

Sermon XXV. 01.
1st Sunday after Christmas
31 December 2023

The Journey Home

Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

"...They set out, and there ahead of them, went the star..."
Matthew 2:9b (NRSV)¹

Craig Barnes – former president of Princeton Seminary - tells of a journey he once made many years ago.² His parents were recently divorced. His mother had left their home on Long Island to go live with family in Texas. Barnes and his brother were left to live there with their father - an evangelical preacher. Things were not working out.

So, Barnes and his brother - both older teenagers - decided to hitchhike from Long Island (all the way) to Texas...in order to see their mother at Christmas... On this journey they found themselves on a section of I-81 in the Shenandoah Valley.

The snow was blowing and accumulating quickly on that bitterly cold evening of Christmas Eve... No one had picked them up for hours...and no cars or trucks were to be seen. Finally a highway patrolman came by...and told them the news...that the interstate had been closed two hours before.

There they were...(Barnes told us years later) stranded on a closed highway...far from anyplace they would call home.

We all may have stories - even adventures we tell - of our journey home...or to the place where we are welcomed home. The first of the year, usually marks the return for some on their journey home...or at least to the place where they live and work.

Matthew tells his story of the birth of Jesus in the context of a journey...by those who came to see him in a place far from home...

I

In Matthew's gospel, the first people to come and worship Jesus, the Messiah were the Magi...those from **outside** Judea and Palestine... Gentiles...priests...and astrologers from a land out East - across the desert.

It is the Magi...thought to be three because of the three gifts they presented... *It is the Magi* who shake things up in Jerusalem, and the court of King Herod - the Great - by stopping and asking directions...posing questions

"Where is the child... the newborn king of the Jews?"

"A rising star indicates (to us) his coming..."

"We are here to worship him."

So common (it seems) and unassuming was the birth of Jesus...that no one in nearby Jerusalem seemed to know or care what God was doing through a young migrant family in Bethlehem...and even revealing in the heavens to those who lived far away.

No, it took learned men from Persia...(probably) to come and tell Herod...that something *extraordinary* was happening right there in their midst... their own backyard ... over in **Bethlehem** - the little "house of bread"³ - where another (would-be) king herded sheep a thousand years before.

II

The journey of the Magi...is known to us. Often shown as *three* fellows, dressed in fine robes and bearing gifts (that look like something from an expensive jeweler). They are often featured in most nativity scenes - on a mantle or table near you.

Some people even place their magi some distance away from the manger before Christmas - and move them closer to the crèche throughout the 12 Days of Christmas.

(Some magi - I dare say - may already be packed away by now - not to reappear - like *Brigadoon* - until their *magical* return some day.)

One of the important things to remember about the Magi - besides their gifts and rest stop in Jerusalem - is the journey they made... The journey of seeking - led by the star that brought them there. And, perhaps more significantly, their journey back home.

It may be imprudent for me (or for any of us) to speculate too much over what that journey home may have entailed. Matthew, of course, says very little of it - except that they followed a different road. But he also gives us a glimpse of these men when he writes:

"...having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road."⁴

A glimpse, because these Magi were dreamers, and interpreters of dreams. Receiving a message or warning in a dream was as real to them as observing an astronomical sign... as it rose in the heavens at nightfall.

III

Herod was indeed...a real threat to the Child. And that old fox tried to use what God had revealed to the Magi for his own personal advantage.

Last week I told you of Pastor Careen Jones and of a Christmas Eve pageant that occurred years ago in the church she serves.⁵ In that little church all that attended the service had a part to play in the Christmas story. There was "Reggie" (as I mentioned) - a homeless man - who played the innkeeper.

Herod was played by a teenage girl named "Lily." Lily took her part very seriously. Before the pastor pronounced the benediction, Lily said..."Wait a minute. I have one more line to give." "Okay Lily, give us your line."

Lily looked at the congregation and said: "I am Herod...and I hate you." Then she added, "...and I am going to kill all your children." You could feel the chill come over the place.

And those who were in the congregation realized, that even the joy of the gospel message ...has the tragedy and death caused by Herod.

Thankfully, the Magi heeded the warning from their dream - and journeyed home by another road...

But there also seems to be an **unspoken** message in the epilogue of the Magi - who appear only in Matthew - as.

"...(they) returned to their own country by a different way."⁶

For practical reasons - and for child-safety concerns - they followed a different path on their journey home.

Could it be that they were different, too? Changed people...with changed directions. Another path...another journey home for them... Maybe because they were not the same wise men who had wandered and ventured to Bethlehem in the first place.

Jesus has a way of doing that to people...changing them - changing us - in a way we may not expect.

Only Matthew gives us this story of visitors to the child from a land far away. These were people - not that different from us - who find themselves on a journey toward home...which often leads down a different path.

You and I are on a similar journey home.

For some of us - *the journey itself* may be all that we can imagine life to be - or even hope for.

For some, the journey has taken us to some *unexpected* places.

For others, the journey (home) is *nearing its end*...

While for others it seems only at its *beginning*.

IV

What you may consider - on this dawn of a New Year...is that God **can** - and often **does** offer signs for us to follow along the way. The signs are not always predictable or even dramatic.

We rarely have stars to follow... much less

Dreams that warn us to take a detour.

But the signs are often there...

If we have **eyes** to see them,
ears to heed them,
hearts to wonder and marvel and even explore them

...on our journey home...home by another road.

The signs along the way may even remind us on our chosen path that **God may** be at the end of that journey... But even more significantly, **God is there with** on that journey.

There's a story of **Billy Graham** and his journey home. Near the end of his life, and suffering from the effects of Parkinson's disease, the city of Charlotte wanted to honor their favorite son. So **Graham** agreed to come.

After many wonderful things were said of the preacher and evangelist who traveled the world...with the Billy Graham Crusade...

Dr. Graham stepped to the rostrum, and said:

Today I am reminded of *Albert Einstein*. Einstein was once traveling by train from Princeton. The conductor came down the aisle to punch tickets for each passenger...when he came to great physicist. Einstein reached for his ticket...but it was not in his pocket. He searched among his papers...the ticket wasn't there.

Finally, the kindly conductor said... "Dr. Einstein, I know you. I am sure you have bought a ticket. Not to worry." The professor thanked him...and the conductor continued down the railway car.

But a few moments later, the conductor noticed Einstein still rummaging through his papers...even looking on the floor for his ticket. Once again the conductor said..."Dr. Einstein, it's okay. I know you. You need not have your ticket."

To which Einstein replied, "Young man, I too, know who I am. What I don't know is *where I am going*."

The old evangelist, Billy Graham looked at the crowd gathered to honor him. He remarked on his own age and mortality...and added:

"But when you hear (that) I'm dead... I want you to remember this: I not only know who I am, I also know where I'm going."⁷

The journey before us can be difficult.

There are times we may wonder...Where are we are going?

The Magi went home by another way... So may we - by different roads and with God's help - be ~~lead~~^{led} to that place we can call and experience home.

W. Clay Macaulay
Director of Alumni Development
Union Presbyterian Seminary

A homily preached for the
Second Presbyterian Church
Petersburg, Virginia

Endnotes

- ¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the Scripture quotations contained herein are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- ² M. Craig Barnes, from a talk he gave at the Chautauqua Institution, Sunday evening, July 25, 2004.
- ³ The English translation of the Hebrew name for *Bethlehem*.
- ⁴ Matthew 2:12, *HarperCollins Study Bible - New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1993), p. 1861.
- ⁵ An illustration related by Thomas G. Long in "What the News?," a lecture given for the *Festival of Homiletics*, May 2002, at the Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois.
- ⁶ Matthew 2:12b, **The Jerusalem Bible** (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1966), p. 6 - NT.
- ⁷ From a story sent to me by Carolyn Axt, 12 October 2005. No other source for the story provided.