



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

“Home By Another Way”

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Matthew 2:1-15

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Several years ago, back when my husband and I were living in Oxford, OH, we took a trip over to Bloomington, Indiana to visit my brother on Labor Day weekend. He was doing his doctoral work at IU, but as a devoted Hoosier fan I never really need much reason to go to Bloomington. We went hiking at Brown County State Park (which I highly recommend, by the way). What we thought was a 3 mile loop turned into a 9 mile loop but that is a story for another time. After our hike Mitch and I headed home, roughly a 2 ½ hour drive from Bloomington to Oxford. I am not sure how familiar you are with driving in Indiana. We have our share of interstates and big highways that cross through Indianapolis in a wheel spoke-pattern, coining the phrase “The Crossroads of America.” But if you are not on one of those big roads you are left with mostly state and county roads, zig-zagging your way to your destination. We were traveling across SR 46 and we came upon a road closure sign. It indicated how far ahead the road would be closed. We were very confident that our next juncture was before the road closed. Well, we were wrong. Thank goodness for Google Maps! We made it home, taking what felt like every single county road in southeast Indiana. It only added an hour to our trip. We had to go home by another way.

Today we close out our Advent sermon series, Close to Home. All throughout Advent and the Christmas season we have been focusing on home: what that means for each of us and what it means to find our home in God. Today is Epiphany Sunday and we are focusing on the story of the Magi, who followed the star to find the Christ child. At their story unfolds we will see that they had to return home by another way. We will hold this story in comparison with the story of Jesus and his family, who had to flee from their home to keep Jesus safe from King Herod. They had to find home in another place. In the scripture narratives, we can see glimpses and truths from our own lives. Sometimes we have to make decisions that take us a different way than expected. Sometimes we, too, have to go home by another way, but we can be confident that God is with us and with God, we are always close to home.

The scripture passage opens up with “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, ‘Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east, and we’ve come to honor him.’” Now, the way the nativity story is told often makes people think that the magi came riding into town shortly after the shepherds departed from visiting baby Jesus. Most nativity scenes include the magi, or Wise Men or Three Kings (we will get into their titles in a little bit), including the one I had growing up. It also had a charming selection of random animals, such as a moose and a deer. But in all reality, the magi did not visit Jesus until he was a toddler, roughly 2 years old. They journeyed a long way and it took a long time. These magi might seem like unlikely visitors. For one, they were not Jewish. Secondly, why would they travel so far to see a baby? Thirdly, why magi? What is so significant about these magi that they would be remembered in our canon?

A word about the title, “Magi.” The original Greek word used is *magos*. This word can be translated as sage or a wise man. Legend would later make them “kings” and ascribe names to them: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, as well as physical descriptions. However, our rendering of the word as “magi” is probably the most faithful translation, as well as leaves open the possibility for women to have this role (no matter how unlikely that might have been at the time). The magi were a tribe of priests from Persia. They were in Persia what the Levites were in Israel. Magi were teachers and instructors of Persian kings, known for being men of holiness and wisdom. No sacrifice could be made in Persia without a magi present. They were skilled in natural science, philosophy, and medicine, as well as in interpreting dreams. It is no surprise, then, when an angel appeared to them in a dream that they knew exactly what it meant and responded accordingly. While we might find astrology questionable in modern times, astrology was commonly believed in during ancient times. They believed they could foretell the future from the stars and that a person’s destiny was determined by the star under which they were born. We do not know for sure what star these magi saw but we do know that these magi, trained with an eye towards heaven and the sky, saw a brilliant star that spoke to them about the birth of a king. This star was significant and therefore, so was the person it stood above. In addition, it was inconceivable at that time to

have the birth of an important person without a star to signal their birth. They believed that “a messiah’s advent must be hailed by a star.”¹

So we see Persian priests, men of great skill and knowledge, traveling to find the Christ child because a star so magnificent indicated that someone of great importance has been born. And not just anyone, but the king of the Jews. But doesn’t it still seem rather extraordinary that they would travel so far? Well, ancient writing from around that time indicate an expectation for the coming of a king. Roman historian Suetonius wrote “There had spread all over the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world.”² Tacitus, another Roman historian, wrote “There was a firm persuasion... that at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers coming from Judaea were to acquire universal empire.”³ When Jesus Christ was born there was an eager expectation about a king to rule, a messiah to save. We know now that Jesus was not the ruler and messiah that everyone expected but is the King and Savior we need.

When King Herod heard that these magi were seeking the newborn king of the Jews, he became deeply troubled, along with all of Jerusalem. Now when I previously read this verse, I took it to mean that all of Jerusalem was troubled at the prospect of a new king. But after doing research work on this verse, I think the concern had less to do with Jesus and more to do with Herod. You see, Herod was not known for being a reasonable ruler. While Herod maintained peace and orchestrated a lot of wonderful public works project, including the reconstruction of the temple, he was a cunning and cruel ruler. Herod was incredibly paranoid and suspicious. The older he got, the more paranoid he got. He was once described as “a murderous old man.”⁴ If he suspected anyone was a rival to his power they were immediately killed. He had several members of his own family killed, including his wife, mother-in-law, and three of his sons (most notably, his eldest son Antipater). He had no problem having people assassinated, usually for no good reason. So it is no surprise that when rumor of a new king was born, the people feared Herod’s response. Jerusalem knew what Herod was capable of and his determination to snuff this newborn king out.

Herod had to find out for himself. He secretly called the magi to visit with him and learn about what they had heard. He asked the magi to search for the child carefully and when they found him, to report back so that he could go worship and honor the newborn king, too. Right. Whether or not they believed the veracity of his words, we will never know.

The magi set out from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to find the Christ child. Bethlehem is about 6 miles from Jerusalem, so they probably arrived quickly. They saw the star hovering over the place where Jesus was and they were overjoyed. Can you imagine that? A star burning bright like that for over two years? Who else came to visit in that span of time, curious about what this star meant? Were Mary and Joseph surprised to see the magi? Magi were typically well-received and welcomed in that time, so that probably was not an issue. The magi “entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” What a lavish, adoring response! These magi recognized that they were in the presence of royalty, even if Jesus was only just a toddler. I wonder how Mary would have felt. Would they have been another set of people in a long list of visitors who worshipped Jesus? Or was something about their visit different? Scripture reveals that they brought three gifts. You will note that scripture never reveals that there were three magi, but it is implied from having three gifts being offered.

The gifts that the magi offered were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These might seem like odd gifts. As the parent of a two year old, these are not at the top of my gift list for her. Blocks, play doh, and anything Mickey Mouse would be well-received in our house. But these gifts the magi offered had symbolic significance. Gold was the gift for a king. Jesus Christ is King of all and over all. Jesus Christ is our friend and Savior but we have to recognize his place as Lord and King. Frankincense was the gift for a priest. It was used during worship and sacrifice at the Temple. Jesus Christ is our Great High Priest, creating a bridge between us and God. Jesus opened the way for us to have direct relationship with God. Finally, myrrh is the gift for one who will die. It was used for embalming. Granted, we all will die, but Jesus’ death is significant. Jesus’ death allows us to live. He entered into the world to die for us. Myrrh is an appropriate gift for the sacrifice he would make.

¹ Albright, W.F & C.S. Mann, *Matthew*. The Anchor Bible Commentary. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc, 1971, 15.

² Barclay, William, *Gospel of Matthew*. Daily Study Bible. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1976, 27.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Barclay, 29.

During their visit to the Christ child, the magi receive a warning in a dream to not return to Herod. Because of this, they decided to go home another way. They were not willing to participate in Herod's evil scheme, which was to kill all the children under two years old in the surrounding area. But not only did they have to return home a different way, Joseph and his family would soon need to make home in another land. Joseph also received word in a dream to "Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him." Joseph took Mary and Jesus and escaped to Egypt during the night.

These stories in scripture reveal that sometimes we have to go a different way than anticipated. It can be thought of in simple, less consequential terms, such as having to take a different route home. That certainly added time to the magi's return trip but their destination remained the same. But other times we have to make bold, life-changing decisions and go a completely different direction. Joseph and his family had to flee to Egypt to keep Jesus safe. They would have been home among plenty other Jewish refugees at that time, as Egypt was a common place to flee for safety and refuge. We encounter moments in life where we have to make bold, courageous decision. Most of the time, those decisions are pain-staking, costly, and difficult. Leaving a job and/or completely changing career fields. Ending a relationship that is no longer life-giving. Putting up boundaries and barriers to protect your well-being and mental and emotional health. Opting stop treatment that is more devastating than the illness itself and choosing to enjoy the life you have left. Stopping life support for your loved one. In life we are faced with devastating decisions to make. I imagine that we can all call to mind at least one decision that had to be made in life that we are still living with, whether it is positive or negative. For me, I left my job as a laboratory analyst at Pfizer to pursue my calling to ordained ministry. That was a positive but hard decision to make. On the flip side, I still carry with me the phone conversation I had with the emergency room doctor treating my dad. My dad was on life support and could not be resuscitated. We found out through the autopsy that he had a saddleback pulmonary embolism, a complication from the chemo for glioblastoma. Nobody wants to make a decision like that, let alone be part of the decision-making process, but here we all are. We live with the consequences of decisions made, whether our own or someone else's.

So what are we to do? We all find ourselves going a different way, in different places, with different people, or without the people we want beside us. Home looks different all throughout life. My personal experience has taught me that in those moments, in those seasons of life when everything feels like chaos and nothing makes sense, what absolutely holds true is God's presence with me. God's presence with you. God's presence with all of us. When everything gets taken away, God remains. God is a sure and steadfast anchor for our soul, our hope, our light, our peace. God is with us always. Sometimes we see God most clearly when we find ourselves going another way, traveling in the dark. God is with us. Is that not what Christmas is all about? Emmanuel- God with us. God drawing close. God drawing near. God dwelling with us and in us. We find true home in God. God is always with us and with God, we are always close to home.

As we wrap up our sermon series which focused on themes about home, we recognize that home holds a variety of meanings for each of us, some positive, others negative. We remember that there are many people around the world leaving their home and seeking safe refuge in other lands. We create gracious and warm welcome for others, both in this church and in our lives. We are all seeking true home and one day we will get there. But until then, we ground ourselves in the truth that God is with us and God will always welcome us home with open arms. We are loved, we are chosen, we belong with God. All are welcome in God's home. So come, kick off your shoes, and stay for a while. We are always close to home. Thanks be to God. Amen.

