# The First Noel

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[0:00] Well, let's pray. Ask God to help us. Father, thank you for your word. We thank you for the gift of being our compass, the one who leads us to Jesus. Thank you that we can build our lives around Jesus. We pray that you will speak to us through your word. In Jesus' name, amen. Well, I want to wish you a very happy epiphany today.

And epiphany is that big word. It's the big word that means the revelation of Jesus to the Gentiles, in fact, to the whole world. And I have about 12 minutes to talk about epiphany and these wise men. But I want to say that epiphany is relevant to all of you because Jesus has revealed himself to all of you if you are a follower of Jesus. And he's done it in many different ways, through your parents, through your friends, through a preacher you may have heard, through your own reading of the Bible on its own. I have a friend who became a Christian not knowing a thing about Jesus just by opening the Bible and a light came on for him. But God has brought you each on a different route, some very long, to find Jesus as your King and your Lord. The wise men in today's reading are marvelous figures because they are the first ones to see the significance of Jesus. They're the first ones in the world outside Israel to know about this good news. And we don't exactly know how many there were, as I said. We do know they came from the east, which probably means Persia, which we have several members of our congregation who are from there. But that would have been at least 400 miles. And it's probably Babylon was about 900 miles away by the trade routes.
And they were men who represented their country in some way as emissaries because they had an audience with King Herod we saw. And they had access to great wealth as well. We also know that they were called magi or wise men. And what that meant was they were from a cast of priests and teachers who interpreted dreams. And they studied the stars to try to get an inside knowledge of world affairs.
It was the CNN of Persia in that way. But you see, astrology, which is what they were looking at, and magic are strictly forbidden in both the Old and New Testaments. And so you have here guys who are spiritually far away from Jesus Christ and physically far away from Jesus Christ.
[2:52] Yet God in His power chooses to work in these very unlikely people. He gives them news about Jesus in their study. And He guides them by a star, which they had been idolizing by God's...and they also were led by God's Word very specifically to Jesus. And I think this is an encouragement for us. God works very powerfully in people in your life who seem very far away from God, spiritually and physically.

He is powerful to work. In fact, that is what His mission in this world is. And we'll be praying for people like this by name in our prayer gathering that we'll have, our quarterly prayer gathering on January 21st. But the thing that's remarkable about these men is they are so taken by Jesus that they orient their life around Him, just like a compass. It was a long journey that they took, at least two weeks as they are on horseback and camel. But they are convinced that Jesus is worth it. You see that joy at the end of the passage, which I'll talk about in a minute. But when they got to Jerusalem in verse 3, there's a very different reaction. Because, of course, verse 3 says that Herod and all Jerusalem were troubled. They were very upset with the news of Jesus' birth. And Herod summons these pastors and theologians to find out what the Bible says about where this baby is going to be born. And of course, they tell him that the Bible quite clearly says it is in Bethlehem where the Messiah will be born. He will rule his people as a shepherd. He will care for them, protect them, and guide them into a right relationship with God. Well, you'd think this is good news. But Herod is deeply threatened. And the learned scholars of the Bible are completely apathetic. They don't lift a finger to go try to find him, to find Jesus. They just go out of the picture. And in 2019, these are two very common reactions to the good news of Jesus. There is a feeling of threat. God will change me. I will have to come under his rule. There's also an apathy that can come very, very

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easily. But as we come into the new year of 2019, this passage calls us to respond to the good news of Jesus in the same way that these wise men did, what they did was they treasured Jesus. They oriented their life around him. And they had God as their guide as this happened. And I want to briefly look at three ways that these wise men teach us to treasure Jesus. They do it through joy. They do it through humility. And they do it through their generosity. So they took joy in Jesus. You know, after Herod deviously sends them to Israel as their, or to Bethlehem as their undercover agents in a sense, unwitting, look at verses 9 and 10.

The wise men see the star stop over the house where Jesus was, and they are absolutely overwhelmed with joy, to know that they are close, that at last they found him. It's difficult in English to translate the extravagance of the joy that the original language has here. Verse 10 does it as best as it can. They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. It's joy upon joy upon joy. And this is the kind of joy that a new believer has. And maybe you can remember that, or you have people in your lives who have recently become Christians. It comes when you discover the powerful love and grace and forgiveness of Jesus and His glory for the first time. It's the joy of moving from no hope to having this living hope that surrounds you, that's before you and behind you, for yourself, for eternal life with God. Hope for the world. When you first experience Jesus' assurance that you are His child forever, there is a strong, strong joy.

And that joy can diminish over the years as you are a Christian. But thanks be to God that He renews a kind of long-term, powerful, solid joy in your life through God's Word. This is one of the gifts of reading God's Word. And a new year is a great time to renew your commitment to read the Bible. As you read the Bible, cultivate the joy of Jesus in your life as you read. So you look for Jesus and His goodness.

Look for His beauty, His glory, His goodness, and rejoice in what you see revealed about Him. And thank God for who He is for you. You know, God's Word is a living Word. The purpose is not to give us knowledge.

[8:10] It is to bring us into relationship with God by knowing Jesus Christ in the Old Testament and the New Testament. How is He speaking to you in His Word? That is the question as you're reading this year.

Look for Him to guide you. Look for Him to teach you. And rejoice that this Jesus is your living King. Now, the second thing that the wise men did was they had a humility before Jesus, not just a joy in Him. Look at verse 11. It's an amazing sight. It says, going into the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and those wise men fell down and they worshiped Him. And that's what I talked to the children about. They literally lay on the floor on this poor, simple surroundings, this house that they were in. And they lie down on the rustic floor before Jesus. They are seeing that this poor baby is priceless, that He is worthy of all honor, glory, and praise. These guys come from places of great wealth and great status. And yet they lie down before this baby Jesus, this humble King. And what they were doing there was they were delighting in His glory and His majesty. They were treasuring Him by gladly giving of themselves to this baby. And I think this is an example for us. The central way of treasuring

Jesus is by our generosity, by open-hearted generosity. It means a warm hospitality. It means inviting others in your life into your life with Christ. It involves giving your money for the work of Jesus in the world, of asking Him how you can serve Him. It involves praying for other people. There is a gift to this kind of humility. You get a sense in this passage of a wonderful open-hearted sincerity that's there. Now, I want to say that finally, as we enter this new year and think about humility, can you lay down your life before Jesus? What are the parts of your life as you enter 2019 that really need His rule? What is the thing that is humbling for us? What is the hard thing for us to submit ourselves to and this King in our lives? That is the question of humility. But it's a question that we can answer because the King that we submit to is the one who lays down His life for us.

And then finally, I want to conclude by saying that the wise men were deeply generous towards Jesus. Look at verse 11. It says, Then opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

[11:13] And as we close this passage, here is the wisdom of the wise men. Because they cross deserts, they ride and walk for hundreds of miles, they meet with this tyrant Herod, and they give just for one reason, so that they can give Jesus their very, very best.

And in the end, this is what we are called to in this passage. Jesus is our shepherd king. How do we give Him our very best? I saw a lot of this happening this past month at St. John's during Advent

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and Christmas. Many of you were warmly inviting people you knew to gatherings where the gospel was shared. And you gave very generously of your finances. And I know this because we were able to meet budget this past year. What a gift from God. Thanks be to God. You prayed for those who don't know Jesus as well. You served in many practical ways in your singing, in your teaching, in your organizing, in your visiting, in your welcoming, and in your cooking. Lots of different practical ways you chose to serve God, giving Him your very, very best. And that is a wonderful way to treasure Jesus in this year to come. The giving of yourself is a reflection of Jesus Himself, who, though He was rich, became poor, so that by His poverty we might become rich. It is why our own generosity is such a powerful way to treasure Jesus. So this year of 2019, may we pray that God helps us, that He guides us to treasure Jesus in 2019. May you orient your life around Him as you rejoice in Him, as you humble yourself to Him, bringing all the parts of your life under His Lordship, and as you give to Him your very best. God grant you His Holy Spirit to be your compass and your comfort in this year to come. Amen.

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