

# Journey to Bethlehem 3: *Down the Holy Way*

By  
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Advent 3

December 11, 2022

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus <sup>2</sup>it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. <sup>3</sup>Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. <sup>4</sup>Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.” <sup>5</sup>Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup>then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; <sup>7</sup>the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. <sup>8</sup>A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. <sup>9</sup>No lion shall be

there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. <sup>10</sup>And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

## 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, <sup>2</sup>asking, “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.” <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>‘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.’” <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then 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.”

<sup>9</sup>When 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. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On 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. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

When our young adult sons came home for Thanksgiving a couple of weeks ago, we had an interesting conversation about things of value. Like many of you, and many of your children, I presume, our sons were into Legos growing up, the younger one, Winston, in particular. Every year, he got one of the big Lego sets for Christmas like -- Life on Mars, a medium one for his birthday, a small one in his Easter basket. It may seem strange for a pastor to buy a Star Wars toy for Easter, but it replaced a lot of candy, so there you have it!

The most obsessive mothering season of my life was during the move from Atlanta to Columbia when the boys were 10 and 12. Because I had apparently ruined their lives uprooting them from their childhood home and friends by taking a new church job, the least. I could do was care for the Lego collection during the move. I took each creation off the bookshelves, carefully securing them in bubble wrap, packing and driving them myself to our new home. Admittedly, some of them arrived in better shape than others. We don't have all the original boxes, but we have the books of directions, and now clusters of Legos are organized pretty well in big clear plastic bins on shelves down a basement wall in the manse.

All these years later, it turns out it was worth the trouble, because Winston has discovered that some of his Lego characters are worth a lot of money. He has one tiny little Boba Fett of Star Wars fame, who came in a limited release set, and has a rare design on his little bounty hunter pants, a rarity that has spiked his going rate among collectors to twenty-seven hundred dollars. Yes, two thousand, seven hundred dollars for a little piece of plastic not the size of my thumb. While Larry, James and I chuckled on the sidelines of Thanksgiving weekend, Winston went through his old Legos and pulled out Boba Fett and a handful of other characters that could fetch hundreds of dollars and stored them away. Of course, he will never sell them, but when he returned to Chapel Hill, he sent us a link to an article from *Architectural Digest* about their soaring value entitled: "Lego Sets are Better Investments than Stocks, Bonds or Even Gold."

The value of some investments, it would appear, is hard to imagine at the beginning of a life-long adventure. In the familiar Visitation of the Magi this morning, we hear of these exotic characters bearing gifts – rare, expensive gifts; but my guess is even they had no idea of the long-term value on their investment in this child. The title for the Wise Men, Magi, is simply the plural form of Magus – a member of a priestly caste from ancient Persia. Matthew doesn't actually tell us how many made the journey to see this newborn king.

You see we count them three in number only because three gifts are named: Gold for royalty; Frankincense, the fragrant herbs and oils a priest would use to symbolize purity and holiness; and Myrrh, a very strange gift for a baby because it is a strong, bitter perfume used for embalming to cover the stench of death, clearly an early sign of the suffering and sorrow this child will come to know. One biblical scholar summarizes the value of these offerings saying, “These are symbolic gifts for a king who is no symbol but the real thing.”<sup>1</sup>

The Magi had already encountered the kind of king the world was used to; I would say the kind of leader we see far too many of today: Herod was an autocrat, cruel, jealous; he lusted after absolute power and more of it. When he feared members of his own family were vying for his power he had them killed. Historians tell us there was a saying about him that it was “safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons.” The gospel will tell the gruesome tale of the Slaughter of the Innocents to make sure we get the comparison between this brutal earthly ruler and the kind of governing God intends. I am confident that the Magi make their way to Bethlehem via Herod's palace, so that we will see the difference and behold the stark contrast. It is no coincidence that the Magi have to stop by the epitome of earthly power on their way to find the strength born of humility by God's power.

Matthew is most clear about this when he describes their journey. They went toward Jesus one way, and came home, we are told, by another way. When they knelt before the baby in Bethlehem, there was no going back to Herod. In that Holy Family's humility, vulnerability, and radiant light, they had discovered another way, a holy way, a way of life set apart for the

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Commentary.

purposes of God. They could not have known that the gifts they carried would be perfect, just perfect, because no one could possibly have known until we see the person Jesus grew up to be.

We read the story of the Magi, and now can see that their way to baby Jesus may have been illumined by a star, but their way home was illumined by his inner holiness. On this far side of his birth, we are privileged to know the real value of those baby presents – Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. For the significance of those gifts, and of their journey down another road help us find the holy way of following Jesus.

For we will perceive that holiness for our time. When he preaches on a mountain side and says to the poor in spirit theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven; when he blesses the meek and promises them, they will inherit the earth. His holiness will shine in Galilee when a paralyzed man is carried to him by friends on a stretcher, and Jesus bids him walk, and he does. We will see his unusual reign when he gives the little children the keys to the Kingdom, and when he positions the least, and the last and the lost at the front of the line to enter in. His light will shine forth that day when a leader of the synagogue comes to him and says his daughter has just died and begs him come shine his own light into the darkness of death; and Jesus reaches out and touches her and raises her up to life again. He is so radiant that day a hemorrhaging woman brushes by his robe and he feels his power leave him while she is healed in that instant. And so, his Holy Way is made through the crowds he feeds with a few fish and loaves of bread; and through his disciples who draw close to learn the lessons about service and sorrow and sacrifice until that memorable day when he enters fully into human suffering and dies a terrible death.

That is precisely the moment when the gifts of the Magi are needed most! That gold for his royalty when he is mocked and scorned while the crowds shout out in derision, King of the Jews. The Frankincense that signifies the purity of his sacrificial love, as his body is laid in a tomb that had never been used by another. And of course, the Myrrh the women will bring on Easter morning to anoint his body for burial.

The journey of the Magi and the value of their gifts only makes sense way down the road. But their journey on their way home is instructive for us. For we have the privilege of looking back and realizing that Jesus himself has already shown us another way, a Holy Way. A way that leads us to bypass the cruelty of worldly leaders who lust after power and deal in petty jealousies, so that we might journey the way that mimics Jesus' own life of feeding the hungry, serving the poor, healing the sick, and leaning into resurrection among that which is dying around us or becoming dead inside of us. To follow in that way, that Holy Way, is to journey together in the pathway of discipleship, doing the good work of God, serving just causes, making peace, expanding our capacity to love. It is not an easy way; it requires sacrifice from time to time, and extraordinary generosity all of the time. But it's the kind of journey that makes life meaningful, and who is not looking for meaning these days?

New Testament scholar David Bartlett told of how his family collected crèches and picked up various sets of the Holy Family clustered around the manger from their travels. They entered a gift shop on one family vacation that had a wide array of Manger Scenes from which to choose. David noticed a sign that simply informed the shoppers with the following words: the price is under Baby Jesus. "Of course," he wrote, "that meant that if you lifted up the babe in the manger and looked closely you could see what the crèche cost, the manger, the family, the whole business. Even at Christmas," he continues, "if we look closely at the baby Jesus, all that vulnerability, all that weakness, all that hope – we begin to realize the price. The price of incarnation is crucifixion. God born for us is bound to be God dying for us, too. Oddly, God is most God when God is most God for us; oddly God is most God just when God is most vulnerable, most human."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> David Bartlett, "Great Words of Faith: Incarnation," *Collected Sermons*, p. 218.

Friends, we have gifts to bear this season as we journey toward the baby in Bethlehem. The gift of highest value, of course, is to give our lives to him. To journey down his holy way.

Amen.