

SERMON TITLE: "Decisions for the Journey"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 2:1-23
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 29, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

The Christmas-to-New Year holidays are a big travel time for Americans. In anticipation of the holiday rush, AAA predicted that "a record 115.6 million Americans" would "hit the roads, skies, and rails" from December 21 to January first. AAA indicated that "travelers should be getting used to crowded highways and airports, as this marks the eighth straight year of new record-high travel volumes for the year-end holidays." Even when congestion, winter hazards, and work and family dynamics complicate our travel, it seems that many Americans still make decisions for the journey.

I guess it makes sense that so many Americans travel at Christmas, when you recall the original Christmas some 2000 years ago. The Gospel according to Luke tells us that Emperor Augustus made a decree about a census that forced Mary, at the most difficult time of her pregnancy, to travel with Joseph to his ancestral village of Bethlehem. And the Gospel according to Matthew, which we've read today, tells about the travels of the wise men and the frightening journey of the holy family into Egypt and back.

Whether we're traveling a geographical distance, or whether our journey is some other kind of life transition, maybe we can learn something from those original Christmas travelers. Let's consider today's stories from Matthew chapter two and see how they might inform our own decisions for the journey.

1—THE WISE MEN'S DECISIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

The first travelers we encounter in Matthew 2 are the wise men who had come from the East. Guided by a star, they journeyed to Jerusalem, looking for the Jewish Messiah who was to be born. Quite unpleasantly surprised by this, King Herod quickly consulted his Jewish scribes. Those scholars of Jewish scripture then told about the words of the prophet Micah, who had said that a ruler would come from the

village of Bethlehem. With that new information, the wise men continued their journey until they found the house where Jesus was. There, they were able to worship Jesus and offer him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Factors influencing the wise men's journey included the meaning they attributed to the star they had seen in the east. These men were the scholars and scientists of their day, looking for new insights and understandings. They discovered truth from the natural world around them. Their travel decisions were also informed by the social and political powers of their time. If a worthy leader were rising in the region, they wanted to be aware and allied on the side of his strength. Through King Herod's inquiry, the wise men also gained information from the religious tradition of the Jewish scribes and their prophet Micah. And last, but not least, the wise men were spiritually sensitive to a dream that warned them not to return to the danger of King Herod. This experience informed them that they should go back to their own country by a different road. All these various factors and influences were like road signs that helped the wise men make good decisions for their journey.

2—HOLY FAMILY'S DECISIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

Similarly, the holy family of Joseph, Mary, and infant Jesus had to make some important decisions for their journey. Fortunately, they had some guideposts to help them too. Matthew 2:13 tells us that "an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream" and warned him that King Herod wanted to destroy Jesus. The angel told Joseph to "take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt" until the coast was clear. Fortunately, Joseph heeded that warning and protected his son from Herod's jealous and infuriated massacre of the innocents in and around Bethlehem. After a length of time had passed, an angel again appeared to Joseph in a dream and indicated that King Herod had died and that it would now be safe to return to Israel. Joseph also kept his ear to the ground and learned that Herod's son was ruling in Judea. So he decided it best to take his family further north, to the town of Nazareth in the district of Galilee.

Mary and Joseph had to make many travel decisions. Guidance had to be sought, received, and followed. These weren't inconsequential decisions. It wasn't like a well-to-do family on their vacation asking, "Should we spend another day at Disneyland or move on tomorrow to Seaworld?" This was more like the decisions being made by an impoverished migrant family fleeing murderous gangs in Central America, hoping for survival by going north, but having to constantly dodge life-threatening danger along the way.

3—DANGERS ON OUR JOURNEY

Fortunately, we rarely have to make such difficult decisions in the journeys of *our* lives. But we do face dangers and threats that seem real enough to us. For example, we face emotional threats that come to us via the negative opinions and attitudes of other people. While Christmas can be a lovely time of families getting together to enjoy each other's company, maybe some of you were reminded this past week of the difficulties of family relationships. Sometimes emotional danger comes from parents who are too strict or too permissive with their children, or from grown siblings who haven't figured out how to forgive past hurts. Emotional hazards are present when a spouse is too controlling or unfaithful. Emotional threats exist when job security or career advancement is based on unethical business dealings or sexual harassment. Emotional danger is present when gender identity or sexual orientation is condemned rather than understood.

We also face physical danger. While most of us don't have anyone hunting us down the way Herod was looking for baby Jesus, we are at physical risk of terminal illness and heart attacks, auto accidents and broken bones. Some people—like police, firefighters, and the military—face real physical dangers while doing their jobs. Those same people and others might be exposed at work to bad chemicals or physical injuries that handicap and shorten their lives. Sometimes the life experiences we've had are so disturbing that they create in us post-traumatic responses and behaviors that put us in physical jeopardy. Some of us endanger our health by risk-taking recreation, promiscuous sexuality, or overuse of

alcohol, tobacco, opioids, or other drugs. Other times, our danger might be continuing to try to drive or live at home when our physical abilities have declined past the point of independence.

Spiritual danger is also a factor in our lives as we face difficult choices and tempting situations, and we fail to recognize our best options. We are affected by conditions which cause us to forget God's love for us or to neglect our devotion to God. Spiritual danger might feel like a loss of purpose and meaning in life, a loss of connection to God's bigger picture.

Yes, like the infant Jesus, we are faced by genuine and real dangers as we journey through life. And like his wise parents, we must consider what to do about that. Will we stay here, doing the same thing, and hope it works better this time? Or, as we approach a new year, will we take the huge risk of going somewhere else? If we go, where, how, and when will we do that? Who will go with us? What information will we seek, and whose advice will we listen to?

4—SIGNPOSTS FOR OUR DECISIONS

Don't you wish we had an angel who could come to us in a dream and tell us what to do? Wouldn't it be nice if it were that simple? My hunch is that it never was that easy, even for the wise men and the holy family. But I do believe we have some signs and signals that can help us.

To begin with, we should remember that God loves us very much. Jesus was God's son, and we are God's children too. This fact is crucial as we make decisions for our journey. Knowing God's love gives us inner strength and courage to stand up against that which is wrong and distance ourselves from it, if necessary. Assured of our place in God's family, we won't let ourselves be threatened unnecessarily. God's love for us will increase our sense of purpose and help us avoid those people, situations, and self-thoughts that could cause us harm.

A second signpost is to follow the wisdom of scripture. It was the scripture from the Prophet Micah that directed the wise men to look for the king in Bethlehem. And, you may not have realized this, but this story in Matthew's gospel is fashioned after the Old Testament story about baby Moses, whose

life was threatened when the Egyptian Pharaoh had all the Hebrew baby boys killed. If you read the Bible as much as I do, you begin to realize that the scriptures have a way of repeating. Similar stories and descriptions of events happen over and over again. And that's great, because it shows us that life and history are like that. If we pay attention to scripture, we can learn a lot from what happened before and make more-informed decisions.

A third set of signs comes from our spiritual nature. When we pray a lot, we become more accustomed to listening for and hearing God's voice. Then we are more likely to hear the guidance of an angel or sense God's direction in a dream. Maybe we'll even learn something wise from a church friend or the pastor!

A fourth set of guideposts for our journey could be those from the universe around us. The wise men looked to the stars and gained wisdom from natural science. They and Joseph were also mindful of current events in their geopolitical world. Just because we're spiritual people doesn't mean we can only think about heaven after we die. To make good decisions for our life journey, we also need to be aware of what's going on around us on earth right now and plan accordingly.

CONCLUSION

The good news of Matthew's stories of dangerous travel is that there is also hope. Like with the wise men and the holy family, God has provided us with many signs and signals to help us be safe. To give us a boost in that direction, next Sunday I'll begin a New Year's sermon series I'm calling "Developing Strength for Life's Challenges." I hope to see you here as we work on developing physical, spiritual, relational, and skill strengths. All those will help us make the best decisions for the journey.

*<https://nypost.com/2019/12/24/expect-gridlock-record-number-of-americans-set-to-travel-this-holiday-season/>