



“Home by Another Way”

a sermon by

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‘We three kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we travel so far ... following yonder star.’ That’s about all we hear of the three wise men in the Advent season, and King Herod isn’t mentioned much at all. And yet acknowledging their place in the roll call on Christmas eve is essential to understanding the world into which baby Jesus was born, and reflects to us something about the nature of discipleship in the midst of some raw and pretty terrifying realities of the world. And so today as we continue our survey of the cast of characters at the Nativity scene, we will take up their stories as recorded in the gospel of Matthew 2:1-12.

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

“Celebrate Christmas this year by giving the original Christmas gift to someone you love,” the advertisement began. I stumbled across it online while cruising to see just where all these leads to the ‘perfect’ Christmas gift would actually take me. It continued, “Show a true understanding of the meaning of Christmas by gifting someone the very same gifts that the Three Magi gave to the baby Jesus on his birthday. This gift package includes the incenses frankincense and myrrh, as well as a beautifully crafted 14k gold angel that completes the "Gift of the Magi" set.” Only \$89.99- that’s a 33.44% savings off the retail price. What better way to show a true understanding of the meaning of Christmas, huh? Well, I suppose you could certainly argue that. But I might be just as inclined to argue that the greatest gift the magi gave to the baby Jesus can found not in what they brought to him when they came to visit, but what they gave him when they left.

Wise men from the East. Astrologers to be exact. Not so much kings as dignitaries. They studied the sky for a living, and it so happened that their pagan practices that included seeking out future kings in the stars led them straight to Jesus Christ. Only an infant, and Jesus was already being a light to all the nations. But like any good dignitary who is entering a foreign land, the wise men stopped by to pay their respects to the local ruler and see if he might know how to direct them in their enthusiasm to see this divinely-appointed king of the Jews. But this new king is news to king Herod - the state-appointed king of the Jews who was drunk with power, and willing to do what it took to preserve it. And that is where the plot of our birth narrative thickens, and the reality surrounding the Advent of Christ, for the reader of Matthew’s gospel, begins to darken as the kingdoms of God and the world collide. And baby Jesus, the wise

men, and the rest of the world find themselves, unsuspectingly, caught right in the middle of it all facing dangerous and even deadly consequences.

The quiet carol rings through the season, ‘O little town of Bethlehem...the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.’ We are well acquainted with the hopes of the years that make this line so well suited to our celebrations- ‘the people who walk in darkness will see a great light’¹ says Isaiah. ‘Justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore...’² The virgin Mary sings, “God’s mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear him...he has filled the hungry with good things”³ and John prophesies ‘behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’⁴ The hopes of the world are surely found in Jesus and so it is fitting that the songs of the season should create an atmosphere of quiet, holy peace. But Matthew forces us to take that other part of the line seriously- the hopes and fears are met in thee tonight. He reminds us that there was murder in the air that night as well. For in the eyes of the powers that be this little child indeed also represented all their fears- a long awaited threat to their kingdoms living and breathing and in the flesh in Bethlehem. The birth of the Messiah meant death to their reign. Isaiah also testifies, “For a child will be born to us ... and the government will rest on His shoulders ...”⁵ And “He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble ... and sent away the rich empty handed ...,”⁶ the Virgin also sings. The old man Simeon tells Mary, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed - and a sword will pierce even your own soul ...”⁷ It is so easy for us to forget that the word of hope and peace that the prophets proclaim wasn’t good news to everyone. And in the rawness of the real world into which Jesus was born, this meant terrible consequences.

The wise men knew nothing of these Hebrew scriptures that spoke of justice as well as joy. They likely did not know that Herod had killed his two brothers-in-law, his own wife, and two of his sons; and would now set his sights on the Savior when they traveled from the East. They didn’t know that on his deathbed Herod would order the gathering and execution of random citizens of his own state to ensure a proper atmosphere of mourning for his funeral. It likely wasn’t in the stars that they read that night that years later another king would be seeking Christ’s answer to their very question, ‘are you king of the Jews?’ They did not know that their visit prompted the world to lash out against Jesus in its fear, like a wounded animal trapped in a corner, for the first, but certainly not the last time. The wise men only knew the joy of a new and special king. But “King Herod was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.” It is a domesticated

¹Isaiah 9:2

²Isaiah 9:7

³Luke 1:50, 1:53a

⁴John 1:29

⁵Isaiah 9:6

⁶Luke 1:51-53

⁷Luke 2:34-35

holiday we observe today but history has taught us what happens when rulers become frightened. So for the first but not the last in Christ's life, the king would gather the scribes and chief priests around him to consider who this Jesus might be. And when it dawned on him in horror that the Messiah was indeed to be born in Bethlehem, the ruler who was to be the true shepherd of the people of Israel, Herod feigned devotion, but would soon order the slaughter of every single firstborn male child in the city to be sure Christ was killed. A slaughter that was ordered because the wisemen went home by another way instead of surrendering Jesus. It would be neither the first nor the last time that humanity would suffer because the world is terrified by the implications of Jesus Christ upon their grasp on power or hold over the truth. But it would be the last time Christ would escape the king's decree of death upon his life.

It is easy to forget while we are wrapping presents and hopping holiday parties that when Jesus collides with the world and brings with him a new order, the powers that be tend to respond with something far different than choirs and carols. But this is the world into which Christ was born- the same world that would heave a cross on his back and drive him up a hill to hang him. This is the world that he died for. This is the world that he saved. And this is the world we are called to go out into having experienced Jesus for ourselves, though I'm sorry to say that not much about its condition has changed in 2000 years. For Christ continues to challenge rulers with his quiet reign, and hatred continues to become infuriated by love. This is the world the magi defied when they chose to go home by another way. And this is the world in which we are asked not just to weigh what gifts we will bring, but how we will leave his presence transformed and actually live like it.

It is not just a story about Herod and the wisemen that Matthew gives us, but a statement about the reality of the Christian life in the world. A reality that faces some pretty strong opposition and demands difficult and dangerous choices if it is to preserve and perpetuate Jesus as the light of the world. A reality that sometimes demands our defiance in the face of great power if the Word of God is ever to make it out of the manger alive. Looking at these wise men through the lens of all of this, we see that the greatest gift they gave to Jesus was not anything that could be laid at his feet, but the way in which they went out into the world after they encountered him. The greatest treasure to the kingdom was not anything that could be found for a low, low price in the Gift of the Magi box set, but in the way those wise men allowed Christ to break into their world and transform their lives. The story of Christ's life did not depend on the gifts they brought, but on the way they responded to God's call to go home by another way.

And so I would venture to say that the question before us this Advent season is not what we will bring to Christ, but what we will take away from him, knowing all the costs. For it is not how we will come to the manger, but how we will depart from it that will define our discipleship. Will we take the safe passage promised by those who ask us to surrender the gospel for the sake of their kingdoms, or will we follow the paths of God that call us out in ways that will give the gospel of Jesus Christ a chance to save this world?

The charge of this Advent text upon our lives is perhaps best summarized by the words of that great theologian, Mr. James Taylor, in his song, "Home by Another Way." He writes, "Steer clear of royal welcomes, avoid a big to-do. A king who would slaughter the innocents will not cut a deal for you ... Time to go home another way. Home by another way ... Me and you can be wise guys too and go home by another way ... We got this far to a lucky star but tomorrow is another day. We can make it another way ..." Next week before Christmas we will sound the

good news of Christ's birth with the angels and shepherds and will celebrate by their side that the glory of the Lord has been revealed. But it is appropriate in Advent that at least one message this Christmas season should end in the minor key. For we cannot truly know joy without first knowing the pain of hope. We cannot see the need for the light of the world without first standing at the edge of the manger and taking a sober look into the darkness of the night around us. We can't allow ourselves to sound the notes of salvation without recalling that innocents will suffer for his name. We cannot go home by another way if we don't first know the path before us. And why it is that we have to walk it. Amen.