

Sing it Like you Mean It! Confessing the Carols

The First Noel – Acts 17:1-12, 1 Tim 3:14-17

Brothers and sisters, the Christmas season not only brings us all the music and carols that we are looking at in our current series, but it also inspires a lot of movies as well.

There's Home Alone, How the Grinch stole Christmas, the Santa Clause, Chevy Chase's Christmas Vacation, A Christmas Story, Miracle on 34th Street, Scrooged, A Charlie Brown Christmas, Its a Wonderful Life and of course... what is claimed to be the greatest Christmas movie of all time... Die Hard.

Now if you fact-check that last statement, you will discover that particular movie claim is disputed – and in fact I would personally say that that The Lord of the Rings movies are the greatest Christmas movies of all time.

In the early 2000's nothing said Christmas quite like waiting for the next installment of the Peter Jackson's epic trilogy to be released and watching it on the big-screen over Christmas

vacation, and to this day my Christmas holidays are not quite complete without a Lord of the Rings extended edition movie marathon.

Now these classic Christmas movies have also produced some very memorable lines as well, from the iconic *"Ahhhhhhhhh"* in Home Alone to a Christmas Story's *"you'll shoot your eye out"* and a Wonderful Life's *"Every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings."*

But its the opening lines from the Lord of the Rings that have the most significance for us this morning. As the movie starts, the voice of the Elf Queen Galadriel solemnly admonishes the viewers stating *"And some things that should not have been forgotten were lost. History became legend. Legend became myth."*

And this is significant for us brothers and sisters because our Christmas celebrations and traditions can easily follow the same trajectory if we aren't careful.

Take Santa Claus for example, this mythical man is based on the legends and stories about St. Nicholas, a real-life historical Christian whose church leadership during the plagues and persecution of the late 200's and early 300's in the city of Myra is often forgotten and lost to us.

Even our traditional nativity plays are in danger of the history becoming legend and legend becoming myth.

For example, how many times have you seen an inn-keeper in a nativity play who tells Joseph and Mary that there is no room for them at the Inn and then brings them to a stable? Right???

And how often is the nativity play set in some sort of barn-like stable, with nice straw and hay all artistically arranged in rough but cottagey-quiet wooden manger??

And how many times do nativity plays have the Wise Men showing up at the stable to worship the baby Jesus while he's

in the manger? And how many times do we have the angels singing?

Well in pretty much every nativity play that we put on... And I should know because I'm responsible for arranging that every year at Christmas.

I set up an artistically stylized manger scene on the stage, and at the Christmas eve service we get the kids to play their parts, and we've included an inn-keeper, we have the Wise-men show up at the stable and bow in worship around the manger, and when the angels sing we join in with them by singing *"Angels we have Heard on High."*

But are any of these particular elements that we so often include in our Christmas nativity plays actually in the text of scripture?

Well, why don't we check the gospels to find out. If you have a bible handy why don't you turn with me to John 1...

and we'll discover that the gospel John doesn't have the Christmas story... the closest John comes is in 1:14 *"The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us"*

Ok, so what about Mark? Let's turn to Mark 1... and what do we find there? Nothing – Mark starts his gospel with Jesus' baptism... no his birth. That's interesting.

So let's turn to Matthew 1 – how does that gospel start? Well there's seventeen verses of a genealogy tracing Jesus back to Abraham and then eight verses describing how Joseph eventually comes to terms with Mary's unexplained pregnancy, and Jesus birth is briefly mentioned in vs.25.

Then in Matthew 2 we find the account of the Wisemen, which is told in twelve verses and we'll notice in vs. 11 that they found Jesus in a house, they didn't find him lying in a manger in a stable – like we so often portray in our nativity plays.

So that leaves us with Luke, this must be where we get all our information about the Christmas story – so let's turn to Luke 1 to see what we find there.

Well this chapter is some eighty verses long and its mostly about the events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist and how the virgin Mary is told that she will become pregnant and give birth to Jesus.

We have to get to chapter 2 to get to the story of Jesus' birth, where we find the familiar details about the Roman census, the trip to Bethlehem, the shepherds in the fields at night and the angels and so on.

But there is no kindly inn-keeper showing Mary and Joseph to a stable, it simply says there was no guest-room available for them and as a result when Jesus was born, they used a feeding trough to lay him in.

And its also interesting to note that no where does it mention that the Angels were singing, vs. 13 tells us that a multitude of

the heavenly host were praising God by saying... *“glory to God in the highest...”* but it doesn’t say they were singing this.

Now the point of this is to demonstrate to us how easy it is for us to use speculation to fill in some of the details in the story, combine different gospel accounts together into one, and how we read our assumptions into certain phrases in the scriptures – like automatically assuming that praising God means someone is singing...

And we do this for well-intentioned reasons of course. The scripture was not written as a script for a play and sometimes its just easier and simpler to move from one scene to another by taking some creative liberties – like adding in an Inn-keeper to bring Mary and Joseph to the stable or having the Wisemen show up at the manger to worship Jesus and present him with their gifts.

But this begs the question as to why we are presenting a nativity play in the first place?

Well, the answer to this question draws from what we learned last week about the historical context. During the medieval era in Europe the scriptures were not available in the common language of the people and there were very low levels of education and literacy, so the Church attempted to help people learn and remember the teachings of the scriptures through singing hymns and performing plays, especially nativity plays at Christmas time.

And the Christmas carol that we are looking at this morning, the First Noel, was likely developed as lyrical accompaniment for a medieval nativity play sometime in the 13th or 14th Century.

These lyrics were set to the music we are now familiar with in the Cornwall region of England, and the melody is somewhat unusual for an English folk tune in how it is arranged. Some scholars think this is because the melody was originally the treble part of another carol arrangement, and somehow as it was passed down it aurally it was utilized as a melody instead and came to be used for the First Noel.

The term Noel is a French word for Christmas or the Christmas season, and is derived from the Latin phrase “Natalis dies” which means “the day of birth.” The repeated use of Noel in the chorus of this carol is therefore similar to singing happy birthday to someone.

The modern arrangement and scoring and first publishing of the carol is credited to Gilbert Davis who put together an anthology of Cornish Christmas carols in 1823, and it turned up again ten years later in the 1833 publication of Gilbert and Sandys Carols.

It’s a bit unclear but apparently Sandys did more of the editing and arranging of the current form while Gilbert was responsible for contributing some additional lyrics, though neither was a professional musician of any sort.

Apparently, their motivation to produce these publications in the early 1800’s was a concern that singing Christmas carols had fallen out of favor and they wished to remedy that, and perhaps this decline was due to the historic opposition of

Christmas celebrations that were more reminiscent of our Stampede week than they were focused on the reason for the season.

At any rate, this collection of Carols coincided with the growth of Methodism and their endorsement of singing hymns and so the First Noel gained in popularity wherever Methodism went and has become one of the classic carols of Christmas.

Now if we examine the lyrics of this carol, especially comparing them with the other carols we’ve looked at so far, its quite evident that this is a simple recitation of the events of the nativity story from Luke 2 and Matthew 2 starting with the shepherds out in the fields.

There isn’t much for complex theological concepts represented here – its more of a narration, a reciting of the story about the birth of the Israel’s king, and the majority of the song actually focuses on the how the other kings, the Wisemen come from afar to seek Him.

The most common version of the carol starts with describing the encounter of the shepherds and the angels in the first verse, the introduction of the Christmas star in the second, the story of the Wise Men seeing the star, traveling, going to Bethlehem and worshiping Jesus by giving him their gifts in vs. 3, 4 and 5.

The carol then wraps up in verse 6 with an invitation for us to respond similarly in worshiping Jesus as Lord because He is the creator, and has bought us with his death on the cross. This is the most theological of all the verses as it instructs us how we ought to respond to the details of Jesus birth and what it means for Him to be a King.

Now one of the clues that we find in this song that indicates it was based on the content of a nativity play comes as we move from verse 1 to verse 2.

In the most common versions of this song the lyrics of verse 2 say *“they looked up and saw a star...”* Brothers and sisters have you ever thought about who this is referring to??

I must confess that I certainly haven’t.

But as I was reflecting on the lyrics for this message, I realized that this line is referring to the shepherds. The shepherds looked up and saw a star... in fact other older versions of this carol state this specifically.

But there’s only one problem with this, and I think you probably know what it is – the scriptures don’t mention anything about the shepherds seeing the Christmas star.

But... I can see how this would be a dramatic device in a nativity play to create a smooth transition from one the scene to the next, using the star in the sky to move the focus from the shepherds and angels over to the Wisemen – that’s a great scripting move for a play.

However – I do find it a bit concerning how I have sung this song for years and I’ve just sung right by that and not noticed it. I mean just last week we were talking about how important it is that we make sure the lyrics we’re singing are biblically

and theologically correct and then I'm singing this carol at the end of the service and missed it completely.

Which just goes to show you how easily history becomes legend - and if we don't check the historical sources, then legend can become myth. And brothers and sisters I would add that in regards to our Christmas celebrations in many cases myth then becomes sentiment.

Now don't get me wrong, there is plenty of room for joy and happiness and gratitude and amazement at Christmas – in fact when you realize the historical reality of what has occurred and the implications of it, if you don't feel anything that would be a cause for concern.

However if we are happy and joyful and feeling wonderful at Christmas without having that grounded in the historical reality of what happened and its significance, then we are falling into sentimentality and again... Christmas nativity plays are a great example of that.

Do we include these in our celebrations because it helps us remember the Christmas story? Because it's a great way to include the children and have them participate in learning and remembering the details about Christmas?

Or are we fond of having pageants because its cute and endearing to dress up the kids and have them look adorable as little angels and that will really go over well with everyone who comes out once a year on Christmas eve – its nice and sentimental.

Do you see what I'm talking about? It's so very easy for Christmas to become a sentimental celebration instead of a scriptural celebration – I mean there's a cute baby involved right?? (the same can be said for Breakfast Theatre drama)

So, we need to remind ourselves that the music, the carols, the nativity plays and the good news that we hear in them are supposed to help whet our appetites for the scripture, not be a substitute for them.

In this regard brothers and sisters we ought to be like the Berean Jews that were mentioned in our scripture reading this morning in Acts 17:11. When Paul and Silas came and shared the good news about Jesus being the Messiah, they didn't reject it and they didn't blindly accept it.

But as it says *"they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."*

So singing a carol like the First Noel should motivate us to go and read the actual story in in the scriptures, seeing a Nativity play at Christmas even should inspire us to dig into the details and read more, study the context and ask questions.

Why does Luke start with the birth of John the Baptist? Why does Matthew begin with a connecting Jesus to Abraham? Why do Mark and John not mention anything about Christmas at all? What are they trying to help us understand about who Jesus is?

This is what carols and Christmas plays are supposed to make us curious to find out, they should leave us feeling somewhat unfulfilled and anticipating the main course – they are only the appetizers... let's not confuse it with the main course of the text of scripture.

So, brothers and sisters, as our second reading from 2 Timothy 3: 15 reminds us, the purpose of all scripture is to point us to Jesus Christ, so - that whenever we hear something said or stated about Jesus Christ outside of the scriptures... that should cause us to return to the scriptures to verify whatever we have heard about Him, just as the Berean Jews did.

Now, the point of doing this is not to pick out whatever discrepancies you might find between a nativity play and the details in Luke 2 and then make a big deal and suggest we're doing something significantly wrong if our nativity play had an inn-keeper in it or that we had the wise-men show up at the manger when it should have been to a house...

To do that would be to fall into the error which Jesus indicted the Pharisees for in John 5:39-40 where he says *“you study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”*

Yet it is important to make sure that we pay attention to the details of scripture, not picking and choosing what we like or don't like with what God's Word has to say to us, just as Paul encourages Timothy, in the previous chapter 2:15 to be diligent in the duties of his ministry without quarrelling over words but presenting himself as someone *“who correctly handles the word of truth.”*

In other words, our approach should be that if a Christmas carol or a nativity play has a discrepancy in it and we notice that – how might that focus our attention on something in the scripture that we've not noticed before and what might we learn from it and apply to our lives?

After all, even minor details in scripture are *“God-breathed*

and are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:16)

Not to mention that when the Bereans investigated scripture to verify what Paul and Silas were preaching about Jesus, that He was in fact a King, Acts 17:12 says that *“as a result... many of them believed!”*

So when we sing the First Noel and then we go to the scriptures to verify that indeed at the birth of Jesus the Angels told the shepherds the Christ was born and praised God, and the shepherd then went to worship him, and yes there was a star that signified a King had been born, and the wise-men from the east came looking for him, and they gave Him gifts and worshiped him, brothers and sisters my prayer is that the Holy Spirit will cause you to believe that Christ – this baby born in a manger – is as the song says, the King of Israel.

And while you may not fully understand all the implications of that... you would at least understand that if wise-men, magi,

kings of other nations would come and bow down in worship of Him, then we too ought to recognize His right to rule our lives and acknowledge that even as a baby – He is worthy of our worship.

Brothers and sisters, the baby Jesus is not cute and cuddly – rather He is a King for whom the highest spiritual beings give praise and thanks, He is a King whom the lowliest of shepherds can recognize and He is a King whom the highest-ranking kings seek out to pay their honor and respect to and bend their knee in allegiance.

How can we not do the same??

So, If you remember one thing from the message this morning brothers and sisters, let it be that you know the difference between sentimentality and saving faith in Jesus and that you chose to celebrate saving faith over sentiment at Christmas.

May this carol always help us remember the history of the first Christmas, the first noel – let us not let it be forgotten for us,

or become legend and turn into myth and breed sentimentality...

So, we're going to have the band come back up and help us sing to remember, sing to point us to the scriptures – and let's sing it like we mean it.

Amen