

Sermon Text for December 26, 2021

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Isaiah 66:1-2, Matthew 2:1-12 *Jesus the baby visited by the wise men*

We find ourselves on the day after Christmas gathered to worship, to come let us adore him, Christ, who is our Lord. We have made our way through a sermon series in which we find ourselves still immersed. We saw Jesus the baby conceived out of wedlock, Jesus the baby born in a manger, Jesus the baby visited by the shepherds, Jesus the baby presented at the temple, on Christmas Eve, just a two days ago, we saw Jesus the baby given to us by God. Except for the last one they were supposed to be in chronological order. Today, we continue in chronological order as we look at Jesus the baby visited by the wise men.

But we will see that actually he was not a baby at the time that he was visited, as we open this Scripture we will find ourselves on a journey much like the wise men, meandering from one place to the next wondering where will the path laid out before us take us. Our task as children of God is not to set the course, but rather to follow the path, to go on the journey, never knowing where that journey will lead us, but just trusting that it is God who is, after all leading us. Let us read.

READ

A Christmas tradition that we have as a family is to go hiking on Christmas day. After the presents are opened and we have gorged ourselves on food, we go for a hike. Every year I post our yearly hike on facebook just so the world can see that we have accomplished this feat once again. We tend to go on trails that we know very well and that are not very difficult, just a fun outing. But you know, Stacy and I like to hike, and we haven't always been on trails that are easy and familiar.

One of our most painful hikes was with Bethany and Stacy and our dog Ellie, where we were planning to do about 14 or 15 miles which is a pretty good distance for us, it was December, I believe, it was hovering right around freezing, probably a couple of degrees below freezing. We got to a crossroads where there was a sign that said Applachian Trail to the right, and then to the left it said: "dry route". That's all it said. So of course, I don't want to miss a single step on the Appalachian trail.

A few miles down the trail we noticed in front of us that there was a beaver dam that had created a lake on side and just a messy soup on the other and we thought it shouldn't be too difficult to make our way through that messy soup. Well, Bethany fell in first and go soaked up

to her waist, then I fell in, Ellie had icicles hanging from her fur and we decided to turn back and go down the dry route which was a few miles behind us now.

As we made our way back to the dry route Bethany hurt her knee so periodically I had to carry her on my back as we shivered our way out from what was supposed to be about 15 miles to something that was closer to 20 in the dark. Not all hikes and journeys and paths are as easy and straightforward as others. Some are meandering and full of risk and fraught with danger.

I don't mean to compare the Appalachian trail with the journey that the wise men took when they went to visit Jesus at the house, but I guess I just did. Any of you felt like this the last couple of years? Meandering? Not exactly sure which way to go? I can relate. In my 28 plus years as a pastor, I have never experienced a season of greater uncertainty. We are in uncharted territory and the old play book just doesn't work like it once did. Has that been true in your life? Well, I have good news. Rabbi Jesus once taught his disciples "I AM the way..." He didn't say, "I know the way" or "I can point you to the way." He said, boldly, "I AM the way." But as we see in our story, even those who encountered toddler Jesus discovered a new way forward.

Real Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Immanuel, a name that means "God With Us." The miracle of Christmas is that the God of creation came to us as a baby...and that his Holy Spirit is present with us even now. When we understand and embrace that, it makes all the difference...even in a very crazy world.

It's a familiar story...but maybe not as familiar as you think. In fact, nearly everything you've learned about this story is probably wrong: the tale of the Three Kings. Except, they weren't kings, we don't know how many there were and, despite our beautiful decorations here in the church, they didn't visit Jesus on the night of his birth. They showed up two years later at a little apartment in Bethlehem when Jesus was a toddler.

Matthew calls these visitors "magi"...a word that means "wise men." They came from the East...probably modern-day Iran. They weren't Jews; they were pagans; astrologers who believed that human destiny was guided by the movement of the stars and planets. In short, they are a most unlikely group of visitors to come seeking the Jewish Messiah. But their adventure changed the course of their lives...and teaches us something about what it means to follow the Way of Jesus.

When the magi left King Herod on the final leg of their journey we are told that they "went on their way." When they left the child, they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and "...departed to their country by another way." The story of the magi, at its heart, is a

story about seeking God's direction...and following it. If you believe in a God who loves you and cares about every aspect of your life journey, surely you want to follow God's way, right?

The very act of becoming a Christian starts with repentance; the Greek word means to stop going the way you are going, turn around and go another way. The way toward Jesus. If you're a disciple of Christ, the constant question guiding your life ought to be: am I going the way of Jesus? Am I headed in the direction he wants me to go? So are you? Does that matter to you? Or do you feel a little aimless and uncertain? If so, these open-hearted pagan fortune-tellers have a lot to teach us about how to find and follow the way of Jesus in our own life.

First, they saw God's hand in their circumstances. Christians shouldn't believe in coincidences! We believe a sovereign God; a God who is aware of and in charge of the entire universe. That should be a great comfort! To know that God is truly in control. That his hand guides every part of our lives. Nothing happens by coincidence. Romans 8:28 makes this magnificent promise: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

If you love God...if you desire to live God's way...he will use every circumstance to shape you and guide you. Usually, it will be the ordinary, everyday circumstances of life through which God speaks. Our experiences, our schooling our parents and friends and children, our work, our recreation, our good times and our struggles. The magi were just going about their ordinary work...their studies...their observations...when they made their life-changing discovery. God's guiding hand can be seen in the ordinary circumstances of our lives, and we sometimes forget that.

But sometimes God's guidance is spectacular, like the miracle star that guided their journey. Our culture poo poos such things, but we believe in a miracle-working God who still works in miraculous ways. Usually, God guides us through the ordinary; sometimes through the miraculous. But more astoundingly: God guides us even through the evil circumstances. The wise men naively approached the most dangerous guy in the Kingdom to seek guidance. Herod was an evil, awful man. The Romans made him their puppet King of the Jews, and he wasn't even Jewish. But he was wily and vicious and paranoid and would destroy any threat to his power.

Herod murdered his wife, his mother-in-law, his uncle and several of his own sons. Nobody was going to steal his crown. So, when the magi came seeking the newborn King of the Jews, Herod was not pleased. When Matthew writes that Herod "...was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him..." he meant exactly that. When Herod was upset, everybody was upset.

And no one was more interested in finding this new king than Herod, but for murderous reasons. So, he ordered the Bible scholars to provide the answer. And they found it. The prophet Micah predicted that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. So, Herod sent the magi to find him, not to worship him but to kill him. Pure evil. Herod manipulated good-hearted men for evil purposes. But God out-maneuvered Herod, and used his wicked intent for God's glory and good.

This is such an encouragement! Every one of us, including your pastor, has dark stuff, sinful stuff, in our past. Stuff that causes us shame and regret. And maybe you have been the victim of wickedness, evil that has stained, shamed and scarred your life. The incredible, good news of the gospel is, in Christ, all your sin has been forgiven, and all your pain has been redeemed. The Holy Spirit can take that which is most broken in our past and redeem and reshape and reclaim it for our good future. Nothing is wasted. Not a scar, not a tear. All of it, even the worst of it, God uses to guide us on the way with Jesus. That is such a comfort to me. Maybe it is to you, too?

So, the magi saw God's hand guiding them through all the circumstances of their lives. Secondly, they surrendered to King Jesus. When they finally discover Jesus in the manger, this...literally...is what they did. "...they fell down and worshiped him." That must have been quite a sight. Surely these wealthy noblemen donned their finest robes to honor the child-king they had sought for two years. There they were.... lying face down on the dirt floor...in front of a very puzzled two-year old and his parents. Isn't it gracious that pagan fortune-tellers... practices condemned by Scripture...are the ones who recognize this toddler for who he is: King of Kings...and, on behalf of the entire Gentile world, prostrate themselves before him in humble worship.

But there's more to see! In the first part of the story, when the magi come to his palace, Herod is referred to...three times...as "the king." But after the magi discover Jesus and fall down in worship before him, Matthew never refers to Herod as king again. Never. There is a new king in town. It is the two-year-old Jesus. When the magi bowed to him, Herod's crown was snatched; his authority over them surrendered. Those heartfelt worshippers laid everything, their finest treasures, their very lives, before their new king.

If you want to go the way of Jesus...if you want God to direct your path...it begins with absolute surrender to King Jesus; with you saying, "Everything I am and have...I lay before you. I want my life to honor you in every way. Jesus...you are my King...my Lord...and every other claimant to the throne of my life is a usurper and a counterfeit."

So, the magi saw God's hand in their circumstances, they surrendered to King Jesus... and here's a third thing we learn. They took one obedient step at a time. I don't know how the miraculous moving star worked or what it was. But I do know there's a difference between plugging an address into your GPS...and listening the directions of someone next to you. In the first case, we know our destination, when we will get there, where the traffic jams are, where the speed traps are. In the second, we simply listen and follow instructions. "Turn here. Go straight. Slow down." One...step...at...a...time.

When God called Abraham to the Promised Land, he didn't say, "And here's where you will find it on the map." He said, "Go to the Land that I will show you." When the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they followed the pillar of fire and cloud. When it moved, they moved. When it stopped, they stopped. The Magi saw the star and started walking. As it moved, they moved. When it turned, they turned. Enough light for the next step. Until finally, they arrived. And when they left, the Lord told them in a dream to go another way. And that journey, too, started with one step...one step...in a different direction. That is the way God always guides us. One step. If you can be content to focus only on God's one next step for you...instead of insisting on a detailed itinerary...you will live in faith instead of fear and frustration.

It's amazing, even when evidence suggests otherwise, how we can insist on pursuing a road that isn't taking us where we want to go. The way of Jesus begins with one step in his direction. One step. You don't have to see the destination. You don't have to have the whole itinerary. Jesus will call you, will direct you, will guide you one next step at a time. Just enough light to see, but not so much that you don't need to trust.

Do you feel aimless? The good news of this story is, God is still in control of your life and able to use everything...the mundane...the miraculous...even the malicious...to guide you. Open your eyes to see that God is at work. And surrender yourself to Jesus. Confess him as Lord of everything; put your very best in his hands. And then...take one step toward him. One obedient step of faith. This is the way of Jesus.

And if this is hard, take heart. Even Jesus faced uncertainty. On the night of his death, he knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane and begged the Father not to go to the cross; the way forward overwhelmed him. But in the end, he surrendered: "Not my will but your will be done" And in so doing, saved us, forgave us, redeemed us and called us to himself. This is the Way of Jesus; a way of obedience, sacrifice, trust....and life. Amen.