

“Are We There Yet?”

Matthew 2:1-12

Micah 5:2, 4-5

When our children were small, as many families do, we went on a summer vacation to the beach – either New Smyrna Beach in Florida or Jekyll Island. We traveled, at least for the first time to a new place, always with a “triptick” from AAA, showing us the best route, the rest stops, the motels and restaurants, and places of interest along the way. We packed the car with a variety of snacks and a cooler with drinks; and we gathered an assortment of toys and books, and – are you ready for this – tapes for our high-tech 8-track tape player. Thus armed, we’d back out bravely from our driveway headed 300-600 miles down the road for a week of fun in the sun.

And before we’d gotten more than a few miles away from the house, there would come for the first of many times – the dreaded, but inevitable question – “Are we there yet?” We may hold the dubious distinction of being the only family in Georgia for whom the 300 mile trip to Jekyll Island became a 2 day affair, because we just couldn’t stand the constant questions and whining anymore – the Dublin Holiday Inn became our long awaited, and much appreciated half-way stop over.

It’s hard to go on a trip – and it’s even more difficult now, what with gasoline prices going up and long lines at the airport, regulations about what you can and can’t take with you, sardine can seating, limited food service, and the ever increasing chances of lost luggage and delayed departures. It’s a wonder anyone goes anywhere anymore.

So I have a great appreciation for this morning’s story. Here I am complaining about the discomforts of air travel or the difficulty of traveling 300 miles in an air conditioned car fully equipped with music and snacks, while Matthew tells us about people who traveled from a far distance on the backs of camels! I’ve never gotten close up to a camel, and frankly don’t care to, but I’m pretty sure they’re not nearly as comfortable a ride as that 1978 Olds Cutlass Supreme!

We conclude our Christmas experience this morning with the story of the wise men, who set out to see, as we sang just a moment ago, that wondrous thing – Christ the newborn king. It’s a great story; everybody knows it. Painters have painted it; poets have written about it, Longfellow even gave the wise men names, Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar. We know they brought totally impractical gifts for a child – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Although we sing “We Three Kings”, we know that they weren’t actually kings, and there weren’t three of them, at least according to Matthew. However many there were, they brought three gifts. We also don’t know where they came from or how long it took them to get to Bethlehem, or how old Jesus was by the time they arrived. We don’t even know about that famous star, although many people have spent a lot of time studying astronomical charts and reading ancient history for factual evidence of a comet or some other bright disturbance in the night sky around the time Jesus was born.

But, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, the facts don’t matter as much as the story does because “stories can be true whether they happen or not.”¹ “You just listen to the story. You let it come to life inside of you, and then you decide on the basis of your own tears or laughter whether the story is true.”

So Matthew may have gotten the idea for his story from a first-hand account, passed down by Joseph and Mary, or he may have been reading Isaiah and Micah, and realized that in Jesus these two prophecies were coming true and decided to tell that truth in narrative form for new Christians trying to understand who Jesus was and what his life meant to them and to the world.

Isaiah 60 is a very old poem first recited to Jews in Jerusalem about 580 BC. They'd been sent away from Jerusalem into exile in Babylon, present day Iraq, for several generations. Finally they came back home, only to find a city in shambles. And in the midst of their despair, Isaiah urged them not to give up hope, but to expect newness in the city that God had not forgotten. He promised that everything would change for the better. Soon, he said, "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawning." (Isa. 60: 3,5) He imagined that camel caravans would come from Asia, bringing all kinds of commercial goods, especially rare spices, and he writes, "They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord." (Isa. 60:6b).

Matthew's wise men and their journey are fashioned after Isaiah's promise. They go to Jerusalem; they bring exotic spices; they search for the king of peace and prosperity.²

But when they arrive at the seat of commerce and power, they encounter someone who is surely not the promised king of peace – crazy, murderous old King Herod, who would just as soon kill you as look at you. One glance, and they know they've come to the wrong place. Herod doesn't know what they're talking about and he's upset and afraid – and, as the saying goes – When Herod ain't happy, ain't nobody happy! Or as Matthew puts it, "When Herod heard them, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." (Matt 2:3).

Herod's priests put their heads together and realize that these wise men have come to the wrong place – Isaiah 60 is the wrong travel guide for this particular journey – Micah 5 is what AAA should have given them. "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days . . . And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace." (Micah 5:2-4).

The new king is not to be found in palaces of power, in places of business and prosperity, in centers of wealth and influence, but in of all places, a humble, little out-of-the-way peasant town called Bethlehem. And so off the wise men go to their new, revised destination, *so unlike* what they'd anticipated when they'd made a beeline straight for Jerusalem.

And there they find a king, *so unlike* the one whom they had anticipated meeting when they gathered together what they assumed were appropriate gifts for such a journey: A child – a peasant child – dependent, vulnerable, powerless - Not at all what they'd expected.

They call this story an Epiphany story. Epiphany means "revelation" or "manifestation." During the season of Epiphany we read the stories about Jesus that manifest or demonstrate to the world who he is; that he is the one, as Paul puts it, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. And God's fullness doesn't dwell, as it turns out, in places of power, prosperity, and influence. It dwells in the humble, the powerless, and the poor.

The wise men took a long journey to get to Jesus. They packed up their camels; they headed east, and they got lost. They went to the wrong place first. With that failure, they could have decided to stay in Jerusalem, and just put up with Herod, staying out of his way, overlooking his propensity to violence, just settling in and biding time. Or, they could have decided to throw up their hands in disgust and defeat, and go back home thinking this whole idea of a new king was a hoax, a fantasy, a major cosmic trick. But, instead, they took a courageous step and headed down a new path, a less traveled road, to an unseen and unknown destination unlike anything they'd ever imagined or anticipated. I wonder how many times they asked each other along the way, "Are we there yet?"

And we have the same choice in our own journeys of faith. We can become complacent, look the other way, stay put, go through the motions but without conviction, without joy. We can turn around and go back home at the first challenge or disappointment, and there will be disappointments along the way. Or, we can persevere as the Wise men did to find the Christ child. May our prayer be this morning that in our own journeys of faith, we will be as persistent, as courageous, as imaginative, as curious, and as faithful as were these wise men.
Amen.

Rev. Lisa Caine
Oconee St. UMC
Athens, GA

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Home by Another Way," *Home by Another Way*, Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1999, p. 28.

² Walter Bruggeman, "Missing by Nine Miles," *Inscribing the Text*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004, pp. 129-130.