

# God's Initiative

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, I wonder how you'd complete this sentence.! It shouldn't be Christmas without...

What? For you. Many of us love our Christmas traditions, don't we? And that's a good thing. But the danger is, I think, we can find too much happiness, too much security, in the comfortable and familiar traditions.

And then when Christmas is past, the comfort and security have gone. We don't look for comfort and security in one place it can truly be found.

And that is in what the actual Christmas story is all about. So I want us today to look at that story. Now as we consider the readings we've heard, we'll see Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without God taking the initiative.

Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without God taking the initiative. Think about some of the things we've heard. God takes the initiative in telling Joseph that this baby to be born to Mary is actually God's own son.

[ 1 : 27 ] God takes the initiative in saying this baby should be called Jesus because he will save his people. God takes the initiative in the Lord Jesus Christ being Emmanuel, God with us.

God takes the initiative to say, as he tells, as the angels proclaim, a saviour is born. I don't know if you heard on the news last week at the end of the climate change conference in Paris, President Obama said, I believe this moment can be a turning point for the world.

He carried on, it's the best chance we have to save the one planet we've got. Well, sure, it's a great thing to have a climate change agreement, an amazing thing to have 195 countries sign up to it. But is it really a turning point in the history of the world? Surely the Christmas story is a turning point in the history of the world. God coming to live among us.

In fact, we set our calendars by it, don't we? We're now in 2015, approximately 2015 years after these events happened in human history. And God's reason for sending his son was indeed to save the world, to save the planet, in a way that climate change agreements cannot do.

[ 2 : 40 ] See, it wouldn't be Christmas without God's initiative. But the question then is, how do we respond to that initiative? How do we respond? I'd like us to consider for a few moments the various characters who we've read about and how they responded to the first Christmas.

And I wonder if you can see your own response, your own emotions, reflected in the way they responded and reacted. So first of all, in the reading, Reg just read to us, on page, well, Matthew chapter 2, whatever page that is, we see King Herod, what was his reaction?

He was angry. Matthew tells us he was disturbed. We read on in the story. If you read on in the Bible, you'll see he was so angry at the threat of having this other king born that he killed off all the baby boys under two years old in Bethlehem.

And that entirely fits with what we know about Herod the Great's character from other historical sources. This is a man who was so desperate to cling to power, he killed his own wife and several of his own sons so they couldn't threaten his reign.

Now these days, most people don't get that angry about Christmas, do they? Yet people can still feel threatened by this claim that Jesus is a king who has a right to rule.

[ 3 : 56 ] A primary school in Brentford just this year received a petition from 200 people asking them not to do anything Christian in the run-up to Christmas. I think that is a little symbol, a little sign of the anger that people feel at Christian claims about Christmas.

As well as anger, there was also anxiety. I don't know if you noticed, the people of Jerusalem were anxious, were disturbed as well as Herod. In their case, that disturbance, I think, was anxiety. What was their despotic ruler going to do if he felt under threat? And so they were anxious. Anxious about their security. Anxious about their future. Anxious about their well-being.

And a lot of people are anxious at Christmas time, aren't they? But these people in Jerusalem should have known God's promises from their Old Testament scriptures. That God was one day going to send a rescuer to his people.

So they shouldn't have been anxious, they should have trusted. But it seemed they no longer really believed that God could do something in their lives and in history. It's like God was an academic idea for them.

[ 5 : 05 ] And so they were anxious and lost all hope. I wonder if we feel anxious as we look at the economic climate, as we look at the world stage, as we look at our own lives.

Do we feel anxiety instead of hope? As well as anger and anxiety, there was apathy. Who did Herod turn to to find out what to do?

It was the religious leaders of his day, the teachers of the law, the experts in the Bible. And they correctly told him the king will be born in Bethlehem. They correctly quoted from the prophet Micah who 700 years earlier had promised God's king would be born in Bethlehem.

But then what did they do? Nothing. It was apathy. They couldn't be bothered to do anything else. They believed all the right things in their heads, but it didn't affect their hearts.

And I wonder for some of us who profess to be Christians, there's a danger that we hear the Christmas story and we believe it in our heads, but it doesn't change our hearts and our lives.

[ 6 : 13 ] But actually our response can be apathy as well. But in contrast to the anger, the anxiety and the apathy of those people, there are two groups of people who reacted very differently.

They took action. Now both these groups of people were actually outsiders. Both of them took action because God did something to grab their attention.

And both of them took action to seek to find out more and that action ended up in awe and worship and joy. And those two groups were the shepherds and the magi, the wise men.

Now shepherds were outsiders in the religious culture of Israel of the day. They were dirty folk who looked after sheep. They were people who worked the night shift. I guess like minicab drivers today who always work a night shift.

It's hard to be really involved in social life and in community, isn't it? And worse than that, shepherds were often blamed for things going missing. They were distrusted as these strange people who lived outside the town.

[ 7 : 16 ] So they were outsiders. And God comes to them, God attracts their attention in the middle of an ordinary night shift. They didn't expect anything to happen. They were probably sitting around a campfire cracking open a six pack of beers between them, maybe around a fire, keeping themselves warm, looking after their sheep.

When all of a sudden, God sends angels to grab their attention. And they act. They want to find out more. They go to Bethlehem to find out more. And then there was the wise men.

They were outsiders too. They probably came from Babylon. They came from a totally different religious background. They worshipped many gods, not one god, like the Jews.

And yet, God grabbed their attention with this star in the sky. And what did they do? They searched at great length. They travelled many miles. And their search ended in bowing down in worship, giving their gifts to King Jesus.

As you think about those different reactions, the anger, the anxiety, the apathy, or the action to find out more, leading to worship and awe and joy.

[ 8 : 32 ] Do you see yourself reflected in any of those? So your temptation may be, like me, if you grew up in a Christian home, so easy to be apathetic, isn't it?

We just go through the motions every year. In which case, perhaps what we need to do is go back and look at this story again and ask the Holy Spirit to warm our hearts and open our eyes to the incredible truth of God taking on the flesh of human beings and living among us to rescue us.

If actually your reaction is anger at these claims, can I ask you to think about what makes you angry? Because anger is usually a result of fear, isn't it?

What do you fear about God coming to rescue, God coming to save? Or if you're anxious like the people in Jerusalem, then could it be you're just too preoccupied with material things around, with what you can see and feel and touch right now?

Maybe you need to lift your eyes to this God who comes at Christmas to be Emmanuel, God with us, to rescue. Or maybe, like the shepherds or the wise men, you feel like you're an outsider to this Christian Christmas story.

[ 9 : 48 ] Maybe like the shepherds, you just feel marginalized in some way or looked down on by Christian people. As shepherds were looked down on by the religious leaders of the day. Or maybe like the magi, you grew up in a different religious background.

And you think, well, I could never follow this Jesus Christ. If I say to you, look at this story. God comes for the outsiders. He specially calls to them with angels or stars to grab their attention and bring them in.

He comes to the outsiders. Is he maybe grabbing your attention today in some way? Maybe through illness, maybe through difficulties in work or in a family life.

He'd grab our attention to say, show us we're not capable. We need help. Maybe he's grabbing your attention through a friend or through someone bringing you here today.

So I urge you to be like the shepherds and the wise men and act on that. Because you see how the story ended for them? It ended with joy, didn't it? The wise men worshipped this baby king.

[ 10 : 58 ] They realised he was more important than they are. They realised he was the source of their hope. The shepherds went on their way rejoicing, telling others about it. We tell other people things that make us happy, don't we?

We praise things which we love and which we enjoy. Taking action now could lead to joy later. We want to help you with that.

If you'd like to talk to me about it at the end, please do. Or after Christmas and the new year, we're going to run a course called Christianity Explored. The details are on the back of your sheet. Do please take time to find out more.

There are also details of the two Christian groups that meet in Ealing Council. For those of you who work over in Percival House, do contact them. They'd love to hear from you. We'll come back on another Tuesday in January where we'll be meeting downstairs in the Telfer room.

Same time. 10 past 1 to 1.40. But take time to respond. It wouldn't be Christmas without what?

[ 12 : 02 ] Gingerbread lattes? Nativity scenes? A terrible amount of stress getting ready for Christmas? No, it wouldn't be Christmas without God taking the initiative to step into our world to rescue what is rightfully His and to be God with us, Emmanuel.

And for me personally, it wouldn't be Christmas without singing a carol that sums up all of that so beautifully. Hark! The Herald Angels Sing. Thank you.