

A Shepherd King

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Date: 12 December 2021

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. And let me add my welcome. My name is Graham. I'm the pastor here at the church, and it's just so wonderful to see so many folks out with us. And how good was that to watch the Nativity? Love the wise men running around the stage. That was my personal highlight. But fantastic to celebrate the birth of Christ. It's just such an incredible season. I wonder what the first Christmas song this year was that you heard.

I was walking through, I think it was Cameron Toll the other day, and I heard on the sound system, whatever it was, I heard Mariah Carey. Is that how you say it? Carey? I don't know. Her song that she's been living off for years and years and years, and I dread to think the royalties that she makes every time we hear and play that song. Her song, All I Want for Christmas Is You. I wonder what you first heard. Little known fact about Mariah Carey, which I'm sure will massively appeal to those of you here today like me who are really into organizing, right? Planning is your thing. How about this? In 2010, Mariah Carey gave birth to twins. Gave birth to twins, and here's what appealed to my sense of planning. Four things, okay? She gave birth at nine o'clock on a Monday morning, I think. She gave birth on her wedding anniversary, which I think was pretty cool. Number three, she instructed the midwives to play the music from her 1995 live tour in the background as the birth was going on, and she instructed them four to deliver the babies at the precise moment when her favorite track came on, at the end of the track when the crowd applauded her so that her babies would come into the world with applause.

And the thing about Mariah Carey is that that happened exactly how she planned it. Now, of course, there's give and take. You can't plan everything, can you? But for her, that's exactly how it happened.

How about that for a planned birth? Does that appeal to your sense of organization? And on the dot, it does to me. And I wonder if you think about the original Christmas story, and you think to yourself, I really wish that Mariah Carey was there back in the first century to give Mary and Joseph a few tips as how to plan a birth. Because we look at this story, do we not? And we see, in contrast, a birth that is ruled by absolute chaos, that is ruled by randomness. What is going on? I'll give you two reasons why I think for us this looks chaotic. Okay, here's the first one. Talk about bad timing.

[2 : 43] Because there is a king on the throne. He's ruling over that region where Jerusalem is. And he's not just any king. He's King Herod, the guy who's got a track record of paranoia, of outbursts, of anger, of murder at the slightest with any rival to his throne. So talk about a bad time for a king to be born.

And talk about a bad place. I mean, Mary and Joseph aren't from Bethlehem. They are from Nazareth. And so this inconvenient census has meant that they have had to travel all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a huge journey at the best of times, let alone with a heavily pregnant Mary who's about to give birth imminently. So they are not enjoying the comforts of a home birth. If it's to travel a huge way for Jesus to be born. And so we look at that and we think to ourselves, surely that is utter chaos.

Utter chaos. And yet standing behind this birth is a God who is in control of every single detail. And he's not just like a grand master chess player who's a few moves ahead of his opponent. Actually, the Bible would say this God knows the end from the beginning. And what a comfort today as we live at a time when the future feels so fearfully uncertain. And I wonder if you've come in here today fearful about what the next days and weeks and months might hold. Does it not feel that as a society that we're in this kind of pandemic game of snakes and ladders? And we were so making our way up that board, rolling high numbers for so long, and perhaps we've just hit the snake and we've started to slide down. And the thing is, we've got no idea how big the snake is. Well, this is a loving invitation to come and know the God who's in control of all things. And so here is a birth that's

happened precisely and profoundly in the right place at the right time, according to the good eternal purposes of the God of the Bible. What we've been doing as a church family in the run up to Christmas is we've just been journeying with Matthew. And we've been thinking about how Matthew, one of Jesus' 12 disciples, a historian, has recorded these details so that his generation of Jews and every generation ever since will know about this man Jesus, know who he is, know how he was born, know about his life, know about his death, know about his resurrection. And so Matthew wants us to know certain things about the birth.

We've been thinking about the fact that this is not just a random event, that Matthew keeps using this word fulfilled, as if to say this is going down exactly how God planned it. And in terms of the birth, we might look at it and see chaos, but Matthew looks at it and sees and says glorious. It is glorious because he sees in the birth of Jesus the very fulfillment of everything that God had promised about the birth of his king. Now, what is it that Matthew sees as being fulfilled? That's a question we've been thinking about. Today, really quickly, is all about the place. Now, if you've got the Bible open in front of you, and the words will go on the screen as we go kind of through it, Matthew focuses in on Bethlehem. If you've got the text here, you see Matthew references Bethlehem four times in these short verses, four times. Five of them if you include verse 16 of Matthew chapter 2.

[6:39] So Matthew thinks it's really important that his readers know where Jesus was born. Let me give you a couple of things to notice about this. Let me tell you firstly why it was hugely fitting that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. And we'll pick it up if you've got it there in verse 5 of chapter 2.

Events happening after Jesus was born. And after Herod has summoned the Jewish religious rulers and asked them if they know the whereabouts of this birth. And they reply, in Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, for this is what the prophet has written. Now, the prophet that they are quoting there is a man called Micah. He's a contemporary of Isaiah. He's God's messenger roughly kind of 700 BC. And what's important is that Micah in his short letter is addressing the people of God when they are behaving terribly and when the Assyrian army, their enemy, is advancing mightily. And all the way through the book of Micah, as he brings his, God's word to his people, the appeal is as Assyria gets bigger, as the enemy comes to the forefront, the answer is not to be scared. The answer is to trust in this God. And particularly to trust in the king who God will raise up for his people, who is everything that the current king in Israel isn't.

And this king will come from Bethlehem. Now, you read around in this, historians generally agree that you're looking at a town with most likely under 1,000 people. Some even put that it's something more like 300 people. So this is a very small place. And truth be told, there ain't a lot happening in Bethlehem other than sheep. It's all that kind of happens in Bethlehem. Nobody's booking a jet two holiday to Bethlehem. That's the kind of idea we're meant to get as we read Matthew 2. This says a little town of no renown. But what is significant about Bethlehem is that this is the birthplace of King David. This is the birthplace of the king par excellence in Israel. The king who God said was a man after his own heart. And he was born in Bethlehem. He was from this place. And so when God says, it's from Bethlehem that my king is going to come, it's almost as if he's saying, there's a new and better David on the way. There's a new and better David that I'm going to raise up for my people. And so the question is, how is he new and better, this king that God is going to raise up? He's new and better because of who he is. Everything about this birth speaks of lowliness.

Everything about it screams humility and service and giving yourself in sacrifice for others. And in a week where there have been big questions surrounding our leaders and how they have used their power and their influence and their position and their privilege to flaunt certain rules, God's king is the opposite. He is the one who laid aside power and position and took on a lifestyle that Bethlehem perfectly embodies. This is God's king. The way of God, the way of the kingdom is radically different to the way of the world. Now talk about, we always talk about, don't we, the people who never forgot their roots. How true of this Jesus? How true of this Jesus?

[10:32] This is who he is, the servant king born in Bethlehem. And this king's origins, do you see, his beginnings are from ancient of times, says Micah. So in this king is found a wisdom that surpasses humanities. In this king is found a love that excels anything you and I have ever known. How new and better? Well, secondly, because of what he will do. God's people who know all about division and inviting and soon will know exile in the context of Micah. God is saying that this king that he will raise up will bring about restoration and unity. He will be the one that gathers his people from all over the world. And he will be their shepherd. It's the most incredible description that we get

of Jesus, of this God, that his life will be about binding up people's wounds, about protecting them from ultimate harm, about providing for their every need, about leading them to safe pastures, about giving direction for their weary souls.

And so that is why, if we're here today, that's why we sang earlier on, O come, O come, all ye unfaithful. Because how many of us here today do not feel that we can honestly say that we have life sorted? And yet this king has come to give his life for us. This king has come to serve us, not to be served. This is who God's king is. And I wonder if those words about who the shepherd will be are just the ones that you need to hear today. This is who Jesus is.

And thirdly, because of what he will be. Those who come to him, he will give them rest for their weary souls. And his greatness will be known the world over. Do you see that? As outsiders, foreigners, people from all over the world will come to see the greatness of this God. And how true is that of us here today? If you want to see the fulfillment of this all these years later, look at the church. People from all over the world, all sorts of different people. Here today will just be a microcosm of what God has done. People from all over the world, different ages and stages, doing different things. And yet united by this one thing that we love the king who served us. And it's a joy to worship him. And all of a sudden, you see with that background, you understand what role these magi from the east are playing in this story. Because it does seem, doesn't it, just a bit weird. What's going on here? Until you understand that here is the people of the world coming in to worship God's king.

This bunch of pagan astrologers, right? They ain't amateur stargazers. This is what they do. They're pagan astrologers. They know the stars. Likely there was a comet that they followed. Again, if you want, so we don't have time to do that this morning, but if you want more information on the historicity of that, I can recommend some cracking resources for you. But this is what they are seeing. There's something going on in the skies that's drawing their attention. But more than that, why have they come? It's explicit in the text. They have come not to inquire about God's king. They have come not to admire God's king. They have come to worship God's king. See what's going on. Mike is saying that God will raise up for you a greater king from Bethlehem. And Matthew has written this down and he's exclaiming to us, this king that God promised from Bethlehem is here. He's here. And God is saying to a weary world, what do you make of my king?

And secondly, let me just tell you why it was hugely revealing that Jesus was rejected in Jerusalem. So with the child Jesus and his parents, they're in the house in Bethlehem. Matthew records two reactions to Bethlehem's king that happened back in the capital. The first is from King Herod. There's a new king on his patch. There's turf wars going on here. This is an all-out worship war. There's a rival to his throne. And Herod reacts to the news with hostility. No way I'm sharing it with him. This king.

[15:16] Herod reacts with hostility. And the other reaction from the religious rulers is apathy. Because here's the thing, when Herod asks them, do you know where the king, God's king is going to be born? They don't shrug their shoulders.

They don't say beats me. They know the answer. Did you notice that? They know where this king is going to be born. You're looking for the perfect panel for the Eggheads Christmas special, Christmas birth.

These are your guys that you want on your team. They know the answer. But it means absolutely nothing to them. So we've got three reactions here. Herod reacts with hostility. The religious gurus act with apathy.

And the magi, the ones who shouldn't have got this, but did. They react with worship. Here's sometimes what I see in my social media feed. People post pictures of things, different textures of toast, or a chart with different strengths of coffee. And it's safe to say, which one are you?

You ever seen these kind of things? Which one are you? Here's what I want to do. I want to take that and superimpose it on Matthew chapter 2. And this is what Matthew invites us to do here and say, friends, which one are you? Which one are you? Is there war against this king in your heart today?

[16:44] The natural inclination of all of our sinful hearts that I don't want this king. I'm not sharing with this king. If that's you here today, would I lovingly plead with you. Do you know who this king is?

Have you read the scriptures for yourself? It seems to me that would be a very logical thing to do, to read about this man, Jesus. Are you like King Herod? Is there a war going on in your heart? I don't

want this king. Is there apathy going on in your heart? Maybe you've been coming to church for years.

You know the verses. You could rhyme them off top of your head. You know how church works. You know how to look happy. You know how to raise your hands at certain points. But let me ask you, is he your king? You know, I remember playing football years ago during my time at uni with a ton of boys from the Western Isles of Scotland. And they knew the Psalms way better than I did. They could quote them like that. They knew their Bibles inside out, but they had absolutely no interest in Jesus. You know, there's a world of differences in there between knowing facts about Jesus and really knowing him and trusting him as your savior and your king. You know, one of today's the day when God, by his Holy Spirit, would take what you know and would just make it click in your mind and in your heart. And you get the king from Bethlehem and who he is and what he's done.

And this is the shepherd king that God is promising. And the thing is, this birth that started here with rejection in Jerusalem, 30 years or so later from this moment, the shepherd king would find himself back in Jerusalem. There he would know rejection. The shepherd king whose life has been one of service, the shepherd king whose life had been one of love, the shepherd king who knew rejection in Jerusalem at the start of his life would be back. And he would know rejection in Jerusalem at the end of his life as the shepherd king willingly lays down his life as the sacrificial sheep.

[18:55] He goes there fully intent on laying down his life on the cross. He takes the punishment that you and I deserve for our sin against this holy God. He takes our place. And in him, we get his grace. We get the love of God. And that's who this king is. And so do you see how it was hugely fitting that Jesus was born in Bethlehem? And do you see how it was hugely revealing that he was rejected in Jerusalem? This birth in Bethlehem, the world screams chaos, chaos. And yet Matthew writes it down and he presents it to us and he says, glorious. Let me just read to you the words of the final song that we're going to sing as we close our service. And let's just reflect on this as we head into this week. And let's maybe just reflect on everything that we've heard and seen and heard and sung today. Here is, O little town of Bethlehem.

The words of Philip Brooks writes this, O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell, O come to us, O Lord Emmanuel. Let's pray.

And so Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for today. The sense of celebration, the sense of joy. O Father, would you help us though in the midst of all of it to not miss the significance of your king who was born in Bethlehem. Father, for us, those of us here today, Lord, who perhaps feel far from you, Lord, would you draw near. For those who are feeling the hardness of life at this time of year, Lord, would you draw near and bring comfort and peace. And so Lord, may in all the uncertainties that perhaps the next weeks and days and the future holds, Lord, Lord, would you remind us today gloriously that you are the God who is wonderfully in control of all things. And we thank you that you hear us because we pray in Jesus's wonderful name. Amen.