

The Confrontation and Comfort of the New-Born King

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[0 : 00] The scripture reading comes from Luke chapter 2 and Matthew chapter 2. Please follow along in your bulletin or on the screen. In Luke 2 we read, In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem.

Because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in Matthew 2 we read, 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?

[1 : 20] 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 Judea, are by no means least among the rulers of Judea.

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 may too come and worship him.

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.

[2 : 32] 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.

This is the word of God. Great. Thank you, Annabelle. Okay. Well, once again, on behalf of my family and the leaders, Merry Christmas.

It's wonderful to be with you all today. I really trust and pray that each of us get to experience a wonder-filled, Christ-centered Christmas this year.

And although this year has been a difficult year for many of us in Hong Kong, we do pray that the beauty and the wonder of Jesus and who He is will be more deeply felt and more significant this Christmas than any other year.

[3 : 36] And we pray that 2020 will be a great year for all of us. Now, when you think of Christmas, what do you think of? What things come to mind when we think of Christmas? I need some help here.

Tree. Okay, Christmas trees. That's right. Any other ideas? Christmas stockings. Christmas stockings. Okay. Yeah. Sorry?

Barbecue. Theo says a barbecue. Okay. Theo and myself both come from South Africa. And strangely enough, winter, I mean, Christmas takes place in summer. And so growing up, all our Christmases were spent on the beach with barbecue.

So when someone says to me, I think of snow and reindeer, I think, not at all. I've never had a snowy Christmas. But once in my lifetime, I'm sure I'll experience that. Okay. But when we think of Christmas, I think of good food and some good wine to go with that food.

I think of lights and Christmas carols and tinsel and all sorts of these things. Right? These are all wonderful things. And some of the words that we think of when we think of Christmas, what are some of the words that come to mind?

[4 : 45] Joy and peace and hope and love. That's right. These are the things that we think of when we think of Christmas.

Christmas is a wonderful time of the year. And just the last two weeks, Claire, my wife and our two daughters were in Cape Town visiting their new nieces and the cousins. And so I've been home alone for the last two weeks.

And every night, I turn on the lights of our Christmas tree. And I put the carols on loud. And don't feel sorry for me because I've loved it. It's been wonderful. I've missed my family.

Don't hear the wrong message. But Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. The trees and the lights and the carols, it really gets me excited. But Christmas is meant to be so much more than just filling our stomachs with good food and good wine.

Christmas is meant to be a time when we also fill our hearts. We don't just celebrate with food on the table. We're meant to feast on the richness and the significance of this. And when we ponder the intensity and the complexity, the riches as well as the challenge and the scandal of Christmas, we see that Christmas is far richer.

[5 : 58] It's far deeper. It's far more significant than just good food and presents and lights and Christmas tree. We see that the Christmas season tells us something deep and significant.

And because Christmas should help us to see Jesus and captivate our hearts. And so this morning I want to just talk to us about three very simple things. I want us to consider the confrontation of Christmas.

Secondly, the paradox of Christmas. And thirdly, the comfort of Christmas. Okay, the confrontation, the paradox, and the comfort of Christmas. And today we will be a little shorter than usual.

So firstly, the confrontation of Christmas. We read it a little earlier, but in the narrative that the Bible tells about Jesus coming, Jesus is born in Bethlehem.

And around that time, some wise men come from the east. Now these wise men, also known as magi, they were possibly astrologers or philosophers from Babylon or Persia.

[6 : 57] They were men that studied the ancient scripts, sacred scripts. They studied the stars. And together they would try and work out what is happening in the world and possibly even predict the future.

And so by observing the stars and studying these ancient scripts, they would see what is going to happen. And around this time, they observed possibly a solar eclipse.

We know there were a couple of eclipses around 4 BC when Jesus was born. Possibly some supernova that happened in the sky. And they observed some sign that takes place in the sky.

And that, as well as the scripts they've been studying, they come to the conclusion that somebody somewhere is sending them a message. And the message is that a new king has been born.

And so they saddle their camels and their entourage and they make their way across the desert to the city of Jerusalem, which is where they believe that the sign in the sky is leading them. And they come to Jerusalem and they start to ask questions.

[7 : 58] They go to the temple and the places of cultural significance. And they say, we believe that the new king has been born. Does anybody know where is the king of this land?

And nobody can answer their questions at first. And Herod, who is the king, hears about these people that are asking conspicuous questions. And he is very troubled.

In one of the great understatements of the Bible, it says Herod was troubled. Well, of course he's troubled, right? He's the king and he's heard that there's a new king in town. That's not a good thing for the incumbent who's on the throne.

And so he brings these wise men to his palace and he says, what's this idea that you're spreading these rumors? And they tell them the story, the sign in the sky, and the ancient script. And they say, we believe that a new king has been born.

Now we know from history that Herod is a very cruel man. He's a very violent man. But we see in the scripture that he's also a very cunning man. He's a crafty man.

[8 : 59] Herod puts on his very best poker face. You know what a poker face is? When you play poker, you've got to like have a deadpan face. You can't give away any emotions because you can't tell people what's in your hand, right?

So you've just got an emotionless face. Herod puts on his poker face. He just nods his head and he doesn't give away any emotion. But inside, his heart is riling.

Inside, his heart is churning. And the reason is because he's the king. And he's just been told there's a new king that's rolled into town and your position on the throne, your position as king is under threat.

That's why he's so troubled. That's why he's so agitated. And so what Herod does is he consults his advisors and his counselors and he finds out the best Old Testament scholars and they determine that the Christ is to be born in this town called Bethlehem.

And so he sends these magi to Bethlehem and he says, go and find out where the king is and come back and tell me exactly where he is so that I too can worship this king. Now Herod is crafty.

[10 : 07] He doesn't want to worship the king. He wants to kill him. And so the magi go off on their way and they find Bethlehem and they trick Herod. They don't come back and tell him where Jesus is.

And Herod finds out he's been tricked and again he's fuming. And so Herod's true colors soon come out. And so he issues a decree, all children born in Bethlehem under two years of age are to be exterminated.

Kill them all. And so he sends out this decree. Now friends, unfortunately, this story is all too familiar to us, even in our own world today.

Stories of deception, of fear, stories of bloodshed and injustice fill our news feeds. You go on the news feeds and it's just full of the stories of injustice in our world.

And all this forces us to ask the question, where does this all come from? Where does the evil in our world come from? And what can we do about it? How can we eradicate it? How can we do something about the evil in our world?

[11 : 08] Where does it come from? In the country that I originally come from, South Africa, we have a terrible history of incredible racial injustice towards people that are different from us.

One group opposing another group. One group imposing their will on another group. And in 1994, previously that was enshrined in the legislation, in the constitution, that one group could oppose another group.

In 1994, the law changed. And so we all thought racism is gone from our country. It's done. It's a thing of the past. But over the last two decades, South Africa has grappled with the fact that even though the legislation has changed, the constitution has changed, prejudice and animosity still is in our hearts.

And so the question remains, how do we deal with what's going on in our hearts? Now one of the questions that people propose is education is the problem. If we can teach people and educate people, that will solve the problem.

The reason why there's racism in the world is because we don't understand one another. And so if we sort out our education, that will solve the problem. Some people say the problem with our world is not education.

[12 : 21] It's the poor. It's the immoral. It's those that make irresponsible choices for their lives. If we can just help them make better decisions, the cycle will break the cycle and our world will become a better place.

Some people say, no, no, that's not the problem. The problem is the rich and the powerful. They to blame. They the ones that control the politics. They control government for their own agenda.

They use their positions of power to oppress the others. And so it's rampant greed and materialism. That's the problem with our world. We need to do a better job of redistributing wealth and curbing rampant greed.

Step in Bernie Saunders, right? Different opinions. What's wrong with our world and how are we going to solve it? When you read the Christmas story, we may be tempted to think that the biblical writers agree with that last hypothesis.

That the problem with the world is the rich and the powerful. Right? When you read the narrative of Christmas, Herod is the obvious villain and is humble Joseph and Mary. It's the shepherds that are esteemed.

[13 : 24] But the Christmas narrative is far more complex than that. It's far deeper and richer than that. Scripture gives us a far more deeper answer. Scripture tells us again and again that the source of the problems of the world is not the people out there.

It's in here. It's in my heart. It's in all of our hearts. For King Herod's reaction to Christ is in a sense a picture of all of us. What agitates King Herod so much?

What troubles him so much? It's the fact that he's confronted by the claim that there's another king in town. There's another person that's claiming to be on the throne of his life.

There's another king who demands his allegiance before whom King Herod must bow. You see friends, each every one of us in our own way has a built-in desire to be the Lord and the king of our lives.

Each one of us in our own way wants to sit on the throne of our lives. Each one of us wants to be king. And when somebody else comes along and says, no, no, no, I will be king, we find that the response of our heart is very similar to Herod.

[14 : 29] I was trying to explain to my daughters sometime this last year, every one of us likes to sit on the throne of our lives. We like to be king. And I was trying to explain this concept of being the king of our lives.

And my one daughter turns to me, Shiloh, she's five years old, and she says, Dad, I don't think I want to be king. And I was getting ready to say, no, you do, and explain this to her.

And she says, I don't think I want to be king, but I do think that I'm the queen quite often. And I realized, okay, you're right. You win this battle, right? But friends, whether we want to be king or whether we want to be queen, each one of us has a desire to occupy the throne of our lives.

We see this in our children, right? Before we've taught them social etiquette or good manners, how to mask this desire, it comes out very naturally. Children naturally tell us that they want to be in charge of their lives.

Friends, we all want things done our own way. And when that is threatened, when our autonomy is challenged, all of us are capable of causing great hurt to those around us.

[15 : 33] Maybe we lash out in physical rage. Maybe we don't do that, but maybe we use our words. We use our words to hurt those and to alienate those that threaten us, to make sure we stay on the throne of our lives.

Maybe for some of us, we actually don't use our words. It's our silence that blocks others out. We just give people the silent treatment and we make sure that our position on the throne is well established and nobody can challenge us.

We use our silence to build walls around us. But friends, when the throne of our life is threatened, all of us have the ability to be greatly troubled and to do troubling things. I was talking to a friend of mine about two or three months ago.

He's got children similar age to me. And he was talking about the fact that when his children don't do what he wants, he has the ability to get very angry and to say things that he really regrets.

And he was lamenting to me that he hates the words that comes out of his mouth at times, certain times, in the way that he treats his children. And while he was talking, I was being a good pastor and I was smiling and nodding my head, saying yes, yes, and asking good questions.

[16 : 44] But actually, what is going on was while I was pretending to listen, I was having a deep dialogue in my own heart and realizing what he was saying is exactly what goes on in my own heart, in my own home, and in my own life.

Friends, if you see what goes on in my home, I'm ashamed to say that sometimes I hate the words that come out of my mouth. Sometimes I find myself being so incredibly angry with myself because of the way I've reacted when things don't go my way.

When my kids don't listen to me, yeah, sure, I want my kids to listen, but there's a disproportionate frustration that sometimes comes out of me. Why is that? It's because I want to be king and I want my life to be nicely and neatly ordered and packaged and I don't like it when people, even five-year-old children, threaten my right to rule and reign and to have life the way that I want.

I'm sorry for that public confession. I didn't mean to be so honest. I apologize for that. Friends, we see this confrontation at Christmas. Jesus comes as a baby in a manger and yes, it's true that he comes mild, he lays his glory by, but Jesus wasn't just a good moral man, a good moral teacher who was later on to be made out to be some king.

Jesus, from the very first days that he's born, while he's lying in a manger, here are some magi, some wise men and they come and they say, where is the king? Jesus, from the earliest days of his existence, in fact, before he was even born, it was spoken of that Jesus would not just be a good, wise man, Jesus would be a king.

- [18 : 22] And that means that Jesus unashamedly claims the place of rule and reign in our lives. Friends, Jesus unashamedly comes to us claiming to be heaven and earth's true king.
- Jesus said some pretty strong things about it. At one point he says, if anyone wants to follow me, but does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and his children, he cannot be my disciple. Jesus wasn't commending that we be hateful to our family members.
- That's not what he's saying. But what he's saying is his call for allegiance is so strong that it makes some of our commitments to other family members seem weak in comparison. Jesus' claim is of absolute authority.
- He calls for unconditional loyalty and that it triggers an inevitable deep resistance inside of us. No, I want to be king. Christmas tells us that Jesus has come to be king.
- And that means all other kings, including ourselves, need to vacate the throne of our lives in order to let him have his way. Tim Keller put it like this. According to the scriptures, the evil in the world ultimately stems from the self-centeredness, the self-righteousness, and the self-absorption of every human heart.
- [19 : 31] Each of us want the world to orbit around us and our needs and our desires. In every human heart, then, there is a little king, Herod, who then wants to rule and is threatened by anything that may compromise its omnipotence and its sovereignty.
- The confrontation of Christmas. Christmas tells us that Jesus comes to claim and claims to be king. Now, that leads us to the second point, which is the paradox of Christmas. Look at what happens here.
- The Magi, eventually, they find their way to Bethlehem. And they come before him and they come bowing down before him. And they bring their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And this would have been highly appropriate to a newborn king on the throne, a king that's just been coronated as king with his court officials and his entourage.
- But here, there's a strange paradox. The Magi come bowing down, but they're bowing down on a muddy floor with hay and cow manure and all sorts of other things around them.
- There's something deeply ironic. Something doesn't feel right. And yet the Magi feel very comfortable. There's something deeply paradoxical about it. And this is something we see throughout the Scriptures.
- [20 : 44] God constantly does things the way that we at least expect them to. Remember how God chooses to bring his message of salvation throughout the Scriptures. Jesus doesn't do it through the mighty Romans or the mighty Egyptians or the mighty Babylonians.
- He chooses the small insignificant nation of Israel. Remember how in the Old Testament, in ancient times, the firstborn son got all the wealth. And the secondborn son, well, his social status wasn't quite the same.
- I'm the secondborn son in my family, so you can feel sorry for me. But in ancient times, the firstborn son, he gets all the marbles, right? And the secondborn son is left with the scraps.
- But who does Jesus choose? Who does God choose? God chooses Abel, secondborn Abel, not Cain. God chooses secondborn Isaac, not Ishmael. God chooses secondborn Jacob, not Esau.
- God chooses secondborn Ephraim, not Manasseh. And think about how in the Old Testament, a lady's value and worth to the family was often based on her ability to bear children.
- [21 : 50] How many children she could bear and continue the family line. Well, who does God choose? God chooses Rebecca who can't have any children. God chooses Hannah who can't have any children.

God chooses Samson's mother who can't bear any children. God chooses Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother who can't bear any children. Friends, the uniqueness of Christmas is the continuation of the divine paradox throughout the scriptures.

This is the paradox of Christmas that the Magi come bearing their gifts but they do so in the muddy stable to a king who's lying in a manger.

Now, what are we to make of this? Well, most people think that the way they think about this is that Jesus is giving us an example. He's showing us how humility triumphs over arrogance. He's showing us how the weak overcome the strong.

He's showing us how the good guys always win in the end. Friends, you and I know that's not the case. The good guys don't always win in the end. The weak don't always triumph. Sometimes the evil triumph.

[22 : 52] Sometimes the good guys don't win in the end. Sometimes the weak don't always have it their way. So what's going on here? What's God telling us? Jesus is telling us something about salvation and about the gospel itself.

See friends, every religion, every moral philosophy of the world tells us that you need to summon up your strength. You need to work hard. You need to do all the right things. Obey the rules.

Follow the steps. Be one of the good guys and then you'll inherit the promises. Then you'll get the blessing. God blesses those who look after themselves. God blesses those who abide by the rules.

God blesses those who do all the right things. Who can earn the credit and earn God's forgiveness. Friends, Jesus Christ tells us something different. Jesus says, I haven't come for those that have got it all together.

I've got it for those that haven't. I haven't come for those that are in the palace and their lives look all pretty. I've come for those that haven't. Friends, Christmas is the greatest example that Jesus Christ says, salvation comes not for those who think they deserve it or who have all the answers.

[23 : 55] Salvation is revealed for those that have nothing at all. And this tells us it's entirely by grace. Friends, those that encounter Jesus in the end are not those who are saved by what they've done but saved by what Jesus has done.

See, at the end of Jesus' life he ascends not a throne but a cross. Jesus doesn't come as an example just how to live our lives. He comes as our substitute. Jesus doesn't come for those to show us how to win at life.

He comes and he takes our losses and our shame upon himself. Friends, Jesus came and did for us what we could not do for ourselves and what we probably wouldn't do for ourselves if we could. Jesus comes and he takes our sin upon himself so that we don't have to bear the consequences for our sin ourselves.

Friends, Jesus comes and he announces that he's king but he hasn't come as a king to brush us aside as Herod feared. He's come as a king to include us in his family, to include us in his kingdom.

He's come to bring us healing and wholeness. And that brings us to the third and the final point which is the comfort of Christmas. Friends, because of who Jesus is and because of the nature of his kingdom, because he's come not to ascend a throne at first but he came to ascend a cross, that means that when he comes knocking on the door of our hearts and the door of our lives, we can trust him.

[25 : 16] You can trust him. See friends, Jesus comes and he makes an outrageous claim. He makes a radical claim. He says, either I have all of you or I take none of you.

I've come to be king or I've come to be nothing. Jesus doesn't come just to help us. Jesus doesn't come just to make our lives more comfortable or convenient. Jesus doesn't come and say, I will help you get your life back on track.

Jesus says, I've come to be Lord. I've come to be king. But he doesn't come to brush us aside. He doesn't come to destroy our lives.

Jesus comes to heal our lives. And that means, friends, that we can trust him with the most precious and the vulnerable things in our lives. Friends, you can trust him with the things that worry you most.

You can trust him to open yourself up to him with your identity and your self-worth. Friends, Jesus came not to shame us but to rescue us. Jesus comes as king and he makes no apologies about his claim to be king.

[26 : 16] He comes to call all people everywhere, including you and I, to follow him. Friends, we can trust him with our surrender because Jesus tells us he didn't come to use us and abuse us.

He came to allow himself to be used and abused on the cross so that you and I could be saved. Friends, you know what this means? It means that no one is disqualified. Whoever you are, whatever your background is, whatever you've done or you haven't done, whatever dark secrets you carry about yourself, whatever shame you hold on to, whatever you think about yourself, Jesus comes to each one of us and he comes knocking on the door of our hearts and he says, will you let me in?

Will you allow me to be king? And that's a difficult thing and it's a vulnerable thing to trust our lives to him. But why can we trust him? Because at the greatest moment of Jesus' life, he didn't come to destroy his enemies.

He came to die for them. He came to die on the cross. Friends, this is the comfort of Christmas. This is the wonder of Jesus born in Bethlehem. This is the good news of great joy.

Let's pray together. Well, Jesus, thank you so much for Christmas, the Christmas story. Thank you, Jesus, for coming and dying, coming and being born in a manger all those years ago.

[27 : 34] Christ, we pray that your humble birth won't distract us from the radical claim that you make. That you weren't just a good man or a good moral teacher.

You weren't just somebody who came to show us the way towards heaven. You came to die on the cross. You came to open up the way for us. Father, we pray that this Christmas, Christmas will be so much more than just good food and presents and lights and tinsel and Christmas trees.

We pray, God, that this Christmas, the good news of great joy, the richness and the complexity and the challenge and the comfort and the paradox of Christmas will be real to each one of us.

Jesus, we pray, come and have your way in our lives. Father, where it's difficult to trust you, where it's difficult to be vulnerable and to open up our lives, we pray, Lord Jesus, come and help us.

Jesus, give us faith to trust you. Jesus, won't you open up the eyes of our hearts to see you for who you really are? Father, I pray that in the next few days that we really will come to see you in all your glory.

[28 : 52] We'll see, Jesus, that you're not just a baby in a manger 2,000 years ago, but that even still today you are the king, that you rule and reign, you're heaven and earth's true king, and that we'll bring our lives and surrender to you.

Christ, come and have your way in our lives. Father, pray that this next year in 2020, you'll have your way in our life. We'll let you be king.

God, with our finances, with our careers, with our family and our children, with our relationships and our sexuality, God, with our hopes and our dreams, Jesus, come and be king.

Come and have your way, we pray. Start with us today, Lord. Come and have your way today. In your name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.