

Nativity Service 2013

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: 15 December 2013

Preacher: Paul Johnston

[0 : 0 0] Well let me just add to John's welcome. It's great to see you here and children, young people, that was absolutely fantastic. Hope you can bear with us and listen for just a few minutes while we try and understand a little bit more about what this Christmas story is all about.

Having said that, you've given us a pretty comprehensive account of it all, okay? Sometimes when we get the nativity plays there's lots of bits kind of made up that might not actually be found in the Bible story no matter how hard you look.

I can tell you if you go away and read these accounts in Matthew and Luke you will find that pretty much word for word is what we have seen today folks. So thank you so much young people for bringing us that this morning.

There's some sweets here. I've got just two things to say about them. One, you're welcome to come up and help yourself at any point at all. But don't take more than two please simply because there's lunch coming next.

There's only one other rule, that is you can't take a sweet for anyone else, okay? They're here, everybody's welcome. Take them at any point at all. But you have to come yourself to get your own one or two sweets, okay?

[1 : 0 3] But at any point when I'm speaking for the next 10-15 minutes feel free to come and help yourself to one or two of them. And I'll come back to that a little bit later on.

No rules apart from that, help yourself at any point. I want to read just two or three verses from the account that we've had in Gospel of Luke. So if you've got a Bible you might want to turn to Luke chapter 2 and verse 4.

Luke chapter 2 and verse 4. Let's listen just to these few words together. We're breaking in then to this story of Jesus' birth.

So, I'll let you get your sweets so you can listen to this bit from the Bible because it's really important, okay? Take a couple of sweets and then sit back down and let's listen to Luke chapter 2 verse 4.

Can we have those words on the screen, please? Thank you very much from the NIV grant. Okay, we're all listening to these verses from Luke chapter 2. So, Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

[2 : 0 9] He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for me in a manger. I hope you'll all take time to read and to think more about this Christmas story over the next couple of weeks.

Children and grown-ups too. There's just one word about this story. One word that I really want to emphasize for the next few minutes. Because as I've read the Christmas story again, this one word has really struck me.

I don't think I had ever noticed this one word when I was reading the Christmas story before. And it's the word nearby. Nearby.

Okay? It's there in verse 8. There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby. I wonder if some of you thought where those fields were. In my own mind, I had maybe thought that those fields were quite far away from where Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

[3 : 16] But the Bible tells us that's not the case at all. The fields were really, really near. And although Joseph had to travel quite a distance, and we've seen Joseph and Mary walking right around the church, depicting perhaps 80, 90 miles that Joseph had to travel in order to get to Bethlehem, to his hometown.

Did you know that the shepherds didn't have to travel anything like that distance? Because they were so, so near to where it was all happening.

They were right on the doorstep of Bethlehem, it seems. And when the angel appeared to those shepherds, they were oblivious. They hadn't known that right on their doorstep, something remarkable had happened.

That very night, Jesus had been born. Jesus described as Messiah, Saviour, Lord. Hadn't happened far away. It had happened right on their doorstep.

The Messiah had been born. This baby had had to come a very, very, very long way in order to be near them. Because this baby was described as the Messiah, Christ, Lord.

[4 : 28] This baby is the one whom the Bible teaches is both fully man and also fully God. As fully man, that baby had just had to go through what must have been the fairly unpleasant experience of being born.

But as God, this baby had had to travel an incredible distance. Do you know how far the baby had had to travel as God? And we think where he'd come from. Well, he'd come all the way from heaven himself.

He who had created the world. Philippians chapter 2 in the New Testament tells us about how this one, who was God, who was equal with God, had had to travel so far. He'd had to come all the way down to earth.

And beyond that, he'd had to go all the way to a baby to end up in that little crib. This one had traveled so far. And he traveled this far so that he could come so, so near.

And my message for you children, and my message for the grown-ups today, and my prayer is that this Christmas time, we would understand that Christmas is all about God coming very, very near.

[5 : 38] Do you see God as someone far away? As someone perhaps a little bit distant, a little bit remote, a little bit untouchable? Somebody who maybe doesn't care that much?

Certainly not about the small things? Or as God, as the one who, when becoming a baby, showed us just how near he wants to come to us? Have any of you seen the film Frozen yet?

Some of you have. It's an excellent Christmas film. Since not many of you have been to see it yet, I'm going to have to give a little bit of context. And then we're going to watch a clip from Frozen together, okay? Frozen is based on an old story called The Ice Queen, which some of the older ones here might have heard.

We went to see it as a family on Friday, and we had a great time. It really is worth seeing. The main character in Frozen is called Queen Elsa. Right? Queen Elsa, we see her as a little girl.

And she discovers that she has very special powers. Everything Queen Elsa touches turns to ice. Right? And so it's a little bit... She discovers she's a bit frightened about all of these powers.

[6 : 41] And she's kept away from friends and family as she's growing up. And her little sister is so upset by all of that and can't understand what's going on. At 18, Queen Elsa is crowned. She's princess.

Her parents die. And she's crowned the queen. Okay? And she wants to try and keep her powers hidden so she doesn't want to hurt people. But something happens and her powers become seen.

And the clip we're about to watch is the point where she realizes that she's got all of this power. And she decides that what she's going to have to do is get very, very, very far away from absolutely everyone else.

And as we watch it, you might want to just enjoy the song. That's fine. But maybe ask this. How do we see God? Do we see him a little bit like Queen Elsa?

Powerful. But distant. And remote. Locked away. Far, far away. Let's watch. Okay, we're going to leave Queen Elsa shut up there in that splendid palace.

[7 : 49] Totally isolated. So that no one can come near to her. So that she can't do any damage. So that no one can see her power and strength.

That's what she chose to do in response to the discovery that she had these great powers. There's Queen Elsa. But what have we just been watching as we've watched our nativity?

We've watched the one who we describe as God and Lord of all. Choose to leave the splendors of heaven. And choose to come close to all of us.

And just in the next five minutes or so, I want to leave you with three points this Christmas. They all start with R. So children, I hope you can all remember them okay? It's not going to be too difficult.

Three points which I think it would be good for us to remember in light of what Jesus did as he came close. First, the risk that he took. Second, the response that he invites us to have this morning.

[8 : 55] And third, the reality that we can enjoy. First, the risk that Jesus took. You see, Queen Elsa decided to avoid all risks. She decided to stay away so there would be no risks.

But what we've learned about this morning is that Jesus chose to take an incredible risk. You see, in the book of John, in the Gospel of John, we read that he came to his own.

He, God, came to his own. But his own did not accept him. Jesus came. He came close. But the risk that he took was that many, many would reject him.

And down through history, that is exactly what has happened. Some of you know who wrote the book, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe? You know the author?

The author is called C.S. Lewis. And he wrote lots of great books for children. He also wrote great books for adults. And in one of his books, The Four Loves, he speaks about the risk that love involves.

[9 : 56] And I'd like you to listen to this quote from The Four Loves. It says this, To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken.

If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries.

Avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change.

It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

And folks, the message that I come with today, which I believe God would want us to hear this Christmas time, is that Jesus came close. So very close.

[10 : 57] He came so close because he loves us so much. In 1 John, the gospel says this, This is how God showed his love among us.

He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love. Not that we loved God, but that he loved us. And sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

This is how God has demonstrated how much he loves us. He came so close. He came to that cradle even though he would be rejected there.

And yet even further, we've sung in some of our songs, he even went as far as the cross. In order to give his life as the sacrifice for our sin.

That's how much he's loved us. That's how close he's come. And that's the risk that he's taken. He did it knowing that many, many might reject him.

[12 : 02] That's the risk that he's taken. Number two, the response that he invites this morning. The risk that he's taken and the response that he's invited. Because young people, grown-ups, how will we respond to this story this morning of God coming so close?

I wonder whether we might enter into that experience of the shepherds. How might they have responded after that angel had appeared to them? They could have said, Do you know what? It's a bit late at night.

Can't really be bothered going to Bethlehem. I think maybe that was all a bit of a dream. Because let's face it, angels don't really appear to shepherds. Nothing that special has ever happened to shepherds.

And I'm pretty certain that nothing that special is ever going to happen to us. And so they could have ignored the invitation to go and see the one who had come close.

And they'd have carried on. They'd have missed out. Despite the fact that in the very same vicinity, in that neighborhood, the Messiah, Jesus, Lord and Savior, had been born.

[13 : 06] But instead they responded. Instead they got up and they made just that short, short trip. And they were able to go and see the Savior.

And bow down and respond. And worship Him. And go away rejoicing. Telling others about all the things that they had seen. Folks, I've already invited you to respond to something today.

And not that many of you have responded. I've put this large box of chocolates very, very close by. It's within reach of every single one of you. All I said was that if you want them, you need to come yourself and take it.

There's no getting one and handing them out along the whole pew. Not at all. Because this invitation this morning is for everyone individually. In Jesus, every single one of us are told that He has come close.

He's within reach. In a modern version of John chapter 1 it says, The word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood. That's the marvel of Christmas.

[14 : 09] He is not a God far away who cannot be touched. He's come close. Listen to this wonderful word from a very famous sermon.

Which the Apostle Paul gave in Athens. I want you to be clear that I'm not making this up. This is not poetic license. This is what the Bible teaches. Listen to this one word from Acts chapter 17.

Paul preaching to lots and lots of people in the middle of a city. Tells them about how God has made everything. Tells them about how God is the one who holds everybody's life in His hands.

And he says this. God has done this so that they would seek Him. And perhaps reach out for Him and find Him. And then listen to this.

Because He is not far from any one of us. Can I repeat it? God did all this so they would seek Him. And perhaps reach out for Him.

[15 : 07] And find Him. Though He is not far from each one of us. Yes, I could quote many, many verses from the Bible. Which will tell you that because of our sin and rebellion against God.

We are separated from God. And that in and of ourselves there is a great gulf between us and God. But the wonderful story of Jesus and His incarnation and Him coming to earth is that Jesus says, Now because of all that I've done.

Because of my sacrifice for you. I'm close. I'm not far from anyone of you. Reach out. Seek me.

And you will find me. That's the response that Jesus invites. And maybe think. What was it that inhibited some of you from just stepping forward and coming and partaking from this box of chocolates?

Feel free to do so at any time over the next couple of minutes. Children, you'll all find there's a present for you under the tree at the end of this service. But again, you can just leave it there if you want.

[16 : 11] Okay? You don't need to go and get it. It'll be there regardless and somebody else might enjoy it. But the reality is it's there. It's for you. It's close by you. Not a big trip from there to the tree, is it?

But it does need your response. It does need you to decide, yes, I want it. And I wonder if that's how you'll respond to Jesus today. Not just saying that's all very interesting. That's nice to hear the Christmas story again.

But saying, yes, He's come close. And I want this for myself. I'm going to come. I'm going to seek Him. I'm going to try and understand more about what this is all about.

I'm going to respond and worship Him. I'm going to give my life to Him. And I'm going to tell others about all the things that He has done. We're nearly there. Let me take one minute. The risk that He took.

The response that He invites. And the reality that He now offers. I want to speak perhaps to those who feel that they have been a Christian.

[17 : 11] A follower of Jesus for many, many years. Or maybe less than that. But nonetheless, someone who is following Jesus. He says, I wonder, folks, if we can grasp this Christmas.

The reality, once again, of a God who comes close. I've been struck just doing a little study of this this week. Looking at dozens and dozens and dozens of verses in the Bible that tell us about how God comes close.

Maybe you might make that some of your Christmas studies if you want to do some Bible reading. The Psalms have so much to say about Him coming near to the brokenhearted.

About coming near to all those who call on Him. Who call on Him in truth. What does it mean for us for God to be near? What does it mean for us for God to be coming close?

In our worries. In our stresses about family. About friends. In our worries about health. About work. In our fears for the future.

[18 : 18] Perhaps in our regrets about the past. I wonder if we'd allow this Christmas to know the reality of a God who comes close.

Let's pray. So, Lord Jesus, thank you that you did not stay distant. Thank you that you came close.

Thank you for the risk that you took. Thank you for the love and salvation. And freedom and hope that you offer out to us today. May everyone in this place, by the help of your Holy Spirit, respond today, we pray.

Amen. Amen. We pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[19 : 26] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen.