

## Joy to the World Series – Part 4: The Greatest Gift

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December 19, 2021

**Intro:** Today is the last Sunday before we celebrate. A heartfelt Merry Christmas! I invite you to join us this Friday for our Christmas Eve service. If you've never been in a church service on Christmas Eve there is just a special anticipation and excitement... (choir and strings, live reading, live music, the children have a role to play).

My son plays with a plastic nativity set. Last year we lost Jesus. Then found Jesus. This year he got the set back out and he said, *"Me want baby Jesus grow bigger?"*

### Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea

Jesus – he saves;      Bethlehem – house of bread;      Judah – praise

Praise God for the abundance of bread. He has given us The Bread of Life that saves.

That's the proper order of things. God gives and we give thanks.

- *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..."*
- **Jesus is the greatest gift. Learn to enjoy him.**
- Don't lose the adrenal rush. Don't let this grow stale in your mouth.
- **Happy birthday baby Jesus!**
- Welcome to our mud huts. And outdoor plumbing.
- Jesus didn't come for our Lancaster County air. *Out of State friend, at conference.*
- He came back to spend time with you.
- Mary and Joseph didn't have Indian Kashmir and a cuddly bassinet, just some strips of wool, and a donkey's lunchbox to lay him in. That's not why he came back.
- He came back for the family conversations.
- Over and over in scripture we see this theme, he just wants to be with the children that he loves.
- Today we still celebrate the greatest gift – **His presence!**
- The presence that transforms the world.
- We thought the world gave birth to him, but then we realized he came to give new birth to the world.
- *"Things I once thought were unbelievable are happening!"*
- What was my life like before I met Jesus?

- Ask a thousand people and you'll get a thousand different answers. I was beginning to asphyxiate on empty religious duty. Jesus awakened the depths of my soul.
- I've watched Jesus take meth addicts and turn them into pastors.  
And victims of abuse into valiant warriors. Lonely and fills them with a love that powers the world. And chicken farmers and he's changed nations. And vampires into fathers. And house moms into community builders. Dysfunctional families and create order. Some people were wandering through life, taking pictures, trying to make the most of it found purpose.
- *"Things I once thought were unbelievable are happening!"*
- The Bread of his presence!
- I love the romance and the pageantry of the season. I love the lights on the frosted roof tops. The holly wreaths. The paper wrappings and popcorn strings draping the fir tree, the scent of pine, the peppermint, the hymns, and the hymn sings, the ice skates, and the candle sticks glowing in the window, and the hot cocoa...
- None of it compares to knowing him...He came back! He loves us!
- He is here now. He said, *"I will never leave you or forsake you."*
- This Christmas, learn to slow down and spend time with Jesus. Learn to enjoy him—He's the Bread of Life. His company is worth keeping. In everything you do it makes life the sweeter.

### Matthew 2:6

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

The shepherd ruler who lives with his sheep.

**Jesus is the shepherd ruler who lives with his sheep. Learn to follow him.**

### What a gift our shepherd king is!

Every moment you feel lonely or inadequate, he's present. Everywhere you need to go, he's already been there, and he'll lead you there by the hand. Anything you need he provides. Every enemy you face he's already defeated.

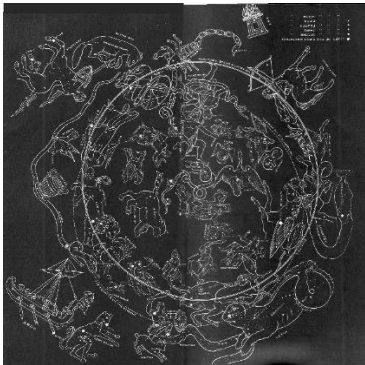
- The shepherd has to look the sheep in their mouth to make sure they are in good dental hygiene. Smell their bad breath.
- Make sure they don't pick up parasites from the grasses they eat.
- He has to use his staff to say, "that's not a good way."
- Even in correction he is compassion. He never shames.
- *Ill: like a dog on a walk sometimes walks on the wrong side of a pole.*
- Even when we don't understand what he is up to, He is Wise!
- Everything is love.
- The shepherd king lives out in the wind and the weather with his sheep.

- Don't think for a minute he's abandoned you. Don't think for a minute his love is weak.
- Love is anti-fragile.
- He is with you on every mountain and in every valley. Follow him.

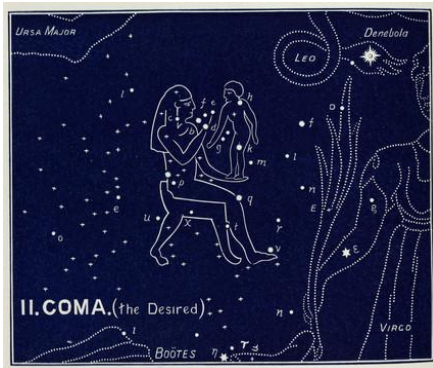
### Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.

- It feels more like a political thriller than it does a Christmas story. Shakespeare's tragedy. This is exactly what happens when people don't follow the shepherd ruler. Lives get burned.
- **Herod** – the devious snake, political intriguer, the half-blooded family traitor, who murdered family members to secure his position of political power, there were no limits to his ambitions—that Herod!? He is the Grinch trying to steal God's gift to the world.
- When he hears, "where's the boy king," he hears, "Your rival has arrived!" He's threatened. The unsuspecting wise men walk right into the viper's nest.
- He doesn't know that Jesus isn't that kind of king. That he doesn't live for political power. That he sacrifices everything for love. To a hammer everything's a nail.
- **Wise men** – Persian wisdom collectors who read ancient texts, these stargazers who studied the constellations, Zoroastrian believers in the One eternal, unchanging omnipotent Spirit who is the creator of all things. Tradition says that the prophet Daniel mentored the Persians in the Jewish Biblical prophecies. The Zoroastrians were watching the heavens and the texts waiting for the King of the Jews who would rule the earth.
- **Star in the East**
- **Slide: Planisphere of the Heavens**



- When we look at the stars, we just see constellations. Big dipper. Orion. When they see the heavens, the constellations are telling a story of world redemption. That story has major books and chapters to it.
- **Slide: Constellation Coma**



- For example, if at a particular time of year their focus would have been on a constellation such as this one...(Coma)...
- Multiple ancient Zodiacs picture this constellation as a woman whose name in Persian denotes a virgin sitting on a throne feeding an infant boy.
- Guess what the name of this constellation “the desired or longed for” as in Haggai 2:7 “the desired of all nations shall come.”
- What’s even crazier is that this constellation had no star in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> magnitude.
- Some historians even believe that it may have been in this very constellation in which an astronomical radiance (a brilliant star) of the first magnitude arrived and the Stargazers would have said to themselves, “the desired of all nations has come.”
- Numbers 24:17 A star will come out of Jacob, a (ruler) will arise from Israel

### God reveals himself to different people in different ways.

(Always drawing people closer to Jesus)

1. To the shepherds who weren’t even looking for him, God just shows up, angelic fireworks lit up the night. Fanfare. Music. Smoke machine. Confetti. He makes it simple to simple people. Party.
2. God revealed his plan to the sophisticated intellectuals who diligently studied, carefully collected the evidence around them. They were measuring and monitoring, and they found a pattern in their data, in their investigation they said, “surely this is the hand of providence.”
3. And to Mary, God spoke as he so often does to mothers, through her heart, as she held God’s miracle gift against her chest. And she wondered, “*God what are you doing?*”

### God wants you to find him. Learn to look for him.

#### Matthew 2:3-12

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.<sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.<sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6 ""But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.""

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.<sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.<sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.<sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.<sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

It must have been confusing for the wise men, looking for a king in a palace. And still they bowed down and worshipped.

- *How do we embrace something God is doing when we didn't expect it, or when we don't understand it or we were offended by the way he did it?*
- My son's observation is deeper than he realizes: *"Me want baby Jesus grow bigger?"*

#### **Revelation 20:11** says

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.

- The Desired of All Peoples has come!
- Jesus the babe was born, not to stay a babe, but to rise to be King of the Earth.
- But he keeps growing. He's too big for this world. He fills heaven and earth until there's no place for anything but Jesus. He is everything. He fills everything. There's no room for anything but perfect love.

So many people come to faith in Jesus. But they never grow past that infancy stage. Jesus stays frozen in their lives, a precious nativity set. But their faith never grows beyond the pageantry, the lights and the gifts and the good feelings of Christmas.

This is our problem we can hear this a thousand times: "God loves you."

And we say, "I know." No, you don't know. How can anyone say they know infinite perfect love?

Just because you waded 1 foot into the ocean surf doesn't mean you've experienced the ocean. **God wants you to go deeper into his perfect love.**

**Closing Song: Acapella – Hark The Herald Angels Sing (Glory In The Highest)**