

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, a couple weeks ago, I was listening to a broadcast of a worship service from thousands of miles away. It was the 100th rendition of the service of Lessons & Carols from Kings College in Cambridge, England. Now the rest of us tend to appreciate a good ‘ole lessons and carols service, because it gives us an opportunity to sing some of our beloved Christmas carols that we don’t get to otherwise, giving us that nice warm-fuzzy feeling for a little bit longer amidst the season that can bring in its fair share of chaos. Us pastors, also, rather enjoy the several readings and songs, because it, then, takes us off the hook from the whole preaching thing; so, yes, there may be some ulterior motives (but we’ll keep that on the down-low).

However, a century ago, England was just finally seeing some kind of...even the dimmest of light amidst the terrifying darkness that had engulfed their beloved homeland from World War I. It was meant to be the war to end all wars, but in that hundred-year timespan since, it turned out to be, instead, nothing more than a new beginning for modern warfare and the most brutal human conflict imaginable. Nevertheless, on Christmas Eve, in 1918, just over a month after the armistice was signed between enemy

nations, Kings College in Cambridge decided to try something new to inspire their home country, to provide some sense of...even the slightest comfort in response to the nightmare that was unleashed upon them for the years before.

The service was shaped by an army chaplain, who had seen the awful atrocities of war first-hand. The usual worship didn't seem quite enough to him for that particular Christmas Eve that would bring in its fair share of the most intense human emotions. So there needed to be more: more songs to fill the space to the rafters and then some, including the very broken hearts of the people gathered there that night. More stories of the eternal presence of God, Who was there all along, even long before the holy night in Bethlehem, and long after all the shepherds and magi had come and gone.

Yes, today we remember the late arrivals of the magi to that holy scene after however many numerous of miles they had to travel to get there; as if they felt this sacred obligation that they must bow down and offer gifts to the one they considered to be the King of kings. And even though they were more than blessed with the opportunity to see Savior of the whole world, including for distant foreigners like them, face-to-face at the end of their long arduous journey, God was, actually, with them all along.

And for the people of England on December 24, 1918, they had to be reminded that God did not wait until that night to show up to their war-torn country. God did not even wait until November 11 that year, the Armistice Day, we call it: when weapons were set aside for a while. Because the Christmas story was not just about a few hours or days in Bethlehem. It wasn't even just about the lives of Mary, Joseph, shepherds, and the most far-off-in-the-distance magi. The story of God coming to life in the very world we call home was from the beginning in God shaping the Creation and humanity for good.

That's why they needed to hear more of the story that night in Cambridge. They needed reminded of the God who had been with the same broken humanity since the beginning, the God who had seen us at our absolute worst, and yet still decided to show up, right along side of us, right along side our worst: our worst behavior, our worst pain, our worst of losing the very faith that God blessed us with from the start. God shows up on the battlefields in the form of chaplains, who will not only create new worship services for the whole world to enjoy, but will also make sure the story is told of the soldiers who did not come out alive. God shows up, still, on those

battlefields when one of those beloved Christmas carols takes on a new life of its own: as enemy soldiers put aside their weapons even before Armistice Day, singing Silent Night together. God knows the hideous terrain of our humanity far far too well, and yet that still does not match the depth of that love that was brought to life all the more in Bethlehem for nearby shepherds and far-away magi.

In the end, we are all on a life-long journey eerily similar to the one the magi took thousands of years ago. It had its fair share of unknown terrain, to say the least, but with plenty of joy-filled times shared together along the way. The promise is that, at the end of our journey, we will see the face of the Savior of the whole world, including for us far-far-in-the-distance wanderers of mortal life; but, in the meantime, God still manages to keep on showing up, because God, evidently, refuses to have it any other way. The story that began even long before Bethlehem, continues in our very wondering journeys: more stories to be told, more songs to sing to the rafters, more life to live in the very grace of God beyond anything we could ever imagine. And for that, we give thanks to God indeed! Amen.