God With Us

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[0:00] for the new year. My day job is in and out of the Middle East. That's another story from Brazil, and maybe we'll tell you some of that if we get back for the prayer time in February. Maybe that would be something to aim for. But I want to ask a question here. We're going to have two goes at this passage. We've got a bit more to read, and the first question is this. Who was in a nativity play this year? Who was in a play? Quite a lot of our younger folks, right? Not many of the grown-ups, except him. He got into one. How did you get into one? So we'll give the grown-ups a go in a minute, but would you mind telling me what part did you play? Yes. The angel. Who else was an angel?

Anybody else? The angel Gabriel. Okay. Who else? What part did you have? And I was the narrator. You were the narrator. Who else was telling the story then? The narrator.
Somebody else. Yeah, you got that. Well done. What else? Somebody over here. Anybody over here? Were you in a nativity play? And what part did you play? You what? Sorry? You have to speak up, you know. You were a donkey. Anybody else was a donkey? Very good. Who else was another kind of animal in a nativity play? You were at? What were you? A lion. A lion. My word. Very good. Just goes to show that it's not in the script, is it really? Okay. Anybody else? Yeah. What were you? Mary. That'll do nicely. Anybody else? Was anybody Joseph? Anybody Joseph? No Josephs here today. What were you?
A shepherd. A shepherd. A shepherd. Who else was a shepherd? And we must have had the we three kings. Well done. There's a shepherd over there. Who were the we three kings? Anybody? Yeah, you were a we three king. Well done. The Scottish version, of course. But you know, this is exactly what I thought would happen when I asked that question. Because the person in this passage in Matthew was not in your nativity. Was he? Can you guess who it is? He's part of the story. Of course, Matthew has fast forwarded things, pressed the forward button, about two years probably. So we kind of squash all this into one play. And somehow the wise guys get in, but there's somebody here who doesn't. Herod. Yes, please. Now I'm going to need five grown-ups who are ready to do some photography with me. I want snapshots of different aspects of this man's life. Okay? Who's going to be a volunteer? Yes, I've got one here. He's being pushed forward by his family, I think. Someone else, slightly less reluctantly maybe. Yes, please,
Susie, you come. We need three more. I'm looking for three more. Any advance on two? I need an advance on two. I need five. Who's going to bid for five? I need number three. Who's coming as three? Who's coming as four? Who's coming as five? Robin will do it. Okay? Well done, Robin. Thank you very much.
[3:08] Two more, please. Otherwise, we could have a very long morning. Yes, thank you very much. And I'm looking for the last person. Any advance on four? We need the five. We can't close until we have the five. Who will come? Who will be number five? Yes! Okay, come on. You had to go already, but I'd like you to do it again. So now here's the thing. Herod was a brilliant man. He did an extraordinary range of things. They called him Herod the Great. He was an architect. He was a builder, and he set up the whole nation. So you, sir, I want you to step up and take a pose that shows how brilliant you are and how much you have achieved. Three, two, one. That'll do, wouldn't it? That's a good image for Herod. See, Herod wasn't all bad. He was a brilliant man, and he really made his mark on his part of the world. But actually, he was also a very worried man. I'd like you to be worried, and I'd like you to be worried. You need to do this together because there's so much going on. Herod is so insecure.

Did you notice as we were reading it that we were told that Herod was troubled, disturbed? It's a very strong word. He's a deeply, deeply insecure man. If anything can go wrong in his world, it probably will. And he's always watching, and he's always looking out, and he's always suspicious.

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Three, two, one. Look suspicious, and fearful, and worried, and disturbed, and troubled, and please, it's a photograph, stand still. Isn't that good? There's another dimension to Herod's life. He asks questions. He calls in the wise men, the visitors, who kind of ask the wrong person where to find the new king, okay? That's not the question to ask an insecure, powerful person like Herod, is it? But they do. And what does he do? He doesn't ball them out. He asks questions.
So would you please somehow think how to look as if you are asking questions, trying to find out this story, trying to get the truth? Count him down. Three, two, one. Okay, got it. What's going on here then?
All right? Very good. Very good. Now you, the last, but by no means the least. You see, at the end of that part of the reading, can you remember what Herod said? I want to go after you to see this child, so what? What does he say? Can you remember? Anybody remember? What does he say? I want to go and see the child so. I can worship him. It's a lie, isn't it? He doesn't want to worship him. He's too insecure for that. He's too powerful for that. He's asked too many questions for that. He wants rid of him.
The danger for Herod is that this child is the real thing, the one who is qualified to be the leader. Actually, he's an outsider. He's appointed the leader, but he's not qualified. He doesn't really belong, and he lives with that insecurity all the time. So can you kind of be a deceiver?
[7:00] What does deceiving mean? What means tricking people, saying one thing and meaning another. That's actually a very hard photograph to take. So we'll give you four, shall we? Four, three, two, one. Okay. Yeah, very good. Very good. Aren't they brilliant? All that without any preparation. Astonishing what you can do at this time of the year. This is your party piece maybe for later on. But here's the story.

Here's this character. And we can show it. I think if you can find me, Nathan, slide three on my presentation. Is it anywhere there? This is a world that has some very bad people in it.
And yet the message that Matthew brings us, the message of the gospel, the Christmas message, yes, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son. They will call him Emmanuel, which is God is with us. So the next one, please. Next slide. Yeah. It's a bad world. A bit washed out, actually, that one. That's an image, by the way, of the church in Egypt where those people were killed yesterday again, going about their ordinary church life, and over 20 or so of them were killed and many injured because someone came and shot at them for just being Christians. Nothing else. And that's an image of Herod in the top left-hand corner, and that's a film image of him. It is, if we're honest for a moment, a world that's pretty mixed, and it has some really bad people in it, and sometimes some really bad leaders. But the message is God is with us, even when there's bad people around. Now, there's another side to the story you'll be glad to hear, but we need to take a break, sing a song, and give these very photographic people a round of applause. Thank you.
I can't you why when we lived in Egypt, and when we go visiting now, when you read this passage at Christmastime, you have to read those last three verses, because that's where Egypt is in this story.
Actually, this whole story in Matthew 2 is very close to our brothers and sisters who have to be Christians in time of war or in time of great pressure. Why? Because although it's a bad world, with some bad characters leading the world, it took five people to show you something of what Herod was like. Although that can be how the world is sometimes, God is with us.
[10:16] And the second part of the story demonstrates that for you in so many ways. These wise men, as we call them, the magi, they come visiting. Now, Helen and I came through from the east this morning, battling the elements, and we managed to get here in one piece. If you live in Jerusalem, and you're a Middle Easterner, and you have visitors from the east, what it means is they've come across the Jordan. Now, most of us think they probably came from Persia, what we call Iran now.

That might be right, with all the spiritual interest that there was there, and all the fascination with the stars and the planets. But there are other people who think actually they did just come from the deserts of Jordan, maybe as far south as the Saudi desert. A British scholar in the 1920s went researching and talking to some tribes, and he found a tribe amongst the Bedouin in the south of Jordan called Al-Khokabani. And he asked them, why are you called this name? This name means we are those who study and follow the planets. This was in the 20th century. And he said, why do you call yourselves Al-Khokabani? The ones who follow the planets, the ones who study the stars. And they said, ah, that's because our ancestors followed the planets and traveled west to Palestine

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to show honor to the great prophet Jesus when he was born. Wow, that's quite a story, isn't it? So wherever they came from, either way, they followed the star when it rose, and they followed its invitation, and they followed to visit. And did you notice again as Helen read what they found when they got there? And I need you to pay attention here, because in a minute we're going to do another scratch nativity. Anybody else who didn't get into a nativity, this is your moment. I need you on the platform in just a minute.

Because when they got there, we are told that they went to the house. Oh, not the stable, the house. And when they got there, they didn't find a baby, they found a child. These are clues that tell you that Matthew has fast-forwarded the story. So we want a crowded house on the platform, please.

We want all kinds of characters. Who would like to come and be on the platform? We've got some people here making a break for it. Well, very good. Would you like to come and join them? Come and join us in the house, please. Of course, I think the child might not be here, because by the time the child is 18 months or two, they're off like a rocket, aren't they? They're all over the place. Nothing is safe. They're everywhere. You have to childproof your house once they get moving at the end of their first year. Who else is going to come? This is not a crowded enough house. There are lots of people in the house. All generations can be in this house. They've all come. And by the way, we need some wise men to some wise people. They don't have to be three. That tradition grew up a lot later, because three kinds of gifts were described. But we can have lots of wise people coming and holding things. Who'd like to be wise? And who'd like to come to the front and stand in front of this household? This is a brilliant crowded house, isn't it? Wonderful. The whole extended family is there. The whole village is there. But we're short of some visitors. We need at least three wise men, magi, come visiting. Who would like to come? Please help us. Don't leave us here. Please be wise. Yes, here's one. Thank you.

Holding out a gift. Who else will join him? Don't leave him alone. Yes, please, sir. Thank you. Very wise. Oh, yes, you snuck up behind me while I wasn't looking. That's only three. We could have a few more, actually. That was a very late tradition, six or seven centuries later that there were only three of them. We need some more. Who'd like to be a wise woman? We could have some wise women. Come on. Yes, please. More than one, though. Let's have another wise woman or two. Yes, thank you very much.

[14:53] I won't do an auction for any more. But there's the kind of scene that you have in front of you. This whole family and these three, five, however many. And actually, you're coming to bring your gift, so why don't you spin round? And you might like to go down onto one knee if you can.

And they brought their gifts. And again, traditionally, gold and frankincense and myrrh represent the offering you would give to a king. Jesus is the king who has come to us. Frankincense would be used by priests in their offerings in the temple. This is the high priest to end all high priests, Jesus Christ. And he has come to live and to die. And therefore, you embalm his body with myrrh. That's the background story. Again, actually, gold is mined in Arabia, or was then. And frankincense and myrrh came from trees that only grow in the South Jordan Arabian Desert area. So another clue to where they might have come from. But whatever the details, you see what is happening, don't you? They have come on a long journey. They have left their lives and their work behind because they recognize that something so special is going on, the like of which they may never see again. So they drop everything. And they make this journey. And they give the best they can. These are expensive gifts.

They are costly things. They are costly things because they recognize that in this family is a child who is here to change everything. Remember what Matthew said at the very beginning?

His name will be Emmanuel, which means God is with us. The angel said to Joseph, give him the name Jesus. He will be the rescuer, the savior of the world. He will do for the world what the world cannot do for itself. This is the one who they are worshiping. This is the one who they are honoring.

[17:32] I think we should give them a big round of applause. Thank you very much indeed. It is indeed a wonderful world. And God is with us. Yes, there are many bad things in the world.

And we want to pray about that. We want to be faithful followers of Christ in the mixed up world that we find ourselves in. I guess at the edge of this new year, you have many hopes. You have many fears.

You may have regrets about last year. You may be anxious about the coming year. You may be absolutely over the moon with excitement. But wherever you're coming from, God is with us. That's

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our message.
And by the end, the very last slide, Nathan, I've jumped around a bit and confused you, I know. But here they come. And they come with overwhelming joy. And they worship him because he's worth it. Amen? That's why we're here.
That's what we want to pray as we go forward into this year. We want to hold on to the God who is with us and who will not leave us. There's a big, big story here, you see. Herod tried to get rid of Jesus.
[18:52] And he did a dreadful thing in the passage that follows, killing young children in order to get him out of the picture. He did not succeed because God protected his son. So the story still runs.

And no one can take it away. No wonder those who are wise come and worship him. And we, too, are invited to worship him. Yes, with our gifts. Yes, with our work. Yes, with our lives.
Because he is worth it. I'm going to pray a special prayer. And then I think Liz, where's Liz? Is going to come and lead us in our prayers. This special prayer is a special one that many people will be using on this day. Eternal God, who by the shining of a star led the wise men to the worship of your Son.
Guide by his light the nations of the earth, that the whole world may behold your glory. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Thank you, Liz.

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