

A TIME OF INVITATION**2 PETER 3:9**

Christmas is a time of invitation. We get invited to parties. We get invited to gatherings of friends and family. We get invited to Christmas Eve services and other events at church. Christmas is an invitation rich time of year. This Christmas season we're reflecting on how well-known, much loved Christmas carols underline or illuminate important aspects of the message of Christmas. These carols support and promote the more important words of Scripture itself. For example, one of the great truths of the Christian faith is the fact God welcomes anyone and everyone who comes to Him with the right heart attitude: acknowledging we're sinners, asking for forgiveness, trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection to make us right with God, and desiring now to do life God's way. Your race or ethnicity doesn't matter to God. God could care less about your level of education, your financial status, or what social class you belong to. While growing up in a Jesus-loving, church-going family is a great blessing, God invites and welcomes people into a relationship with Him who didn't have the benefit of such a background. The Bible says, "He is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent." (2 Pt. 3:9 NLT) What's intriguing to see is how God's invitation to one and all was demonstrated in the Christmas story itself. On the one hand, it's obvious...

JESUS CAME FOR THOSE WHO HAVE IT ALL.

The wise men who came to visit the baby Jesus shortly after His birth had it all. Who were these men? Sometimes called magi, they were known throughout the ancient world as skilled in philosophy, medicine, and the natural sciences. They interpreted the dreams of kings and emperors and were often attached to a royal court. They also believed in and practiced astrology as everyone else did in pagan cultures back then. They foretold the future and people's destinies from the position of the stars and the planets. It's true, the Bible says Christians must avoid astrology; nevertheless, these men – the magi – represented the very best of pagan wisdom in that day and time. They were honestly seeking God the best way they knew how through the revelation of nature – the stars and their movements in the night sky. They were the intelligentsia of their day – the upper class, the upper crust. They represent people who have it all but recognize they still need Jesus above all.

Where did they come from? Tradition says Persia – present day Iran. I like another option better – the area around ancient Babylon in present day Iraq. Hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, the Jewish people had been exiled for 70 years in Babylon. That might well explain the magi's knowledge of Jewish prophecies regarding a coming Messiah. And what was it they saw up there in the night sky? Some believe it was a supernova or a comet that shone with unusual brilliance. The most intriguing theory I've heard is that they saw a very rare conjunction of three planets - Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars – a phenomenon that only happens about every 800 years. Scientists verify that such a conjunction was in fact visible back in 7 or 6 BC which is close to the date scholars suggest for Jesus' birth. Whoever these wise were, wherever they came from,

and whatever they observed in the night sky, they knew someone important had been born that demanded their immediate and worshipful attention.

The great Christmas carol, “We Three Kings” is all about the magi. “We three kings of orient are, Bearing gifts we traverse afar, Field and fountain, moor and mountain, Following yonder star. O star of wonder, star of night, Star with royal beauty bright, Westward leading, still proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.” Now, the Bible never says there were just three magi and it never identifies them as kings, although they probably served a king in some royal court. John Henry Hopkins, Jr. (1820-1891) was the author and composer of “We Three Kings” in 1863 for a Christian celebration known as Epiphany. What’s Epiphany? It’s an event some Christians celebrate twelve days after Christmas usually on January 6. It’s the day some say the wise men found the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. The word “epiphany” comes from a Greek word often associated with the manifestation or appearance of a god. Since Jesus was and is God, the word can refer to how Jesus had been revealed to the wise men as God.

Did you know Epiphany once rivaled Christmas Day as a holiday and a celebration? During the 1800s, Epiphany – especially among those who belonged to the Church of England or the Episcopal Church – was the day the Christmas tree was taken down as well as the day children received gifts and treats attached to and hanging from the tree. Hopkins was a priest in the Episcopal Church and he loved the Christmas season. He never married or had children of his own, but he loved kids. He wanted to give an appropriate, meaningful gift to his nephews and nieces for Epiphany. So his gift to them was the carol “We Three Kings.” I think you’ll agree the cadence and feel of the melody makes you think of the swaying stride of camels carrying these men on their long journey to find and worship Jesus.

Worship Jesus. Don’t overlook that very important fact. Somehow the Holy Spirit had revealed to these pagan men that Jesus was God in human flesh. The Bible tells us, “They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” (Mt. 2:11 NLT) That word “worship” meant to bow low in submission before One you worship and adore. Even though these were important men – men who had it all, so to speak – they knew they were dealing with God in human flesh when they gazed upon Jesus. No matter how high born someone might be or how great his or her possessions, achievements, or credentials, the only appropriate posture before Jesus is to be on your knees. Worshipful submission.

Too many people assume the tradition of giving gifts goes back to the myth of Santa Claus. Wrong. It goes back to the historical fact of the wise men’s visit. What they presented to Jesus was both prophetic and instructive. They gave Jesus gold – a gift fit for a king. Hopkins wrote a verse about each gift in “We Three Kings.” The verse about gold says, “Born a King on Bethlehem’s plain, Gold I bring to crown him again, King forever, ceasing never Over us all to reign.” When you submit your life to Jesus, you recognize He’s King and He reigns over you. The magi gave Jesus frankincense – a gift fit for a priest. Hopkins’ verse says, “Frankincense to offer have I, Incense owns a

Deity nigh; Prayer and praising gladly raising, Worshiping God on high.” Frankincense was used in the Jewish temple to worship God. A priest is a mediator – someone who represents people before God. That’s what Jesus did at the cross, through the empty tomb, and what He still does for us before His Father. He was and is a mediator.

These wise men gave Jesus myrrh – a gift fit for one who will suffer and die. It was used to embalm dead bodies back in Jesus’ day and time. No doubt it was used to wrap the body of Jesus some 33 years later when His body was taken down from the cross. Hopkins verse about myrrh says, “Myrrh is mine; it’s bitter perfume, Breathes a life of gathering gloom, Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.” But he doesn’t let the story end there. The last verse of “We Three Kings” sums up the good news about Jesus very well. “Glorious now behold him arise, King and God and Sacrifice; Alleluia! Alleluia! Sounds thro’ the earth and skies.” Yes, Jesus did indeed come for those who have it all. By the same token, He came just as much...

JESUS CAME FOR THOSE WHO HAVE NOTHING AT ALL.

A second group of people visited the baby Jesus: the shepherds. They were a very different group than the magi. It’s a mistake to think of shepherds back in the first century as noble, admirable, or ruggedly glamorous people. If you’d lived in Jesus’ day, it’s more likely you’d have looked down your nose at shepherds. Everybody else did. They were despised as being lower class. Most often, shepherds and their families were poor people who spent little - if any - time at home. Shepherds lived hard, brief lives. They had boring jobs caring for stubborn, dumb sheep 24 hours day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year. They mostly lived out in the open exposed to the hot sun, cold nights, bone-chilling winds, and soaking rain. Life was a pretty joyless experience for shepherds back in Jesus’ day. They represent people who have nothing at all, but – much to their surprise – discover God wants an eternal relationship with them just as much as He does with those who have it all.

Another great Christmas carol focuses on the shepherds: “Go, Tell It On the Mountain.” I don’t think it’s accidental it emerged out of another group of people despised by some as being lower class and who, quite literally, also had nothing at all: African-American slaves. “Go, Tell It On the Mountain” is a spiritual – a type of song that emerged out of the evil, cruel, and humiliating experience of slavery in our country. There aren’t that many spirituals about the joy and triumph of Jesus’ birth because most of them are about suffering – its reality and the desire to escape it by going to Heaven. It’s a minor miracle this song survived at all. Whoever composed it likely could not read or write. It went unpublished for decades - just passed along by oral tradition.

But while we can’t identify the original author, one very special American family has been key in its preservation as well as many other African-American spirituals. John Wesley Work was an African-American church choir director in Nashville after the Civil War. He was both a scholar and a musician. He developed a deep interest in the music produced by slaves in America. He believed his own people would benefit spiritually by learning the songs their ancestors sang during those bitter days of slavery.

Work passed his love for music and history on to his son, John Wesley Work, Jr. who became renowned as a folk singer, composer, and collector of African-American spirituals. John Work, Jr. was a professor of Latin and history at Fisk College – now Fisk University - in Nashville. He and his brother, Frederick, kept spirituals alive and saved them from being lost or forgotten. Apparently it was those two brothers, John and Frederick Work, who discovered the original version of "Go, Tell It On the Mountain." They rearranged the melody and encouraged a famous singing ensemble, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, to use it in their concerts in the 1880s as the group toured the US, England, and Europe raising money for Fisk College.

John Wesley Work III (1901-1967) carried on the family legacy. This carol and scores of other spirituals were saved through his efforts. A graduate of Julliard, Work III was a devoted student of history and music. During the Great Depression, he took another look at "Go, Tell It On the Mountain." He edited it based on additional research. He added a new arrangement as well as another stanza. The version of this carol we know and sing today was largely shaped by John Wesley Work III who published it in 1940.

Notice how the carol drills down on the experience of the shepherds - this group of people who had so much in common with African-American slaves. "While shepherds kept their watching, O'er silent flocks by night, Behold throughout the heavens, There shone a holy light. The shepherds feared and trembled, When, lo! Above the earth, Rang out the angel chorus, That hailed our Savior's birth." It was to lowly people, humble people, and people who had nothing at all that Christmas angels first announced the greatest news of all, "Don't be afraid! I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem." (Lk. 2:10-11 NLT) What was the angel saying? He wasn't implying God will save every human being without exception. God only saves sinners who repent, trust in, and follow Jesus. Instead, "all people" means God shows no partiality in saving sinners. We live in a world where people are separated as male or female, rich or poor, black or white, educated or uneducated, powerful or powerless, and citizen or immigrant. None of these distinctions matter to God in the least. None of them exclude you from God's salvation. In fact, the only qualification you need to be included among "all people" is that you know you're a sinner in great need of salvation and you receive Jesus with complete surrender and great joy. Jesus came for you.

The carol also captures the irony of how the greatest Being in the universe – God Himself – who had no need to be humble instead practiced incredible humility by being born as a baby in Bethlehem. "Down in a lowly manger, The humble Christ was born, And God sent us salvation, That blessed Christmas morn." So, by all means, regardless of your station in life, how much or how little you have, or whether people think of you as being high class or low class, "Go, tell it on the mountain, Over the hills and everywhere; Go, tell it on the mountain, That Jesus Christ is born!" That brings us back to where we started this morning – the obvious but still wonderful truth that...

JESUS CAME FOR ALL.

God invites anyone and everyone to have an eternal relationship with Him through His Son, Jesus. If Christmas is anything, it's a time of invitation. This is why Jesus was born. Because Jesus came into the world and then died on a cross and rose again, anyone and everyone can have access to God through Jesus. The Bible says, "This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth." (1 Tim. 2:3-4 NLT) I think of what Simeon said when he saw the baby Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem, "I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!" (Lk. 2:30-32 NLT) Simeon knew God would provide salvation not to just Jewish folk like himself, but to everyone around the world as well. This is wonderful news for everyone here... and everyone not here, too! No one is excluded or left out.

At the beginning of today's service we sang what many music critics consider the greatest Christmas carol ever written, "O Come, All Ye Faithful." It's been translated into more than 150 languages and used in thousands of cantatas and musical productions. "O come, all ye faithful, Joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem! Come and behold him, Born the King of angels." It's a carol that celebrates the fact Christmas is a time of mighty invitation. God's invitation to you and me. It's also rich in all the great theology of Christmas. "True God of true God, Light from Light eternal, Lo, he shuns not the virgin's womb; Son of the Father, Begotten, not created." There's the Incarnation. The virgin birth. The deity of Jesus. "Sing, choirs of angels, Sing in exultation! O sing, all ye citizens of heaven above; Glory to God, All glory in the highest." Invitation yet again. "Yea, Lord, we greet thee, Born this happy morning, Jesus, to thee be all glory given; Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing." All those who put their trust and faith in Jesus are invited to give Him all the glory.

"O Come, All Ye Faithful" was written by an English Roman Catholic priest named John Francis Wade (1711 - 1786). In 1745 at age 35, Wade's life was threatened. Violence had broken out between members of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. Catholics were forced to practice their faith secretly and many priests fled England fearing for their lives including Wade. He ended up living and ministering in France. Wade was a gifted musician himself. As a Catholic priest, it was only natural he composed in Latin. He probably wrote "Adestes Fideles" – the original Latin name for this carol - around 1750. It wasn't until 1841 that Wade's carol was finally translated into English. It became increasingly well known in the US before 1900. It became a favorite of those who participated in another Christmas tradition we associate with the season: caroling. Going from house to house singing Christmas songs apparently had a resurgence in our country around 1900. "O Come, All Ye Faithful" was often the final song sung at those caroling outings.

Right there is a wonderful irony. This carol was written at a time when people who called themselves Christians were literally at war with each other. How unlike Jesus can you be to attack – and even kill - other followers of Jesus! Unbelievable. And yet this carol invites any and all who follow Jesus to come together to the same place each Christmas and bow before Christ the Lord in worship and thanksgiving. "O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord."

You might have heard about the leftist guerrilla rebel groups who hid out and lived in the dense jungles of Colombia for decades while fighting the government. The battle was a stalemate for years. Rather than trying to defeat these rebels militarily, the government of Columbia ran a series of creative campaigns to convince these rebels just to give up the fight and reenter society. A few early attempts failed. Then in 2010 a different approach was tried — an ad campaign called "Operation Christmas." At nine strategic places in the jungle where the rebels lived, hundreds of Christmas lights were strung on 75-foot tall trees. When the rebels walked by, a motion sensor set off the lights and a recorded message said, "If Christmas can come to the jungle, you can come home." That campaign resulted in 331 rebels laying down their weapons and returning to their homes. The next year, 2011, a similar campaign ran titled "Operation Rivers of Light." It required 7,000 translucent, lit plastic balls with small gifts and heartwarming notes inserted inside the balls inviting the rebels to come home. As the rebels traveled up and down the jungle rivers, they saw the balls coming towards them, all lit up and floating on the water. They couldn't resist; they opened the balls and received the gifts and read the notes. More rebels gave up the fight and returned home. Then in 2012 the campaign was called "Operation Bethlehem." Huge skylights were shone up into the night sky and the following message ran: "This Christmas follow the light that will guide you to your family and your freedom." More rebels gave up the fight and returned home. The power of an invitation. Amazing!

If you have yet to receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you're out there in a spiritual jungle. You're a rebel from God's presence. Maybe you expect God to come after you and try to defeat you. Or maybe you just expect Him to leave you alone in your rebellion. Instead, you get an invitation. Come home. Christmas was and is God's invitation to come home. Drop your weapons, leave the jungle of alienation from God, and walk to your Heavenly Father's house. If you've already accepted God's invitation, rejoice, enjoy and share the invitation with others. If you have yet to accept the invitation, why not do it today? Christmas is a time of invitation.