

“Home By Another Way”

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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.

As most of you know, I am a big fan of technology, using it in most aspects of my life. One way I like to use technology is in navigation. The invention of the GPS has had a profound impact on my life. I use my phone – on an appropriate dash mount – to navigate even around town. I like to see the context of my route as I travel. One of my children will sometimes ask me, “do you know where you are going?” When I respond with “yes,” she will ask why it is that I’m using my phone to navigate. The ulterior motive is that she wants to play Pokemon Go on my phone, rather than me using it for maps. Sometimes, I relent.

Today is the Sunday we celebrate the Epiphany, with this reading from Matthew, the only gospel to recount the story of the first manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles. Matthew 2 tells us about the Magi, who traveled quite some distance to meet the one born King of the Jews. Matthew doesn’t say exactly where they came from, saying only they were “wise men from the East,” but most scholars agree they were probably from Persia. A trip from Persia to Jerusalem was over 1000 miles and would take many months by camel. Most of us likely know that the traditional representation of the wise men at the nativity scene with the newborn Jesus is not quite correct. The wise men probably arrived to visit Jesus when He was between 1 and 2 years old. Some do their part to correct this traditional inaccuracy, by setting up the nativity scene in their homes with the wise men across the room. Starting on Christmas Day, they then gradually move the wise men across the room toward where Jesus is, with them finally arriving on January 6, or Epiphany Day.

In the Biblical story, the wise men make this journey of over 1000 miles, simply following a star. They had no GPS or navigation system. They didn’t even know what their destination was, only following this mysterious star in the sky. They likely had a good guess about where to go, though. They were heading for Jerusalem, which was a reasonable theory of where the Messiah

would be. Jerusalem was a large and powerful city of Israel with a long history among the Jewish people. That seems like a logical place for the Messiah. But it wasn't where Jesus was to be found. The wise men arrived in Jerusalem and asked to see the child born King of the Jews. King Herod heard about this visit, too. When people start coming from far away to worship a new King, the current King gets a bit worried. So Herod gathered everyone together and they eventually realized that Micah 5 tells them where to find Jesus. "...from you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." They were off by a few miles in Jerusalem. Bethlehem sits just five miles south.

The wise men then leave for Bethlehem and they see the star again. The star leads them, better than my GPS ever could, right to the house where Jesus was. Matthew tells us they were "overwhelmed with joy." Then they enter the house, bow before Jesus and give him the strangest of gifts. What is a poor carpenter's family to do with gold, frankincense, and myrrh? What are they, anyway? The gifts had intrinsic worth and symbolic meaning. Gold we can understand, and it represented Jesus' kingship, not as an earthly king, but a heavenly king. Frankincense was used by priests in anointing people during religious rites, so it represented Jesus' role as a priest, as the intermediary between us and God. Finally, myrrh has a cheerless role to play. It was used for embalming the dead, and it represented Jesus' earthly death as a sacrifice for all of humanity. So, these gifts have symbolic worth and monetary value, though they were likely not of much immediate use to Jesus' family. A cartoon has the caption "Fortunately, three wise women came by later..." and has Mary saying "Diapers, receiving blankets, and an infant mule seat! Now THOSE I can use!" The wise men, though, traveled for quite a distance to lay down before Jesus gifts that He could scarcely use. It all seems a bit strange. Why would they give God's promised one gifts such as these?

The author of short stories O. Henry has an answer for us, though it too seems puzzling at first. O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" was published in 1906 and it tells a story that many know well. Jim and Della Young are a married couple who are very much in love, but they can barely afford even their one-room apartment. Though they are incredibly poor, they have two possessions that they treasure very much. Della has her beautiful, long-flowing hair. Her hair is said to be so beautiful that if the queen of Sheba lived nearby, Della could depreciate the Queen's jewels just by hanging her hair out the window. And Jim owned a watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. Jim's watch is said to be so magnificent that if King Solomon walked by, Jim could make him envious just by pulling out his watch. They had these two wonderful possessions, but very little else, and no money with which to buy Christmas presents. Della longs to buy something for Jim and so she decides to cut off and sell her hair to have money for Jim's Christmas present. She then sees something that as soon as she sees it, she knows that it must be Jim's. It is a nice chain for Jim's watch, which she buys and takes home, where she attempts to do something with what is left of her hair.

Jim comes home from work and looks at Della with an expression that she cannot read. She runs to him and tells him what she has done, but he doesn't seem to be able to get past the fact that she has cut off her hair. He gives her a present which explains his reaction. It is a set of expensive and beautiful combs, made of pure tortoise shell, with jeweled rims. She had yearned for, without hope of ever having, these very combs in a store window. They were perfect for her hair, which was now gone. Della then gave Jim his present, the wonderful chain for his prized watch. She wanted to put it on his watch immediately, but Jim sat down on the couch instead and explained that he had sold his cherished watch to get the money to buy her combs. They have each sold their prized possession to get a present for their beloved and those presents are not

usable because the prized possessions are now gone. It seems like such a depressing story. It seems so wasteful and futile. These two longed to do something wonderful for each other and their gifts end up being useless. O. Henry says that he has told the tale of a couple “who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house.” And yet, O. Henry then praises them. He praises their sacrifice, saying “a last word to the wise of these days: let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.”

You see, it was not the actual possessions that mattered in the end. It was the unselfish love that each showed for the other. Their shared love is greater than any of their possessions could ever be. And so it may be with the gifts that the wise men brought to Jesus. Perhaps they didn't have much practical use, but their significance was meaningful. Perhaps a carpenter's family had little use for these gifts, but the love and honor shown by giving them was the point. O. Henry's story has been adapted and re-told, from Mickey Mouse trading his harmonica to buy a necklace for Minnie Mouse's locket while Minnie trades her locket to buy a case for Mickey's harmonica, to a young auto mechanic who is gradually buying his own tools selling those tools to buy a chest for his wife's quilt which was a gift from her late mother, while she sells the quilt to buy a toolbox for her husband's tools. The story has resonance and meaning for us, as it shows us of the true meaning of self-sacrificing love.

The wise men sacrificed, traveling a long way to lay their valuable gifts before the feet of a little child who would be king. Their example invites us to do the same. O. Henry's story, too, reminds us about self-sacrificial love. We are called to show that same kind of love and worship for our King, Jesus Christ. Giving that gift will change us. The account in Matthew tells us that, after giving their gifts to Jesus, the wise men “left for their own country by another road.” Another

translation says “they departed for their own country another way.” I know this is talking about taking a different road to get home, but I think that the Magi were not the same as they were before. I think that they went home another way, as changed people. The early church father Gregory the Great said “having come to know Jesus, we are forbidden to return the way we came.”

In this new year with great possibilities, let us come before our King and lay down before Him the sacrificial gifts of our lives. And then, we will never be the same again, returning home another way. Thanks be to God, Amen.