

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Epiphany of the Lord – Color: White – January 2, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

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, ²asking, “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.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶“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.”

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.” ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

They didn't have to make the trip. These magi could have stayed home, stayed comfortable, and relied upon others to learn more about the meaning of the unusual star hanging over the western horizon.

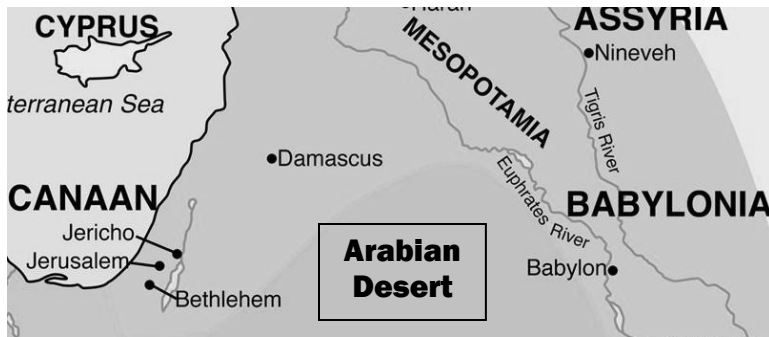
A long and difficult journey

We get the timing of this story all wrong. Our Christmas pageants and nativity sets have shepherds, animals, angels, Mary, Joseph, and three kings with camels ~ all gathered around the baby Jesus. But this can't be right. Even if the star had appeared over Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' conception rather than his birth, and the wise men had begun their journey that very day, they still might not have arrived in time for the birth.

Israel lies on the western side of the Jordan River which sits in a great rift valley. On the eastern side of the river, sits the Arabian desert. Thus, as is evident from the map on page two, getting from Babylonia to Bethlehem necessitated going north along the Tigris and Euphrates and then southwestward through Syria into Galilee and then south to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The journey from Babylon to Jerusalem was more than a thousand miles. At times the magi and their retinue would have traveled through areas plagued with bandits. At other times, they would have passed through sparsely populated lands that offered little to eat or to drink. It would have been so much easier for

Who were these “wise men?”

“Wise men” in v.1 translates the Greek word, *magoi*, which literally means magicians. It is why they are sometimes referred to as the “magi.” But these *magoi* were neither doers of tricks nor kings. Matthew never even says there were three. Because they came from the east, probably Babylonia, they were most likely astronomers and astrologers, readers of stars. Though they worked without telescopes, Babylonian astronomers were quite sophisticated in their understanding of the stars and planetary movement. Further, they believed that certain astronomical phenomena were signs of new kings, falling emperors, and other important events. Over the centuries, there has been much speculation about the star of Bethlehem – was it some sort of super-nova? An unusually bright star or planet? A conjunction of planets? Whatever it actually was, these magi saw in the “star” a sign that something incredibly important was happening – a king had been born! - and they traveled westward in search of the answer.



them simply to stay home and wait for someone else to bring them whatever good news there might be. After all, they were men of great learning, prestige, and power. But despite the difficulties and uncertainties of the long journey, they chose not to stay, but to go.

*An uncertain destination*¹

Not only did the magi know that the journey would be long and difficult, they only had a vague idea where they were headed. Indeed, chances are that Bethlehem was a most unexpected destination.

In Jesus' day, large communities of Jews still lived along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what was once the center of the vast Babylonian empire. These Jews were the descendents of those who chose not to return to Jerusalem after the end of the exile in 538BC. The Book of Esther is set in just such a post-exilic Jewish community in Persia (the successors to the Babylonians). Thus, it is

reasonable to suppose that these three learned men were familiar with the great Hebrew Scroll of Isaiah.

Who was King Herod?

The Herod family plays a prominent role in the New Testament. One Herod tries to murder Jesus and another participates in his crucifixion. However, the NT Herods can be confusing because there are two of them by name and a third called Philip! (see Luke 3:1)

The Herod at the time of Jesus' birth (about 6BC) was Herod the Great, the founder of the family dynasty. In the struggle for control of Judea nearly forty years before Jesus' birth, Herod had backed the right horse – the Romans. As a reward, the Romans gave Herod the title of King, even though Rome's power was wielded through a governor (e.g. Pilate).

So far as the Jews were concerned, Herod the Great was a pretender to the throne. Despite his massive rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, Herod the Great was never able to earn the affection of the Jews. They still awaited a true king, anointed by God and from the House of David.

When Herod the Great died in 4BC or so, soon after ordering the murder of the infants in Bethlehem, his sons assumed control of various portions of Herod's "kingdom." One of these sons, Herod Antipas, "governed" Galilee and is the Herod who executed John the Baptist and played a key role in Jesus' trial.

Isaiah 60 speaks of a time when Jerusalem will be restored to greatness and wealth, when kings will come in procession, when other peoples will bring gifts of gold and silver, frankincense and myrrh. Not surprisingly then, the magi head for Jerusalem. Where better place to find a new king than at the palace, the seat of power and wealth. Imagine the magis' surprise when a few of Herod's biblical scholars dug up the reference to Bethlehem as the place to find this new king. In terms of wealth and power, Bethlehem was dusty and inconsequential, worlds away from Herod and Jerusalem. Surely, the magi never expected to find the child in such a place. Yet, their surprise did not diminish their joy. Perhaps it even heightened their sense of awe and wonder. It was a world turned upside-down by the unexpected power of God.

Our journey

The Christian journey is long and often difficult. It is long in that we are "now" people and don't appreciate that the retraining of our souls takes time. It is difficult in that we often fail to grasp that the retraining moves forward out not out of our successes but out of our sufferings, large and small. Though our destination is certain, we often see it only dimly and, sometimes, not at all. But we do not journey alone, for not only is God with us in each step, we are accompanied by countless Christians. Surely, this is one reason that God has given us the gift of the Church, the Body of Christ, but that is a topic for another day.

¹A recent essay by Walter Brueggemann, "Off by Nine Miles," helped me to see the connections to Isaiah 60. It was published by *Christian Century* magazine and can be found on-line at www.christiancentury.org.

Daily Bible Readings

(Matthew's entire infancy narrative)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Matthew 1:1-18 Jesus' genealogy. It is in three parts, each with 14 named generations. What might this tell us? Can you find the four women in the genealogy?</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 1:18-25 The birth of Jesus</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 2:1-12 The visit of the magi</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 2:13-18 The escape to Egypt and the slaughter of the children under the age of two.</p>
<p>Day 5 Matthew 2:19-23 The return from Egypt</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Beginning January 9 – A New Five-Week Teaching Series at 9:30 with Scott Engle in Wesley Hall

Biblical Perspectives on Love, Marriage, and Sex

We are not all married, but marriages matter to us all. In this series, we'll look at the Christian understanding of love, marriage and discipleship, habits of a healthy marriage, God's plan for our sexual intimacy, and turning to Christ and each other when we hit the rough times.

Winter Bible Academy also begins the week of January 9.

**Information on classes and on-line registration is now available at
www.standrewccl.org**

Classes include: *The Balanced Life* (Sunday afternoon); *The Gospel of Luke: Jesus – Savior of the World* (Monday morning & Tuesday evening); *Why me, Lord?– The Book of Job: A study of faith and hope* (Wednesday lunch); *The Letter to the Hebrews: The final sacrifice* (Thursday morning); *The Gospel of John* (Thursday lunch); *Meeting Jesus: His life and times* (Monday evening); and *Beginnings* (Monday evening). Here are some comments from the fall 2004 classes:

"I would strongly recommend taking this and other Bible Academy classes to anyone – take any class, it will help you. . . . I am thankful to see these classes at long last!"

"I love the Bible Academy! I have learned more in the last couple of years than in the preceding 30!!!"

"This class helped me delve deeper into Scripture and gain a fuller understanding of God. It helped strengthen my personal relationship with Christ."

"The class has enabled me to grow in my faith in a way that I have never been able to in the past. My faith has made great progress. The class made me see that all or most of the church teachings are truly biblically-based."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

It isn't very hard for most of us to grasp that the Christian life to which we are each called is a journey. Nonetheless, it can be difficult for us to grasp the realities of this journey. First, our world is focused upon the moment, the near-term. What will happen to our stock price, this quarter? What will be my grades, this term? How will I pay the bills, this month? . . . How do we avoid letting our Christian journey get swamped by the immediate? How do we learn to appreciate the pace of the Christian life? We expect our problems to be fixed NOW. What are some practical steps for keeping the longer view in our minds and hearts as we set about, with God's help, to retrain our souls? How is the Church part of our journey? How is St. Andrew part of your own journey? How could St. Andrew, the institution, and St. Andrew, the thousands of members, be more helpful and more comforting on your own journey.

What is our destination? You might discuss, not our eternal destination of a fully restored relationship with God and a re-embodied life, but our destination in *this* life. What is our journey's goal in *this* life? How might the journey shape the goal? Do we all have the same destination or goal?