

“Nine Miles Off”

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

January 3, 2021

If artistic output is any indicator, the story of the magi ranks right up there with the best of them in inspiring the human imagination. Poets have put pen to paper, trying to capture its wonders through the ages. William Butler Yeats and William Carlos Williams have each written beautiful poems, recasting this story in verse. Longfellow even went so far as to name them – Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar. Sound familiar? Painters across the years have also found this passage of Scripture inspirational. Seeing the story unfold in their mind’s eyes, they’ve put paint to canvas in untold numbers. More recently, Garrison Keillor retold the story on “Prairie Home Companion.” James Taylor even composed a song based on these verses of Scripture called “Home by Another Way.”

I think this story has become comfortingly familiar to us as well. When you hear this reading, what do you see in your mind’s eye?

For me, I think of some of the men of the churches I’ve served, progressing down the aisles of those sanctuaries - each one adorned in full king regalia thanks in no small part to the costuming gifts of backstage angles. To the manger they come, each one carrying their precious gifts to pay homage to the Christ child.

But I think it’s interesting to note how little the story actually tells us about these magi. The Gospel itself doesn’t mention there being just three – that’s something we’ve inferred by the number of gifts they bring but it isn’t necessarily right. The earliest Christian tradition we know of actually supposes there were 12 of them.

Nor is it likely they were solitary travelers, three camels riding in the desert like you most often find on greeting cards. Chances are they journeyed as all wealthy men did at the time – with wives and children and servants and supplies and a healthy company of burly men. Remember, there wasn’t 911 out in the desert, you’d want to have some tough guys to keep you safe in your tents at night.

Because the trip they were on wasn’t some sort of weekend jaunt. Given their profession, it’s likely the wise men were from Babylon, not the Orient as the hymn imagines. Babylon being the place where you’d find most of the star-gazers. If that’s the case, then the trip would’ve been about 600 miles, most of it across a vast desert.

We’ve called them the Kings through the ages but that isn’t right either. Magi, that’s what Matthew called them. They were learned men, that’s for sure. Astrology was considered important work in the era, it took time and training. There were certain protocols that went with it.

So, when those Magi saw that particular star appear, they knew it told of something important. We got the chance this year to see a similar star, didn’t we? The Bethlehem star rose this year, just as it did long, long ago. And we, like the Magi, knew it was significant. They just knew they had to follow it. You see back then, as these star-gazers would’ve known, the occurrence of a star or a constellation of stars was often associated with the birth of a notable person. So, having seen the star, the Magi went to pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews.

And if we look at today’s passage closely, we’ll likely see another of our assumptions about this story evaporate. I’ve always figured that they were following the star’s course the whole way. But that isn’t the case at all. What the magi say when they arrive in Jerusalem is simply that they saw the star “at its rising,” suggesting that they left knowing something was going on. But you know how even the most impressive of stars sometimes fades into the canopy of stars shining in the night sky.

So off they go, traveling hither and yon. They knew something magnificent was out there. Knew the rough direction but they did a lot of their journeying seemingly without a guiding light.

Now imagine just for a second that you were one of these magi. Long miles and many days you’d travelled looking for a King to pay homage to. Perhaps your throat is a bit parched, maybe your feet are callused, after all, you’d just traversed 600 miles of desert. One day, as you near the land where you know this King is, you stand atop a tall hill, gazing into Israel.

From your viewpoint, you look out, over the Dead Sea. You spot two towns. One shimmers with fires and activity, like some ancient-world equivalent of Las Vegas shining out in the desert. The other town, well, it’s not quite so busy. In fact, it seems downright ordinary. Boring perhaps. A sleepy little town if there ever was one.

And remember, you’re looking for the King. You’ve brought gold, frankincense and myrrh. The best gifts you’ve got in the entire world. And you mean to deliver them.

But you're not sure exactly where to go. The star that set you out upon your quest is now among many hanging in the night-time sky. From your vantage point, it's impossible to tell *exactly* where it's leading you.

So, you do what we all do from time-to-time – you make your best guess.

Which town would you go to first?

My guess is that we'd all choose the same town the Magi chose, *Jerusalem*. And there we'd be, right there in the big city with its lights and its teeming throngs. We'd be right there with the magi, asking Herod where the King is.

But you see, there's a problem and I think it's something that we've also overlooked through the years as we've seen the magi arrive at the manger scene in Bethlehem along with the Shepherds.

You see, despite all their learning, despite all their hard travels, despite even setting out for the right reason, the magi ended up in the *WRONG TOWN*.

To make matters worse, not only did they end up in the *WRONG* town, they also went and asked the sitting King of the Jews where the *REAL* King of the Jews is. That's a major faux pas, isn't it? It's kind of like going up to a pretty girl at a dance and asking her where you can find the pretty girls as though there wasn't one right in front of you.

They're bound to be offended, right?

Well, Herod sure seems to be, at least a little.

But he's also scared. After all, he's grown accustomed to being the King what with all is power and prestige and money. So, he's more than offended, he's deeply concerned.

It's funny, I think. I realized this week that Herod does what any politician does who's fearful of losing his position does these days. He polls his people.

Just like a politician, right?

And those learned men tell Herod that the magi have arrived in the right region, but they're in the wrong town. They're supposed to be in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem.

Turns out - They're nine miles off course!

But then the most amazing thing happens. *Herod points them in the right direction!*

The wise men are directed to where they're supposed to be by the strangest hand of all.

So, they set out to the right place. Another nine miles to travel, sure, but compared with their journey so far, nine miles is but a scant distance.

And guess what, once their course is righted, would you believe it?

The star appears reveals itself once again. Emerging from the background, it shines its light brightly upon them, confirming the direction they're headed.

Sure, they'd been bedazzled by the bright lights of the big city but they'd left all that behind, thanks to a little assistance from a strange place. Soon they're headed to where they should've been all along. They were late, but they were going to get there nonetheless.

And if you think about it, I think that life sometimes plays out for us just like this story of the wise men.

We set off as adults looking for something big. Maybe we're looking for a King, maybe not. Sometimes we don't know quite what it is, but we just know we're supposed to get there.

So, we're on a journey, we're looking for something to fill our lives with joy and peace and security. To make sure we make a good impression, we bring our best gifts, our most precious treasures. Crammed into our back backs we put our time our talents and our wealth and our energy and then we head off, out into the wilderness.

We know what we're looking for is out there, *after all, we've seen the star*. We're hopeful it'll appear again but for the meantime, we just have to keep on putting one foot in front of the next and head in the right direction

Maybe one day we come to a hill, just like those magi may have. There, down below are two paths.

Knowing all that we do, we set our course towards the place with the bright lights and the teeming throngs. It's a guess, to be sure, but with all that we've learned in our journeys so far, it seems like a well-thought through one.

But only instead of a place, maybe we set our course to deliver our most precious gifts to our jobs or to our families or to even to a romantic relationship.

Arriving in our own personal Jerusalem, we're sure to think we've chosen the right place at first. After all, the city greets us warmly. They open the gates up wide for our approach. Soon, inside its warm walls, we're treated as the important people we've figured ourselves to be all along.

Maybe it's fulfilling for a while. Maybe for days or weeks or years the sights and sounds of the city astound us and keep us contented.

But then something happens.

Something always happens when God's people find themselves nine miles off course.

Maybe we've poured ourselves into a job. Perhaps we've given everything to a romantic relationship. Maybe we've given everything we've got to our families.

And then, all of the sudden, from the strangest quarters, we're shaken to find the most startling news. We're in the WRONG PLACE.

It could come through a thousand different means, but all of the sudden one day we just know we're in the wrong place. Perhaps it takes the boss we've worked so hard to impress passing us over for a promotion. Maybe we've been dumped by the person we've given everything to. It could be that a family member just won't do things the way we want them to and we realize that we've spent so much energy trying to right someone else's course that we've paid little attention to how far off course we are. In those moments, we might even feel like failures.

But just like the wise men, sometimes God uses the strangest means to correct our course.

Thanks be to God, someone or something is pointing us in the right direction. We're not left by ourselves to figure out the final leg of our voyage, God gives us help.

And the great news is, the right place is just a few miles away. Nine miles may seem like a great distance but you know what, consider where we've been so far and it's just right around the corner.

Once we start heading in that direction, guess what? That star we began our journey following...it reappears! God's light pours upon us and guides our feet the last 9 miles of the trip.

I want to tell you about my closest friend's father. I got a chance to see him over Christmas. This was a guy who was like my second dad through high school.

What made him seem so cool was how he could talk about sports forever. He was a passionate Tar Heel fan, just like I was. He was a member of the Ram's club. He had amazing seats for games. Every time he'd go, he'd swing by his old Fraternity house and share a beer with the brothers there in college.

It wasn't until after I grew up a bit I began to see my friend's dad as being deeply unhappy. Sure, he could talk sports but he always seemed rather bitter about most other things. I knew he and his wife fought a lot because my friend would tell me when his Dad had to live in a hotel for a few days following a blow-out. When my friend didn't even apply for the same scholarship his dad had received to Carolina, you'd have thought his son betrayed him forever.

You see, my friend's dad was living as though the greatest days of his life were when he as an undergraduate at Chapel Hill. With all his time and energy and money, he was doing whatever it took to recreate those days. So, he talked sports with teenagers. Drank beer with college students. All the while he felt a simmering resentment towards being "settled down."

We lost touch over the years.

Then, one day, when I was an intern at Myers Park Presbyterian church, this man figured out through his son where I was. Out of the blue I got a call from the church's receptionist telling me I had a guest in the office. When I asked who it was and she told me and I went upstairs figuring to have a ten-minute talk about sports and going on about my day.

Two and a half hours later, *he* had to leave. Truth be told, I wanted to hear more.

In our time together he told me all about the last 15 years of his life. Things had changed. And change had come in the most unexpected manner.

You see, he'd broken a hip and while he was in the hospital recovering, he suffered a stroke. In his infirmity, he'd turned over the day-to-day affairs of his business to a guy he'd employed for years. But while my friend's dad was recuperating, this man set-up another business and basically ruined the company he was working for at the same time.

When my friend's dad returned to work following rehab, he found a floundering business. What was worse was he realized for the first time in his life that he'd personally been floundering for decades.

About that time, the Methodist church where he'd been a member for 40+ years asked for volunteers to help pack medical bags for a mission team that was going to Haiti. He shared with me that, at the time, packing bags

seemed like a decent distraction, until *he could get his business going again*. But packing those bags gave way to becoming an active interest. The next thing you know, he's on a flight to Haiti to help the mission work.

I met up with my high-school friend over the holidays at his dad's house. He and his wife have three kids, two right around our kids' ages. Since we live on opposite coasts, all of us had never been together until that day.

Although it was a joy to see all those kids careening all over their living room, the greatest joy came as I got a chance to talk with my friend's Dad once again.

It'd been several years since I last saw him. You'd never believe it, we ended up talking about Haiti again for nearly half an hour. He's now the church's unpaid director of its Haiti mission. This man is almost 78 now but I don't think he's ever been more alive.

You see, in a way, he'd lived most of his life nine miles off course. It took something drastic to reveal how far off he was. But when he realized where he was supposed to be, it made all the difference in the world.

You know what, when the star stopped above the place where Christ was, the Scriptures tell us the Magi were "*overwhelmed with joy*." I'll bet when that happened, all the many miles and all the calluses and all the parched throats vanished from their memory as they filled with the Joy of Christ. Sure, they arrived a few months later than the shepherds. Sure, they'd taken a strange, nine-mile detour along the way. But in the end, they arrived right where they were supposed to have been all along, right there, with Jesus Christ. And they were overwhelmed with Joy.

You know what? I think my friend's dad knows that feeling *precisely*.

Do we?

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