

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Magi: Going Home”

Dr. Jay Howell

Matthew 2:9-10

December 17, 2023

I must take a moment to share my gratitude to Pastor Mark, and more broadly to the whole pastoral team and to this church, for your support of my family in a time of loss and grief, but in particular to Pastor Mark for stepping in. In fact, this is a bit of behind the scenes, two weeks ago as I was about to head to Nashville to be with my Dad, then not knowing what kind of timeline we were on, Mark suggested that we might have an “emergency on-call preacher” among the pastoral team, in which each week one pastor might be a bit more familiar with that Sunday’s text and tentatively ready to step in and preach should I need to be away for a Sunday on late notice. And that’s what we did, just a rotation, week by week through Advent and the New Year.

Not two days later, as it turned out, I give Mark a call and say, “So remember that idea you had of an on-call emergency preacher rotation?” But thank you Mark for stepping in on late notice last week, and to the whole pastoral team for being so supportive of me, and not just me, but of our whole church, for this year, sadly, our congregation has been touched by loss this Advent.

All the more appropriate that this season is meant to be one of great hope. We continue in our Advent series focusing on the Magi, the wise men. And even though the series is a bit out of order in the sequencing—we’re in a season preparing for the coming of Christ, as in, anticipating Christ’s coming, while the Magi weren’t even there until months or years *after* Christ was born, but go back and listen to two weeks ago if that’s news to you—but even though the series is a bit out of order in the sequencing, we believe these mysterious figures from the East have quite a bit to say about seeking Christ in this season.

And this week, they see the end in sight, and it fills them with joy. Let’s go to God’s Word together. Matthew 2:9-10:

When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Holy God, we praise you for you welcome the seekers, you invite in those who are yearning, thirsting, searching, and we praise you that you are a God of both home and wilderness. Lord, make our joy complete, we pray, that in you we would find rest and restoration. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Our most frequent road trips all end the same way. Our destinations tend to be three different places: Nashville, Birmingham, and Thomasville, GA. The road back here, even from three different places, runs together for that last stretch. You know what I'm talking about. It's when I-40 and I-75 come together west of town, so whether we're coming up from Chattanooga or over from Nashville, those final 20-30 minutes are the same on most car trips we take.

Usually what's going on in the last hour of a car trip for us goes a bit like this. The boys are whining about being hungry and "when will we get there?" and picking at each other with one driving the other to tears because they've been cooped up in a car all day. Lilly's starting to cry because we've tried to space out her feedings so that we'd feed her right when we get home, rather than add another half hour or 45 minutes to the trip by stopping at a rest stop. Meanwhile, with anywhere between one to three crying children behind us, Frances and I are sitting there, overstimulated by all the sources of noise and otherwise just stewing. So every minute in that last hour drags.

But something changes once we hit that I-40/I-75 interchange, and those highways run together for a while. The kids are still crying, mind you, but whether we're coming from Nashville or Birmingham or Thomasville, for Frances and me at least, it's this sign that, oh, we're close. We're almost there.

Then something definitely changes once we get off the interstate at our exit. Then the kids even pick up on it. I think it's a combination of the car slowing down and seeing familiar things and stopping at stoplights, to the point that even they might stop crying. We're not home yet, mind you, the trip is not over, but something has changed.

It seems the Magi hit a stretch similar to that once they leave Jerusalem, and something changed for them when it did.

Last week, Pastor Mark talked about the Magi's encounter with King Herod. Now Herod kind of toyed with the Magi, acting like he wanted to know where this Messiah, this new King was so that he too could go and pay homage to him, but really he was just paranoid and wanted to get rid of him. But nevertheless, after meeting with Herod, the Magi set out, again following the star at its rising, the same star that had gotten this whole trip started for them.

We're not talking a long last leg of the trip, mind you. This is from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, which is only about six miles, give or take. They weren't in cars, of course, but presumably they're on horses or camels or something like that, so we're talking a couple of hours here, not days and weeks.

But the star stops. It stops over the place where Jesus was. And then what happens? Listen closely to how it describes it in v. 10: "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy."

"When they saw that the star had stopped," as in, the trip is not over, they're still on the road, but it's like they just saw the sign for their exit. And something changed when they did. What does it say? "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." Overwhelmed with joy.

Now part of that, surely, might have just been, hey the trip's almost over! We're here! But there was something more going on. They were overwhelmed with joy *before* they actually got there and saw Christ.

A few weeks back as the pastoral team was huddling about this series, Pastor Ben noted the importance within the life of the church of hearing the testimony of those who were/are/might be considered "far off," that is, far from faith, far from the Lord, disengaged from a life in Christ, but then came back to it. That testimony is important to hear because it can remind "those who are near," so to speak, of what they are near to in the first place. There's a freshness, a newness to faith among those who were "far off," there's a sense of discovery, and perhaps most of all, there's a palpable sense of a new joy and a sense of wonder in the Lord.

That's not to discount the power of the testimony of one who was raised in faith, grew up in a life of faith, and continued to embrace that faith on into adulthood. That's a powerful testimony too, and if that sounds kind of like your story, you have a powerful testimony too; it's just not so much about you. It's about the cloud of witnesses that have surrounded you your whole life. (We're kicking off our Confirmation Class today, so it's perhaps especially important that we be reminded of that too.)

But without the testimony of those who were/are "far off" from faith, everything might feel familiar, so familiar that the beauty and wonder of the gospel, the beauty and wonder of Christ can get overlooked.

A friend from college shared with me this very kind of discovery. Her name was Anna. When I met her, she wasn't really geared toward matters of faith at all, to the point that in our friendship it never really occurred to me that she might have been inclined along those lines at all. She was full tilt into her academic pursuits, ambitiously working toward advanced degrees and research and publishing and teaching and all of that. This isn't to paint with too broad a brush, but insofar as one might consider an ambitious drive within academia, it perhaps doesn't often coincide with a fervent drive toward the Lord. (It shouldn't be that way, mind you. As a people of faith, we should be eager to seek out and discover the truth of God's creation, of reason, of history, and science and research shouldn't be bad words in the church.) But as far as my friend Anna was concerned, faith just wasn't a part of her life, and I didn't sense much at all that it was a piece she thought she was missing.

What I didn't know at the time was that Anna earlier in her life had felt faith but had fallen away from it, due to some bad experiences in her childhood and youth, to the point that she was any combination of dismissive to indifferent to even hostile toward matters of belief and God and in particular Jesus.

Years later I ran into her at a wedding among college friends, and we caught up. She fell into that category of folks who more or less went dark when it came to social media. (Generationally, there's a subset of folks in their 30s and 40s, for whom social media really emerged during our youth and young adulthood. And for some us, it's just been a part of our lives ever since, to the point that you can kind of keep tabs on people that way. "Hey, you know what happened to so and so?" "Oh yeah, they got married, and had a couple of kids, and new job, and

just moved to such and such place,” you know, acting like you’ve stayed in touch, when really you haven’t spoken to them at all in ten years. You can do that if they post stuff.

But for others, at some point they just more or less drop it. Anna was one of those. So when I ran into her at a wedding among some other college friends some years back, it was truly a point of catching up.

She knew I was seminary at the time, so over the course of conversation, she shared how much she was getting connected at her local church, almost matter of factly. I was shocked. And at one point, I had to ask her, “You know Anna, it’s been years but way back when this was just not a wavelength you were on. What changed?” You know, the sort of upbeat conversations you get into at weddings.

And she shared, among other things, “I just couldn’t go any more without God in my life.”

It could be easy at times for me to forget that God and Jesus and this gospel proclaiming the love of God can be truly beautiful, even attractive to those who may feel “far off,” especially to those who have felt the harshness and coldness of the world otherwise. This gospel of sacrifice, of love, of humility, of the Word being made flesh and dwelling among us, giving himself for us, is beautiful. And in the midst of stacks of books of theology and Bible commentary and church history and all that stuff, you know, good and healthy things to do most of the time, but I could miss the beauty of the gospel that all the scholarship points to. It was important for me to hear from my friend that there was something missing in her life, and that in seeking it, she found a home. It’s not like the journey was over for her, but she discovered joy in seeking the Lord.

Friends, whether you might consider yourself right now to be among “those who are near” or among those who feel “far off,” may you hear the beauty and joy in seeking and finding the Lord this season. Like the star stopping over Bethlehem, may this season be filled with signs that make you stop, in awe and wonder, at the goodness of Christ and the gospel he embodies.

And even though the journey may not quite be over, as we get closer and closer to Christmas, to celebrating and encountering the coming Christ anew, may we sense an overwhelming joy growing as we get closer and closer to home.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.