Christianity is more honest because Jesus says we need to admit our weakness. Admit that we can't be good enough for God by ourselves. We can't love God perfectly. We can't love others perfectly.

[10 : 42] We simply can't make the grade. And that sounds hopeless except for the fact that God has sent Jesus to come down, to live, die, and rise for us, to bring us to God.

Let me invite you to consider his remarkable life. At the back of our church, we have lots of gospels there. Pick one up and read of his miracles, of his teaching, of his love and kindness, of his deliberate sacrifice to rescue us.

And you will discover he is no ordinary man. He is no ordinary king. And because this is true, even if we struggle instinctively with authority, he is a king that we can trust.

It is safe to give our loyalty to this king. And we remember this season as well that while King Jesus came first in weakness, we have the promise that he'll come back again.

He'll return one day in glory. And he will establish his perfect kingdom forever. And to be part of that kingdom, we're invited to trust him, to receive him as our Lord and our king, to be part of that wonderful world that's coming.

[11 : 59] And that takes us to the third thing to do with this story, again, which is probably very familiar, the gifts that the wise men bring. Every nativity play must have the wise men.

And if we're honest, at least some of us must be sitting on the edge of our seat, secretly hoping for that comedy moment where they bring gold and myrrh and Frankenstein. We've been there.

We know what it's like. But again, if we were pressed, even if we hadn't read that passage tonight, I imagine most of us could probably list two or probably even three of those gifts.

But do we know why the gifts were given? Look at verse 2 again. We saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him.

And then as the star leads them to Bethlehem, on coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. This is a remarkable moment.

[13 : 02] They have the ability to see through and to see beyond. They can see beyond the weakness of little baby Jesus, not clothed in royal robes, but still they see in him the promised king, the one who is fully God, fully human.

And so they worship Christ, the newborn king. They can see beyond the humble scene of the house in Bethlehem, and they see here is God's long-promised king.

Here is the way for God and sinners to be reconciled and at peace through the gift of Jesus come into the world. Their long search is over.

They found the king, the one worthy of their worship. And let me suggest this reality reminds us perhaps of a hidden truth that lies within, that all of us, whether we are aware of it or not, we are hardwired for worship.

The magi, even before they'd ever heard of the king, they were probably worshiping the stars, probably worshiping other gods. Because worship isn't just bowing down to a statue.

[14 : 19] Worship happens whenever we make something ultimate in our life. That thing that we look to for security and purpose and identity and joy, and that comes in many forms.

It could be work or wealth. It could be a relationship or beauty or power, comfort or status. And these magi, these wise men are reminding us what every heart needs is to find the right object for our worship, like the wise men to come to know Jesus as Lord.

So we come to journey's end, the wise men worshiping. Can you and I see beyond the familiar stories of Christmas that we hear read and sung about every year to see the life-changing history, changing reality?

God the Son has entered in to be the king who would serve us and the king who would save us. That by trusting him, he would shepherd us home to life with God.

Will you and I walk in the wise men's footsteps? Why not begin the search today? Find joy and worth and worship in Jesus today.

[15 : 39] Now we're going to leave our thoughts there, and in just a moment, we're going to have a couple of songs to finish with. But before we do that, some invitations.

A number of them. First of all, as I mentioned, we have lots of Christmas-themed books up the back. So we have Gospels, the life of Jesus according to Luke and John in magazine form. Please take one of these for yourself or for a friend or a neighbor. We also have some books that help us to reflect on Christmas. Some kind of devotional stuff here, thinking about the theme of Jesus, the light of the world.

If you have questions, questions about the virgin birth, can we trust the Gospels? What they say about Jesus is a very helpful one. Is Christmas unbelievable? Let me invite you as well, if you're free and if you're still in the city, to come back on Christmas Eve.

We've got family services happening at 10.30 and 5.30, and everybody is welcome. Let me also invite you to stick around for some refreshments.

[16 : 46] They'll all be served here. There's going to be some hot mulled wine that will be coming from the kitchen, be coming in trays. There's also mince pies for every dietary requirement.

You can decide what those are. I've forgotten momentarily, but you'll be catered for. And there's an opportunity, an invitation to give to Bethany Christian Trust.

We love to partner with Bethany at Christmas, a really busy time for them of caring for the homeless community. You'll see right up the back, there's a big metal plate. You can put money in there.

We also have a contactless machine if you would like to give to support Bethany's work. Thanks again for coming. Please do stick around afterwards. And let's stand again, raise our voices, to finish with two more classic carols, Joy to the World and O Come All Ye Faithful.

Joy to the World, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King.

[18 : 07] Let every heart prepare Him room. And heaven and nature sing. Let heaven and nature sing.

Let heaven and nature sing. Let heaven and nature sing. Let heaven and nature sing. No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground.

He comes to make His blessings flow. For as the curse is found, far as the curse is found, far as, far as the curse is found.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reads, let all their songs employ. For fields and floods, rocks, hills and blood, repeat the sounding joy.

Repeat the sounding joy. Repeat the sounding joy. Repeat the sounding joy. Repeat the sounding joy. He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness, and wonders of His love, and wonders of His love, and wonders, wonders of His love.

[19 : 56] O come, O ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come, O ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem, Bethlehem.

Come and behold Him, Lord, the King of angels, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation, sing, all ye citizens of heaven above.

glory to God, glory to God, all glory in the highest, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

Child for us sinners, poor and in the manger, we would embrace Thee with love and awe.

[22 : 19] Who would not love Thee, loving us so dearly, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, For Him, Christ the Lord.

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born with happy morning, Jesus, to Thee be all glory give.

Word of the Father, Now in flesh appearing, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

Let me pray as we finish. Lord, we thank You for this wonderful news that to us a child is born, to us a son is given, that the government will be on His shoulders, and He, the Lord Jesus, will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

And may we all know Your peace, Your mercy, that hope that comes from You in this season. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

[24 : 18] Well, thank you again, please have a seat. Thank you again for coming. Do stick around. Please help yourself to some books, and help yourself to some food and drink also.