

Carols by Candlelight

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Preacher: Phil Martin

[0 : 00] Our first reading today is from Micah chapter 5 verses 1 to 5. Now master your troops, O daughter of troops.

Siege is laid against us. With a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek. But you, O Bethlehem, Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me.

One who is to be ruler in Israel. His coming forth is from old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth, the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure.

For now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace. Our second reading is from Matthew 1 verses 18 to 25.

[1 : 17] Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrayed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

And her husband Joseph, being a just and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

He took his wife, but he knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus. The third reading is from Matthew 2, verses 1 to 12.

[2 : 40] Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

For we saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, in Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, and you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

For from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly, and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.

And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word that I too may come and worship him.

[4 : 00] After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.

Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

The fourth reading is from John's Gospel, at the very first chapter. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning, with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

[5 : 16] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.

He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son, from the father, full of grace and truth.

But I don't want to talk to us about the Christmas tingle, just in the next few minutes. The Christmas tingle, it's here so briefly, isn't it?

[6 : 33] And then gone all too soon, definitely gone by January. I don't want to talk to us about the Christmas tingle. I want to talk to us instead about the hope, the hope that is at the heart of the Christmas message, hope for this life and for eternity.

The sentence I want us to focus on is, in these little booklets that you've got, these Matthew's Gospels, they're the eyewitness, one of the four eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life.

They're yours to take away. We'd love you to take them away and read them. If you can, if your eyesight is still up to it, it's page four, verse 23, although it's also on the screens.

Let me read it. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Now I'm going to assume we've got people here from the whole spectrum of beliefs, all faiths and none. Some of us are probably thinking, do you know what?

[7 : 42] It's all made up. So what's the point? Others of us might be intrigued looking at that sentence, wondering what it means. Maybe you've never actually opened one of these accounts of Jesus' life.

I don't know. There was a recent article in the Times, I don't know if you saw it, that announced that Britain has entered the first atheist age as non-belief in God has surged, and for the first time in history, atheists slash agnostics outnumber believers in God, apparently.

What was interesting was the response of James Marriott a couple of days later, who also writes for the Times and also an atheist. And he said, very honestly, he said this, he confessed to some embarrassment about the dawning of the first atheist age.

Instead of a second enlightenment, we have a plague of secular fools. His words, not mine. I think referring to the bewildering model of opinion online.

He bemoans the age of unreason, not the age of reason. Instead of a new liberated humanity, we have the anxious generation.

[8 : 57] Instead of a sense of satisfaction with this new secular regime, we have, and this is anecdotal, but we have churches reporting a kind of spiritual hunger across all of London at the moment, especially among young people who are coming into churches and tearing up the atheist secular narrative that they've been taught and saying, it doesn't work.

I'm anxious all the time. There must be something more. We're going to consider one very simple question in the next ten minutes. Who is Jesus?

And this verse that we've got in front of us is the claim that stands at the heart of Christianity, which is that Jesus Christ was and is God, our creator, come down to earth.

That's what those words mean. God with us. Of course, if that is true, then it changes everything. It changes everything.

There is nothing it doesn't change about your life and about mine, about the present and about the future. Three brief observations on this sentence, okay?

[10 : 16] Who is Jesus? He's God with us as promised. He's God with us proven and he's God with us to die for us. Firstly, he's God with us promised.

promised. Many people think that Christianity is a made-up religion. These followers who wrote these things down, the followers of Jesus, they sat down one day and said, hey, do you want to

make up a religion?

And they embellished the life of an impressive man or they just fabricated their accounts completely. But we must reckon with this fact that God had said many years in advance that he would come and be born as a baby.

Can you see that in verse 22? Just look at verse 22. All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. Verse 23 is a quote and it's a quote from a prophecy from one of the Jewish prophets, Isaiah, who was writing and speaking in 700 BC, 700 years before the birth of Christ. This prophecy said, can you see it there? It said that there would be a miraculous birth a virgin would conceive. And the appropriate name for this baby would be Immanuel in Hebrew, which means literally God with us.

[11 : 49] And so that this baby would be God come down to earth. That is what the prophecy said 700 years before Christ was born.

Now if we scan history, I do not think that we have any candidates for people who can have a reasonable claim to being God with us. Do you? except there is one, only one, there is one. One by who the end of his life, his Jewish friends were prepared to worship as God. Now may I ask you one question? Were you aware of this promise?

Jesus does not come out of the blue. He comes in fulfilment of a promise that there would be a virgin birth and that the baby would be God with us.

Jesus is God with us as promised. Secondly, Jesus is God with us proven. Now if all we had was this account of the virgin birth that we had read earlier, if that was all we had to persuade us that God had in fact come to earth, then I suggest that we could be forgiven for saying thank you very much but that'll be all.

[13 : 16] In fact, if that was all there was to Jesus, an account of a virgin birth, then I suggest that Christmas would not exist. We wouldn't be here today.

But that is not all we have. We're not asked to believe that Jesus is God solely on the basis of the virgin birth, but on the basis of his whole life. what did he grow up to do?

He grew up to do the things that only God could do. That's the point of his miracles. Healing whole towns with a word. Walking on water, raising the dead, calming the storm.

God things. He did God things to prove his identity. Resurrection from the dead. God again, many people think that faith in Jesus is a matter of ignoring the evidence and taking a blind leap into the dark.

That to become a Christian would be to indulge in wishful thinking. It's for those who perhaps can't bear to stare into the abyss, who don't have the courage to face nothingness.

[14 : 27] Again, that is not Christianity. I for one could not be a Christian if it were a blind leap into the dark with no evidence. Think of his life.

Think of the things he did. Can I tell you about MIT Professor Rosalind Pickard? She's a brilliant scientist over in America. She used to be an atheist, has recently become a Christian.

She says this. She says the scientific method is not the only way to ascertain truth. And it is limited. When people claim that science can tell you all truth, there's a name for that, and that's scientism.

She also says this, which I love. She says this, speaking of reading the Bible, Rosalind Pickard, when you encounter the truth, there's something inside you that sings.

things. If you take this account away and read it with an open mind, you will find historical eyewitness evidence recorded by people who had no ulterior motive.

[15 : 39] You might be thinking, oh, perhaps they knew about the promise and then made it up in light of that. Well, these guys were hated by their Jewish culture at the time, their lives didn't improve, and many died gruesome deaths, insisting that Jesus was God with us.

Why would they do that if they did not at least think they were telling the truth? Science can tell us some things, but not everything.

Roger Bacon is known to be the founding father of modern science, and he said this, he said, God has two books, the book of nature and the book of his word.

We can read the book of nature and find some truth about ourselves and about our universe, but we find the most important truth in his word, in which there is a different kind of evidence, the evidence of history.

So, guys, there is overwhelming evidence for who Jesus is with those with eyes to see it. Jesus is God with us as promised and proven.

[16 : 56] Can I say this? If you want to know if God exists, look at Jesus. You want to know what he's like, look at Jesus.

That's the claim at the heart of Christianity. Thirdly, Jesus is God with us to die. Why did God become a man?

The everlasting God, the everlasting God who cannot die, took human form so that he could die. God is breathtaking. And it should leave us asking the question why. Well, I hope you take this away and read it and find out.

You will see where it goes. God is not who we think he is. He did not come to bring religious rules to lay on our already breaking shoulders.

[18 : 07] God came to lift off our burdens. The burden of sin, the burden of death, and ultimately the burden of suffering. Sin is that rejection of God that we've all done with our lives.

It is much more serious than we realise. But God in Christ came down to become a human so that he might die in our place.

he took the punishment that our sin deserved in full on the cross. Why did he do that?

So that we might be forgiven forever and come back into relationship with God as his forgiven children. Later in this account, the night before he died, Jesus said these words.

He said, this is my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. As he hung on the cross, he said these words, it is finished, it is accomplished, the forgiveness of sins.

[19 : 20] Did Jesus come to weary us with religion? So many people think that. no, he came not to give us religion, but relationship, not to give us religious rules, but reconciliation with God, not religion, but rest in his arms forever.

We may not have loved him, but believe it or not, God loves us, he loves you, and he loves me. I don't know if you read the news a lot, I used to read it more than I do.

It's pretty miserable most of the time, never changes. We live in a world so lacking in hope, don't we? Wherever we look, hopelessness.

Don't you feel that sometimes? But into a world without hope, God, God, who made you and me, has come down to bring us hope, now and forever.

Christ, our hope in life and death. Or as the carol puts it, born that man no more may die. Let me just finish with this, Rosalind Cameron's story.

[20 : 44] Rosalind Cameron, speaking as a former atheist, says this, she says, I had reached the end of my cleverness, having dabbled in all kinds of Eastern and New Age philosophies, I was stuck, lost, and confused.

I finally proceeded to read the Bible from cover to cover, and I knew every word of it was true. It changed me profoundly and set me on a journey where I was healed in every way.

Well, that might be you this Christmas. There's no reason why it shouldn't be. there is a response. There must be a response. To repent.

To repent is not a religious word, but a relational word. It does not mean come to a religion, but it means to come to a person, to God, who loves you, to turn away from our lives of ignoring him and come back to him forever.

Who is Jesus? God with us as promise. God with us proven, think of his life. God with us to die for us that we might be with him forever.

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