

The First Noel

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[0 : 00] Well now this is the last in the series Christ in the Carols and it brings us to the first Noel and the three wise men and the second chapter of Matthew.

This is a brilliant chapter to start the year but the problem is it's so familiar to all of us it's easy to miss. In fact it's easy to miss in the gospel of Matthew the way he tells the story it's all wrong. It's all upside down from the way we would usually do things. It's the wrong way for a Messiah to come. So here are the first people who worship Jesus and they are not God's people. They're not from Israel. They are magicians from the east. They are court magicians like Pharaoh had in the days in Egypt. And as you read the current king of the people of God Herod he really wants to annihilate Jesus and when he can't annihilate him he becomes like Pharaoh and kills a bunch of Jewish children.

Chapter 2 follows hard on the heels of chapter 1. If you've got the Bible open look back at chapter 1. You can see in verse 21 the angel says he's going to save his people from their sins.

[1 : 28] And in verse 23 he's going to be called Emmanuel which means God with us. But as we go into chapter 2 the question is who's going to save baby Jesus? Herod's after him with all his soldiers.

It's all wrong. It's not just against our expectations. It's upside down. I want to show you how this works. So chapter 2 begins in this way. You with me so far?

Okay. 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 is born, king of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. In these first 12 verses we have the first three responders to the birth of Jesus. And the first responders are the three wise men.

However, they're not wise men. They're magi. That's what the word is. They're, as I said, the court magicians. They're astrologers.

[2 : 34] They're not kings. So when we sing we three kings, it's not true, despite the song. We're not told where they come from. Here it says from the east.

The word literally means from the sunrise. We don't actually know where they come from. We're not told how many. There's not three. There might be 30. There might be, we don't know.

We don't know their names. We don't know what happens to them after the story. And there's not a camel in sight. So all the Christmas cards we send, meh, not so true.

And here's the thing. They're not Israelites. They're not kosher. Somehow God has brought them all the way to Jesus by using this very strange ancient Near Eastern GPS.

A moving supernatural star. It's impossible for a star to act in this way. And they've traveled a vast distance to this third-rate little tiny tinpot nation, which is occupied by Rome, looking for a baby who's going to be king of that little nation.

[3 : 42] Not a baby born in a famous family or a palace. Not a baby who's won any victories or has got an army of soldiers. But a little baby of a poor couple who's born to save his people from their sins.

And what did they say? They want to worship him. It's so unexpected that the first worshipers come way beyond the mainstream.

People you'd never expect to come to Jesus Christ. And it's a sign to us that the salvation that he brings is bigger than Israel. That he's come to be the savior of the world.

And it's very upsetting to King Herod. Here's the current king mentioned in verse 1. Herod gave himself a name which all his people had to call him.

Do you know what his name was? Herod the Great. You've got to watch that when someone... Although I think... I do think I could try that in the office.

[4 : 39] Herod... Herod... He was raised as a Jew. And you probably know this. When he took power, he gradually murdered all his opponents. Including his second of five wives.

And her mother. And three of his sons. Who he suspected might take over his throne a little early. He had... He's like a lot of people who have power and success.

He was insecure and paranoid. He had a personal guard of 2,000 soldiers. And he built massive fortresses all over Israel. As safe houses to run to.

His great concern was himself and his reputation. And as he lay dying in Jericho painfully. He gathered all the leading families of Jerusalem.

With their wives and children down to Jericho. And he gave orders to his guards. That if he dies. They should execute all these people. So that at least Israel will mourn fittingly.

[5 : 39] You'll be pleased to know the guards didn't go through with it. This happens just months before his death. The wise men from the rising of the sun glide into Jerusalem.

Spreading news about a supernatural star. And the birth of the legitimate king of Israel. That they want to worship. And in verse 3. His immediate and spontaneous reaction.

Is to be troubled. The word literally means shaking. He is deeply disturbed. If the wise men are right. He says to himself. This baby is the real king.

And I'm going to lose the one thing I've got. And that is my power. I have to play my cards carefully. It should not be too difficult to get rid of a child.

And so he gathers the chief priests and scribes together. If you look down at verse 4. It's very interesting. It's Herod. Who identifies Jesus as the child.

[6 : 41] And he asks them the question. The obvious question. Where is the child going to be born? And the scribes and the chief priests. Go straight to chapter and verse.

Verse 5. In Bethlehem they said. Haven't you read your Bible? For it is written by the prophet. And you O Bethlehem. In the land of Judah.

Are no means least among the rulers of Judah. For from you shall come a ruler. Who will shepherd my people Israel. It is a quote from the prophet Micah.

700 years before. And it's the turning point of the passage. Because once the word of God on Jesus has been heard. It cannot be unheard. Why is it so important?

What is the relevance of a quote from a book 700 years before. About the birth of Jesus. And it's relevant because it shows us. That God does not choose the way we choose.

[7 : 38] He doesn't act the way we do. God makes foolish the wisdom of this world. And I want you if you will. To put your hand in Matthew 2.

And turn back to Micah chapter 5 with me. It begins on page 778. So.

You can see from verse 1 of Micah 5. That the context is violence. War. Bloodshed. Judgment. Terrible distress.

Verse 2. Of Micah 5. But you. O Bethlehem Ephrathah. Who are too little to be among the clans of Judah.

From you shall come forth for me. Says God. One who is ruler in Israel. Whose coming forth is from of old. From ancient of days. Beyond time. Long.

[8 : 40] In other words. In verse 2. God turns toward this little tiny village. One of the. One of the word means the smallest. Least significant towns in Israel. In Bethlehem. And he says you. And it's emphatic in the Hebrew.

Yes. You. You. You. You. Bethlehem. You're so small. I even need to mention the area. Ephrathah. You're too little to be counted. The word means.

Weak. And inferior. And insignificant. Why am I going on about this? It's because God does not look at things the way we do.

The outward appearances. That's so. They're so concerned about. They're often deceiving. From this insignificant and irrelevant little town.

Shall come forth God's great king and ruler. Who's going to shepherd his people into the kingdom. The eternal kingdom. Verse 4. Skip a verse. And he.

[9 : 36] That is the new king. Shall stand and shepherd his flock. In the strength of God. He's going to have all the strength of God. And in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

The king will have the majesty of God. And they. That is his people. Shall dwell secure. For now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. Witness the magi coming.

And he shall be their peace. Now. Here's a question. Class. One other famous person in the Old Testament was born in Bethlehem.

King David. Thank you very much. Prize goes to the front row across here. Now. Now. Do you remember the story of how King David was chosen to be king?

God told the prophet. He had chosen a king. This is 300 years before Micah. He says to the prophet.

[10:36] I want you to go to Bethlehem. Where I've chosen my new king. And the prophet says. Are you sure? He does.

And God says. Yes. Go to the family of Jesse. And one of his sons will be king. So the prophet goes. Jesse has eight sons. The youngest son was so insignificant.

He wasn't even counted amongst the others. He was ginger haired. A little bit weedy. And the dad didn't even think it was worth him coming in.

So Jesse starts to bring out his boys one by one. The eldest boy is impressive. Tall. Good looking. A liar. He's the natural choice to be the king of Israel. And God says to the prophet.

No. Not this one. And up comes son number two. Three. Four. All the way down to son number seven. God says. No. No. No. And when they get to the end of seven sons.

[11:33] The prophet says to Jesse. Is that it? And Jesse says. There is one. He's just a teen. He's out doing his job. He's looking after the sheep. And God says. That's my one. That's my chosen.

Because God does not choose the things that we choose. What's impressive to you and me. Is not impressive to God. The things that we think are irrelevant. And sometimes foolish.

God treasures as precious. And that's the point. Go back to Matthew 2. That's the point of the quote. God. We're talking about a human baby here.

Now some of you are having babies. You know how vulnerable and fragile they are. This is a dependent, weak child. Born in a village.

Bethlehem. Which is the least significant in the Middle East. He's going to be the majestic shepherd. He's going to bring peace that passes all understanding. And his shepherding and his kingship is not going to be like conquering and killing others.

[12:34] He's going to die for others. He's going to carry them like a shepherd. Cradling them in his arm. And this is the turning point of the passage. I've been listening to a podcast called Caliphate.

And the first half is about a young man from Toronto. Who joins ISIS. He is Pakistani born. He's from a wealthy family.

Has a happy childhood. At the end of high school he goes off and joins ISIS. And it's horrifying to hear what he does when he joins ISIS. And he joins in with the violence.

And he kills people. And then he decides he's had enough and he comes out. And he's now back in Canada. And the Canadian government doesn't know what to do with him.

And what's most interesting is that he still believes the fundamental things that he believed when he went to be with ISIS. He said to the interviewer, I could have made money.

[13:33] I could have gone to university. I could have done the things that my parents wanted me to do. I could have been rich and comfortable. But he said, there's just more to life than this.

And so he was so attracted by this ideology of death that he went and joined ISIS. And I think, I just want to point out that we don't follow one with an ideology of death.

We follow one who has an ideology of life. His kingdom is not going to come by violence and taking the lives of others. But by giving his own life. He comes as a shepherd to care for lambs.

To cradle us. To feed for us. And provide for us. Well, that's verse 6. That's why the verse is there. And God's word makes everything clear.

He tells the truth to Herod. Herod is not used to hearing the truth. He has toadies around him. Yes men. And when he hears God's word about Jesus Christ, he has to make a choice.

[14:37] Either he acknowledges Jesus to be the promised shepherd of his people. But that is going to expose him as a power grasping bully. He cannot allow this Jesus to expose him.

And so he makes his deadly choice. And this word, the word of God from Micah, is very important to the Magi as well. You see, by itself, the star cannot lead the Magi to Jesus.

It's a complete miracle in the heavens. And it makes them ready to hear. But they need to hear the word of God. See, human wisdom cannot lead you to Jesus Christ.

It can give you a certain humility and a longing. And that you might know you need Christ. But before we come to Christ, we need to hear God speak.

That's how we come to worship him. And it must have been so weird for the Magi in Jerusalem. You know, we've traveled all this way. We know he's born.

[15:39] It's just a couple of clicks down, a couple of kilometers down the road. But there's not a person in Jerusalem who's lifting a finger to go and see him. The chief priests and the scribes, they all believe it's true.

They can quote the Bible verse, but none of them are going. And then they get a call for a secret meeting with Herod. And he pretends he wants to worship the baby as well. And then God takes over again.

And a star appears again. And in verse 11, they find the house. And they go into the house, verse 11, and they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him, the child. 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 another way.

Now, this is a great passage to start 2019. It's better than all our New Year's resolutions. Because Matthew skillfully tells us that there are three different responses, three different reactions to this upside down grace of God.

[16:52] Three different reactions to the coming of Jesus. Let me just go through them and offer them to you. Number one, Herod. Now, you're sitting there thinking, I'm not a Herod.

But all of us have a little bit of Herod in us. Herod is the one who thinks the rules don't apply to me. I'm so committed to my own reputation and security, I can't allow anyone close.

At least, let alone Jesus. The most searching thing about Herod is that he knows the truth about Jesus. He even believes the truth of Micah 5.

But he's so busy with his own plans and so concerned with his own reputation that he's not going to bow and worship. And here's the thing. It's not just the arrival of the Magi that alarm him.

It's the combination of the Magi with the word of God from Old Testament prophecy. And he will not worship. Because he can see that that is going to mean he can no longer decide what's right and wrong.

[17:55] That he's tried to play God and he's a false God. And he's going to have to account for everything he's done to this person, Jesus Christ. Deep down, I think he knows he's opposing God.

And here, in God's kindness, God brings the true king close to Herod for just a brief time. And when God brings the true king close to him, Herod has the choice of holding on to his lie or bowing to Jesus.

But instead, he tries to do what he can to eradicate the truth. And I think this is the first and most obvious way to reject the joy of God. It's to cling desperately to our own power and our own abilities and our own reputation.

As coming to Jesus threatens all our power and our pride. It threatens everything that puts me at the center of my life. But there's also the chief priests and the scribes, secondly.

Now, the chief priests are clergy, but the scribes are not. And their response is very revealing. They are completely orthodox and correct.

[19:06] They know their Bibles. They can quote chapter and verse. They even have a kind of a belief in the truth of the Bible. But they don't act. And they stand as a warning to us that knowing the truth of God is not the same thing as loving the truth of God.

Knowing the truth, even knowing the truth of Jesus Christ, makes no difference if it doesn't lead us to act and to worship. Seeing the truth about Jesus Christ is not the same thing as submitting to him as Christ.

They knew the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. They knew the Magi had been following a star, traveling great distances. But none of them got out of their seats and did it.

There's no record of any of them going. This is a deadly spiritual disease. It's called lethargy. And it's understandable partly. They were afraid of Herod.

You know, in verse 3 when it said, Herod was troubled and all Jerusalem with him. All Jerusalem was troubled because Herod was troubled. And it's one thing to be afraid of someone. It's another thing to put that person between you and God.

[20:16] And when it comes to the scriptures, they're so clear and they're so accurate and they're so correct, but they wouldn't take any action. They're afraid of standing out and being different.

They're afraid of acting on what God's word said.

Why? Well, I can only say I think they love their own personal comfort and position more than they love the salvation that Christ had come to bring.

They love the status quo and the opinion of others more than they love the fulfillment of prophecy. They loved fitting in more than having God with them in the person of Jesus Christ.

How strong this pressure is on us today. And how this is a uniquely evangelical sin to substitute knowledge for obedience, to substitute insight for worship.

Because if our knowing scripture doesn't lead to ongoing change, we completely miss the joy that comes in Jesus Christ. You can be completely familiar with this story. You can go up and down in Greek, but not go to Bethlehem and kneel in worship.

[21 : 20] It's so easy to trade genuine spiritual desire and love for that middle class affluent desire of lifestyle. To settle in for a life of being consumed and entertained and never really asking the deep questions.

Is this the good life I'm living? Is my busyness helping me to love others? Why are my ambitions so banal? Is this really the life I want to live?

What should I do about my lack of joy in Jesus? How can I listen to the spiritual hunda? What do I need to do to know and grow and learn from him and worship him?

What do I need to do to know and learn from him? But there is a third response, of course, and that is the Magi. And in verse 11, they worship Jesus.

It's lovely, that verse. They don't have all the answers. I don't know where they are theologically.

But Matthew explains what it means that they worship Jesus.

[22 : 22] They just give Jesus their best. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And there's a lovely self-forgetfulness in those three gifts. These gifts are not cool.

They're not even practical. When you think about it, frankincense is an oil which is used as a beautiful perfume. Myrrh is a resin which is expensive and used for a sweet, sweet fragrance. Gold is gold and that's useful. But I don't imagine Mary woke up that morning thinking, what I really need is some frankincense for the stable. But that's the point.

The point is not how expensive or useful the gifts are. The point is that they come out of the recognition from these guys that here in this baby is God's salvation and they offer him what they have.

Because that's true worship and faith. It's not having all the right answers. It's not doing all the right things. It's seeing all of God's good salvation in this baby, Jesus Christ, and giving him what you can.

[23 : 30] And that's going to be different for every one of us. Can I say one more thing, Bree? Okay. I've been reading Leviticus.

It's a great book. And in the first couple of chapters of the book of Leviticus, God explains the different offerings he wants his people to bring him.

The first is the offering of a full bull. The second is a sheep and a goat, then birds, then bread, then wheat. And all the offerings are of equal worth to God.

There's no difference between them in God's mind. If you can afford a bull, go for it. If you can afford some grains of wheat, go for it. But God says, if you have some grains of wheat, beat them out, make them into a bit of bread, so that at least I'll know I've got something of you in this offering. And the point of Leviticus is that it comes after Exodus, where God has already come down and is dwelling among them. So the offerings are not to win God's salvation or to bring him closer.

[24 : 40] The offerings are to demonstrate God is with us. And I think that's the same principle here in this passage. The gifts that the wise, that the magi offer to Jesus, they're not to make Jesus love them.

They're not to earn his salvation. But they're a sign that here is God with us in the flesh, in Jesus Christ the baby. Amen.