

# The Hidden Journeys of Christmas

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 20 December 2020

Preacher: James Ross

[ 0 : 00 ] Everybody here, you may have heard that we're going into Tier 4 as of Boxing Day, which means this is actually going to be our last in-person service until those restrictions ease, so at least until, I guess, the first couple of weeks in January.

So this week will be the last one in person. To remind us that we have our Carols by Candlelight service on tonight, beginning at 5.30, we're really grateful to Kellen and for Ben for all the work that they've done and putting that together for us, really excited for that.

A good chance to invite friends to tune in as well. And then this evening at 8 o'clock, we got a chance to come back together on Zoom to catch up a little and to pray, in particular perhaps to pray that God would use the various things that have been happening over Advent for His glory.

Some of us had a chance to deliver gift bags to international students around the city. It was really interesting to see how grateful so many were for the kindness of the church and also how interested a good number were in checking out the church, tuning in to the Carol service.

So we can pray that God will use all these efforts. Now, as we gather to worship, we're going to begin reading together one of our basic statements of faith, the Apostles' Creed, which we'll see up on our screen.

[ 1 : 29 ] So we can read this together to remind ourselves of what stands at the core of our faith. I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to hell. The third day He rose again from the dead.

He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From there He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

[ 2 : 35 ] Amen. And now for folks at home, you'll have a chance to sing. For the rest of us, we can reflect together on the words of Psalm 2 that remind us that Jesus came as both Son of God and promised King.

So we'll hear that now. Amen. Why do the heathen nations rage?

Why do the peoples glut in vain? Earth's kings combine in enmity.

Her rulers join against God's reign. They take their stand against the Lord and challenge His anointed one.

Let us break off their chains from us. With their restraints let us be done.

[ 4 : 06 ] The one enthroned in heaven laughs. The Lord on high derides them all.

Then he rebukes them in his wrath. His rage and terror on them fall.

The Lord has made it known to them. My chosen king I have installed.

On Zion my own holy hill. He is the one whom I have called.

The king then solemnly declares, I will proclaim the Lord's decree.

[ 5 : 28 ] Today your father I've become. You are my son.

He said to me. Pay homage to the royal son.

Lest you in wrath the side are thrust. For swiftly can his anger blaze.

Blessed are all who in him trust.

Let's stand so we can pray together. Amen. Lord we come before you.

[ 6 : 33 ] Lord we come before you. The eternal unchanging God. And we are so thankful. For who you are. As father, son and Holy Spirit.

We are so often taken by surprise. We are so often disappointed and confused by what's happening.

And so we thank you that we can turn to you. The one who knows the end from the beginning. The one whose ways and purposes are never thwarted.

Whose wisdom is complete. Lord we thank you this day for your eternal plan of redemption. At this time of year we remember that just as you promised in your mercy and grace to us.

You sent your one and only son Jesus into our world to be our mediator. To be our substitute.

[ 7 : 43 ] To take our place by taking on the cross. The sin and its punishment that is ours.

So that by looking to him with faith. We might be forgiven. And be called. Children of God. We thank you.

That you sent your son Jesus. To be that sin offering for us. That we acknowledge before you our own sin and guilt.

That in our words and our deeds and our actions. That we have failed to meet our own standards. Never mind your own perfect standards. That we recognize that you demand perfect obedience.

And we have failed to keep your law. And we have failed to love as we ought. Lord that that would cause us to look to the Lord Jesus.

[ 8 : 44 ] And to be thankful for his life of perfect obedience. To be so grateful for the fact that though sinlessly perfect.

He would take the place of a sinner. Lord that we are. So that as he takes our sin. That he might give us his perfect righteousness.

So that you can look on us and be pleased. So that in him we can come into your presence. With confidence rather than fearing our condemnation.

Lord we thank you for Christmas. Lord we thank you for Christmas. And the incarnation. The coming in flesh of the Lord Jesus. And for what that represents.

In terms of your love and kindness and mercy. Shown to the world. And Lord we pray that that message would be heard today.

[ 9 : 45 ] For many who are hurting. For many who are confused or disappointed. For those who are lonely or anxious. Lord that they would look to Jesus.

And find hope and rest and peace and life. In and with him. He is your son. And he is the one true king.

And we pray that you would help us. To bow our knee. To pay homage. To show honour to Jesus. And that your spirit would be with us today.

To enable us to worship. In spirit and in truth. And we pray that you would take your word. And apply it to our hearts and lives. We pray that you would raise our eyes.

To see once again. The glory of Jesus. The saviour. We ask this in his name. Amen. Now we'll read together.

[ 10 : 48 ] First of all in the Old Testament. From the book of Hosea. We will see in Matthew chapter 2. That Matthew refers back to Hosea.

So we'll read the whole chapter together. It will be up on the screen. Or you can look it up. In your Bible or your device. Hosea chapter 11.

Let's hear God's word. When Israel was a child. I loved him. And out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel.

The further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals. And they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk. Taking them by the arms.

But they did not realise. It was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness. With ties of love. I lifted the yoke from their neck.

[ 11 : 48 ] And bent down to feed them. Will they not return to Egypt? And will not Assyria rule over them? Because they refuse to repent. Swords will flash in their cities.

Will destroy the bars of their gates. And put an end to their plans. My people are determined to turn from me. Even if they call to the Most High.

He will by no means exalt them. How can I give you up Ephraim? How can I hand you over Israel? How can I treat you like Adma?

How can I make you like Zeboim? My heart is changed within me. All my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger.

Nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God and not man. The Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath.

[ 12 : 44 ] They will follow the Lord. He will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west. They will come trembling like birds from Egypt.

Like doves from Assyria. I will settle them in their homes. Declares the Lord. Amen. Now we'll bow our heads once more.

For a time of prayer. Lord, we thank you that we come to you as a loving Father in heaven.

We thank you that we come to you as one who invites us to pray to you. To bring our own needs and concerns and the needs and burdens of others to you.

We thank you for your power. And we thank you for your love. And that you make those available for your children.

[ 13 : 50 ] Lord, we think today of the many among us and in our families and around the nation who will be left hurt and disappointed because of the changes to restrictions and what that will mean for family gatherings.

Lord, we pray that you would provide comfort. We pray that you would keep your people from responding in ways that would lead us into sin.

Keep us from anger and bitterness. Lord, give us soft hearts that will hear your words even as we have to wrestle with disappointments in a whole range of levels.

Lord, we thank you that we have been called and we have the opportunity to pray for those who are in responsibility over us, who have decisions to make.

Because we recognize the burden that they have been carrying and have carried for so many months. We ask that you would give them rest.

[ 15 : 11 ] We ask that you would give them humility to bow their knee before you, to recognize their own limits and to trust in you and your wisdom.

Lord, we pray that you would uphold our government. That you would also be with those who are still on the front line in the battle against the pandemic.

Lord, we pray again for our NHS staff. Some who have been working relentlessly for so many months and face with fear the prospect of this coming winter.

Lord, we pray mercy. Lord, we pray for our schools with all the changes that are being made. We ask that you would be with teachers and with headteachers and give them wisdom as to how to carry out their tasks and to enable education to continue in a safe way with the various new restrictions and protocols in place.

Lord, we see our public servants spending themselves time and again, and we are thankful for them and we pray that you might grant to them rest.

[ 16 : 35 ] We pray that in their need they might turn to you. Lord, we pray for ourselves as a nation, that you might use this time as a spiritual wake-up call for us.

Lord, we pray for us. Lord, we pray for us. That seeing our own frailty, seeing all that we would ordinarily place our hopes in, proving so ineffective in maintaining our life and our hope, that there would be many men and women and boys and girls turning to put their trust in the Lord Jesus, confessing their sin and trusting in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

We thank you that you are able to bring good out of the most dark of situations, and we pray that we would see that again.

Lord, we pray for the church in the UK, as the vast majority of churches will find themselves again having to cope with being largely online.

We think of Christians who feel really isolated, who haven't been able to worship publicly, who miss Christian fellowship. Lord, we ask that by your Spirit, you would sustain them in word and prayer.

[ 17 : 56 ] Help us as a church to be aware of our members and to think about those who may be finding this time particularly difficult.

Lord, we pray that this would be a time where you would remind us of what is truly important, that we would rally around the good news of the gospel, that our hope would be in the Lord Jesus, that you would enable us to be salt and light in a hurting and confused world.

Father, we thank you for the opportunities that we have to bring a little bit of light and hope. We again thank you for the chance to partner with Friends International, to care for international students far from home and family.

We pray that as they received those expressions of kindness and care, that you would cause them to think on why strangers would do that.

We ask that it might open doors where people are willing to explore the Christian faith, that it might remove barriers to the gospel, that we might hear in coming days of students coming to read their Bible, attending church services, of coming to faith because of these simple acts.

[ 19 : 28 ] Lord, we pray for our city today. Thank you for every church today that will be communicating the good news of Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Lord, we, in our mind's eye, look around the communities that we come from. We think about the area around our church and we see massive needs facing people, mentally and emotionally, economically.

Lord, above all, help us to see spiritual needs and to pray and to work so that your name would be known, that you would be praised, that we would see revival and renewal happening in these days. Lord, again, as we come to consider your word together, we pray that you would use it in our lives. Help us to see more of Jesus, we pray.

Amen. Now, let's turn together to Matthew chapter 2. Matthew chapter 2.

[ 20 : 42 ] Matthew chapter 2. And we're going to be reading from verse 13. Matthew chapter 2 at verse 13 to the end of the chapter.

And again, let's hear God's word together. Matthew chapter 3. Matthew chapter 3. When they'd gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt.

Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet. Out of Egypt I called my son. When Herod realized that he'd been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious.

And he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he'd learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled.

[ 21 : 52 ] A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping in great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more.

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. For those who are trying to take the child's life are dead.

So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.

Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets.

He will be called a Nazarene. Amen. So we're thinking today about Jesus, the Son of God. But we're thinking too about the hidden journeys of Christmas.

[ 22 : 52 ] Now I know some of us are facing the sadness and the disappointment of journeys that we can't take. Restrictions to our gatherings.

Not being able to see parts of our family. And that means a lot to us because that's a huge part of our Christmas. We've also been seeing, haven't we, that as we've thought about how Matthew and Luke indeed present the story of the coming of Jesus into the world, it's full of the theme of journeys.

Each journey teaching us more about Jesus. For example, we have Mary going to visit Elizabeth. And when John the Baptist still in the womb hears Jesus' arrival, he jumps for joy.

And Elizabeth declares that Jesus is her Lord, though he is still not born. Or we think about the shepherds traveling to Bethlehem, having heard the message and the song of the angels.

Because they want to go and meet the Savior, God's Messiah, the one who will bring peace to all who know the favor of God.

[ 24 : 03 ] Or we think of the wise men traveling from the east. Because it has been revealed to them that God's king has come. This global king. And they want to worship.

So journey is everywhere in the story of the coming of Jesus. But these journeys, the ones that we've just read, they're not the ones that typically feature in our nativity stories.

They are, in a sense, the hidden journeys of Christmas. But they're important. We have Herod on his journey, marching to destroy the child Jesus.

We have the family of Jesus on a journey, fleeing from Herod into Egypt. And in those journeys, we also have this little gift from God to us.

This reminder of who Jesus is in verse 15, where we read, And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, Out of Egypt I called my son.

[ 25 : 13 ] And so we're going to see together what it means that Jesus is the son of God. See what Matthew reveals about that. But before we do that, we need to recognize Jesus as God's protected son here, And the significance of that.

Again, hidden Christmas, not the parts that we typically read at our carol services, Don't typically make our nativity stories.

We speak of Jesus being a light in the darkness, And here we see some of that darkness. Now we see the darkness of Herod's furious rage.

We see his intent on murder. We see that battle that rages between good and evil, That was there from the moment that the serpent came to tempt Adam and Eve in the garden.

Here we see an attempt to destroy the son of God. And we see murder in Bethlehem.

[ 26 : 22 ] And I think it's important for us to recognize that what drives Herod Are some of the same impulses we find in our own hearts. Tim Keller says there's a little King Herod in all of our hearts.

We want to resist his claims. Jesus comes demanding our complete allegiance and loyalty. And instantly there is resistance. There are pockets of resistance.

And it exposes us to our own hearts, Even as we see the darkness of Herod. We see darkness too in the fact that here is the infant Jesus, And he becomes one of the displaced people.

He becomes, as it were, a child refugee. I was reading this week in my prayer notes about displaced children, Christian children in Iraq.

And they were having a worship service for Christmas. And the pastor was asking them what their wishes were for Christmas. And some wished that they could go home.

[ 27 : 25 ] Some wished for an end to terrorism. And some wished they would have the peace that they know other children have, But they've never seen.

It's heartbreaking to think of. But the reality is Jesus knows by experience. And Jesus, our Lord, sympathizes in the pain and the darkness That people like those kids experience.

But in that darkness, we also see God's hand. We see God acting to protect his son. And so verse 13, where we read, When they'd gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph, Get up, take the child and his mother, and escape to Egypt.

So God sends the angel who will bring the child Jesus out of Israel to Egypt. And then in verse 20, verse 19, After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, And said, Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel.

So God will bring his son back to Israel. Again, these journeys are significant. We're being reminded that from his infancy, Jesus has come to be our suffering servant.

[ 28 : 43 ] We're being reminded that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Ultimately, to die at Calvary. From eternity, God's plan has been established.

That Jesus would be sent to take our place to bear our sin. That by looking to him, we might have eternal life. And the good news that we're reminded of here Is that no one and nothing can stop God's plan of salvation from being effective.

Herod tries. We read the Gospels. The devil tries. We see Judas conspiring. We see soldiers and officials conspiring. But nothing stops God's plan of salvation.

Jesus is protected so that God's Son will, In the fullness of God's timing, Redeem his people from their sin. Jesus, God's Son, will take the place and the punishment of his people on the cross.

And nothing is going to stop that. Jesus will be involved in that great exchange where he will take my sin and clothe me in his righteousness.

[ 29 : 55 ] Jesus, God's Son, will show the full extent of God's love to the world. And that while we were sinners, Christ would come to die for us. Jesus, God's Son, will save all who will look to him in faith.

He will reconcile and adopt his people. Because God is making sure that that journey to the cross is going to take place.

Because he sent his Son to save his people. So these journeys fit into the storyline of the life of Jesus.

They're part of his journey to the cross. So Jesus is a protected son. But we're also told in verse 15 that Jesus is God's true son.

And that's the bit where Matthew quotes from Hosea. And just as a wee sidebar, it's interesting to see how Matthew reads the Old Testament.

[ 30 : 58 ] So remember, Matthew is writing his gospel after Jesus has lived and died and risen and ascended to heaven. And Matthew is writing after that Emmaus road principle has been established.

So remember that first Easter, Jesus walking with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. And he explained that all of the Old Testament was speaking about him. And so the disciples understand this.

So now they're reading the Old Testament and they're looking to see how what's promised there is fulfilled in Jesus. So Matthew can look at Hosea, Hosea chapter 11, verse 1, which is focusing on the journeys of Israel, which is thinking about exodus and exile and promised return and rest. And he can say, it's about Jesus. He applies it straight to Jesus. He is true Israel. He is the true son of God. And it's really important for us when we read the Old Testament, that we too should be looking for those pointers to the Lord Jesus in the stories, in the characters that we meet to see those Jesus connections, those gospel connections.

But it's also important for us to recognize here is Matthew presenting Jesus to us as true Israel, true son of God, to show that Jesus will succeed where Israel has failed.

[ 32 : 23 ] Jesus will accomplish what Israel was intended to. So maybe if you've got your Bible, you can turn back with me to the book of Hosea, because we need to look at that a little together.

This isn't the first place where Israel is called God's son. You find that language in the book of Exodus. So, for example, God speaking to Pharaoh through Moses, Israel is my firstborn son. Let my son go that he may worship me. So the nation of Israel pictured as God's son, God's son who should be set free to worship. And that's the language that Hosea uses.

So Hosea 11, the message that we find here is the story of three different journeys of God's people. So the first journey, and they all connect with Egypt, which is important for Matthew 2.

Hosea 11, verse 1. When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. There Hosea is calling to mind the story of the Exodus.

[ 33 : 38 ] God sending Moses to save his people that they might become the worshiping people of God, the nation that God had chosen. But then Hosea goes on that though he loved his people, they chose to resist his love.

Rather than worshiping the true God, they turned to idols. God was a father to them, but they were like prodigal sons. With the result that another journey was coming.

Hosea gives a warning in verse 5 from God. Will they not return to Egypt because they refused to repent?

Judgment in the form of exile, being sent away from the promised land, would come. And yet, that wasn't the end of the story.

Though they were sinful, disobedient, rebellious, God promises mercy and steadfast love. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over?

[ 34 : 47 ] All my compassion is aroused. And then in verse 10 and 11, we see what God does. God calls effectively and his people come.

Verse 10, they will follow the Lord. He will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west. They will come trembling like birds from Egypt.

And I will settle them in their homes. His people will follow. They will return from exile to enjoy life with him once more.

Matthew intends us to think about that chapter as we read the quotation there in verse 15. So the question is, what do those journeys, what does that chapter have to do with the story of Jesus and the journeys of Jesus that are in view in Matthew chapter 2?

Well, surely what Matthew is trying to do is to say to us that Jesus, as God's true son, will lead a new exodus. So Moses was sent to set the people free from political slavery, but also spiritual slavery, so that they might know and worship the one true God and live with him.

[ 36 : 09 ] Jesus has come to set his people free from slavery to sin leading to death, setting us free to enjoy life with God.

Jesus comes on that new exodus. And Matthew also wants us to recognize Jesus as God's true son. He will restore and he will reconcile.

The promise there at the end of Hosea 11, that as people look to him in faith, as we see the glory of Jesus, that's where the power comes to turn from idols to the true God.

Instead of being content with false worship, to want to worship the true and living God as we see his glory in Jesus. Jesus comes on that restoring work.

And that work will take place because of the journeys of Jesus. Because of that great journey Jesus made in coming, leaving the glory of heaven to come to the earth, to become one of us in order to die for us.

[ 37 : 20 ] That's the great journey that gives us hope. How can we enjoy friendship with God?

How can we see the glory of God? How can we live under the rule of God and know his blessing as true Israel was supposed to, but never managed? As we are in Christ, as we're trusting in Jesus, as we become children of God by faith in him, then those gifts, those blessings are ours.

Let's apply this to our own lives and experience. Because here we see Jesus, God's son, and we see his journeys, and he makes us think about the journey of salvation.

Let's think about Jesus, God's son, and our own journey of faith. We've been thinking here about hidden journeys, about the hidden side of Christmas.

But each one of us, we need to be so careful that we don't let the truth, the wonderful truth, that Jesus has come as the son of God to be hidden in our lives, to be hidden from view for whatever reason.

[ 38 : 43 ] We all need this. Today, as much as ever, we need this. We need Jesus as son of God, and we need to worship him.

So if you're here and you're not a Christian, if you're listening online and you're not a Christian, you need to see Jesus, the son of God, as the perfect savior for sinners, to recognize that you cannot save yourself, that there is no other way to God other than through what Jesus has done.

look to Jesus, the son of God, who was punished and who was abandoned at the cross, so that all who repent and believe will be saved.

That you would look to him and be saved. What about if you're here today and you feel as a Christian you're drifting, distracted, perhaps sensing disobedience?

Maybe pandemic has not been good for you spiritually. Look to Jesus. What's going to change your heart is recognizing his heart for you.

[ 40 : 12 ] Recognize the depth of his love. Look at his suffering, saving love. Look at his commitment to make you a child of God.

To recharge your own love for God, you need to see that God first loved you and sent his son Jesus to be the propitiation for your sin.

To be the one who in his own body will take on himself the holy, just anger of God for sins that we have committed, so that in Jesus, trusting in him, we may never be condemned and only know God's love.

Look to Jesus and recognize there's restoring grace for us if we find that we've been drifting or distracted. What about if you're here today and you're suffering?

May you feel you're really hurting as a Christian? This season has been hard. Again, look to Jesus. Look to Jesus as Emmanuel.

[ 41 : 20 ] He has come to be God with us. Come to be that suffering servant from infancy all the way to the cross. And to recognize that Jesus is still our mediator.

He is still the one who prays for us, who pleads our cause. He is both a sympathetic high priest and the one who promises always to be with his people.

Run to him. Make him your rock and your refuge in your suffering and in your tears. What about if you're a struggling or a doubting Christian today?

What about if this pandemic has really rocked your faith? What if you're beginning to question in ways that you maybe never did before? Again, fix your eyes on Jesus.

What you need to see is that his life, his death, his resurrection are your hope. Go to the gospel. See the loving commitment of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to save you and to keep you.

[ 42 : 34 ] As Robert Murray McShane wisely said, for every one look at yourself, take ten looks at Jesus. We need to see him and see him and see him again, to see his saving love.

Every child of God, however we find ourselves today, whether we're here, whether we're at home, we need to worship Jesus as the Son of God to recognize the journeys he makes are for you and for me.

Here we saw Jesus being protected protected from King Herod's unrighteous anger. But skip ahead to the cross and what we see there is that Jesus is not spared from the holy, righteous anger of God as he stood in the place of sinners, taking our place and punishment so that looking to him, we might know forgiveness and eternal life and peace with God.

So as we find ourselves perhaps wrestling with a whole host of feelings about cancel journeys, about missed gatherings, loneliness and fear and frustration, we must, we must fix our eyes on Jesus.

We must settle our attention on him to have our hope in Jesus and his journeys to save us, to remember him exchanging the glory of heaven to become our Emmanuel, to be the God who saves us at Calvary, to remember that Jesus left the tomb and returned to glory and is now ruling over us and is now interceding for us.

[ 44 : 32 ] And we wait for that last journey. We wait for his return. We wait for his return as judge and also the one who will make everything new. That we would remember the final goal of our faith, the final goal in our journey of faith is that we would see Jesus, that we would be with our God and our Savior forever.

We need to fix our hope on him today. Let's pray together.