

Home By Another Way

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I grew up next door to my grandparents and needless to say I spent a lot of time with them, including road trips. We would travel from New Bern to their home in Alleghany Co, to see family in Mississippi or to explore new locations all over the southeast. For hours they would endure my almost incessant chatting interspersed with my singing along to a CD of choice. Bless them for allowing me the space to be myself in those moments but a reasonable person can only listen to *“High on a hill was a lonely goatherd; Lay-ee-odl-lay-ee-odl-lay-hee-hoo”* so many times.

When they'd reached their limit, my grandfather would say in his quiet yet commanding way, “Let's see what else is happening” and find whatever radio station was featuring classical music or some talk show I wasn't crazy about. While these were not my favorite moments, there was one show I didn't mind listening to. A distinct male voice would come on the radio and begin, “And now, the rest of the story...” Radio host Paul Harvey would proceed to tell a story of what sounded like a little-known person. He would give all the details, painting quite a picture! As he neared the end of the story Harvey would then share a key element - that the story was actually about someone quite well-known, and it cast the entire story in a new light. Knowing what came before or after the “fifteen minutes of fame” gave me a fuller picture and helped me understand the person's story even more. Oh, how I wish Paul Harvey had done an episode about the magi!

I think it is safe to say our gospel story for today could stand for Paul Harvey to fill in with more details. Who exactly were these magi from the

east? How many were traveling in the party? Did the magi really believe Herod wanted to genuinely pay homage to the king they were searching for? What did the magi's faces look like when they realized the star was leading them to a humble child? What happened on their way home? Was the road they took home a familiar one or completely new? Did they encounter any challenges on the way? What happened in their lives after they went home by that other road?

Even though Matthew doesn't provide us with all the details, I would venture to say from beginning to end the magi's journey of following the star did not go according to plan. These wise people - astrologers, magicians, sorcerers, Gentiles - had to have had some kind of a plan or idea for the journey they were going to undertake; it wouldn't have been manageable otherwise. Maybe they had a good idea of how much they needed to pack and how many days they would be gone. Perhaps they thought the star would lead them to a great palace and a young king of great wealth and status. They might have been prepared to be warmly received into said palace and sent back home with pomp and circumstance. But we as the readers and hearers of the story many years later know, this is not how the story goes.

We meet the magi well into their trip, just as they have made it into Jerusalem. They go to see King Herod because if anyone was going to know about a new king that had been born, surely it would be him. Upon hearing about the birth of "the king of the Jews" Herod feels threatened and scared for his place in power. He tells the magi to let him know once they find the child for he himself wants to pay homage. The magi continue on their way, following a star, until it stops. The moment they have been waiting for, the moment they traveled miles and miles for is here...they are

going to meet the new king! They enter the small, plain house and find a small child with his young mother. This trip did not go as planned.

It is no secret that my 2024 did not go according to plan. Joey and I entered this year both in well-established jobs with big projects on the horizon. We had trips planned to see friends and family, a few concerts we wanted to attend and some home projects we wanted to complete. We knew we would continue the adoption process we'd begun in the fall of 2023 and thought by the end of the year we'd be in a good place for our profile to be made available to birth families. We weren't too far into the year before our plans began to completely fall apart. Things in my well-established job began to take a turn. I had been vocal in my disagreement and disappointment in a decision made by leadership regarding inclusion. As a result, I lived through weeks of extremely emotional meetings and conversations, and then finally found myself facing a decision. I could "toe the party line" or I could leave with no backup plan or safety net in place. Since I was not willing to compromise my beliefs or my understanding of who God calls me to be as a minister, I resigned.

Very quickly the year we had imagined for ourselves disappeared. Being now a single-income household we were forced to cancel all our trips, concerts, and projects, and we had to put our adoption process on hold. Overnight our lives were turned upside down. We had no idea how long we'd be traveling this unexpected road. I began months of what felt like endless days at home. I did my best but there are only so many shows to watch, rooms to clean, walks to take and podcasts to listen to. I was, of course, researching and applying for jobs along the way but none worked out. I was not in a good place and bless him, Joey was doing his best to carry us through.

Fast forward to today we are again both in jobs we love, better able to provide for ourselves with an-as-of-tomorrow three month old daughter. We are making plans for another new year. Like I said, 2024 did not go according to plan and I can say now, knowing the rest of the story, that I am so thankful! Please hear me say, I recognize the position of privilege I speak from that things turned around relatively quickly and that we're ending the year on such a high note. The biggest lesson I've learned through all of this this year, and one I think the magi learned as well, are those wise words from the prophet Isaiah, that God's ways are indeed not our ways; God has purposes that go far beyond our own. We want to control how things are going to go so we make all kinds of plans. And we should make plans because without any life is unmanageable, but in our planning it is important to leave room for the Spirit to change our plans, sometimes very radically.

It can be hard to let go. The magi had their plan, they had an idea of the kind of king they were going to find, they were prepared to head home the same way they'd come. And imagine what all would have played out had they held so tightly to their plan. Instead of holding on to their own plan until their knuckles turned white, these wise scientists moved beyond their well-thought out plan, putting their faith and trust in a wisdom beyond their own to take them where they needed to go. They followed that tug on their hearts, left behind all that was familiar and found something that forever changed their lives.

This is where I want Paul Harvey to chime in and tell us the rest of the magis' story. I imagine it might go something like this...Now the rest of the story...after following a great star and traveling miles and miles from home, the group met a king. It wasn't the king they were expecting to find.

As the group approached the place where the star stopped and shined brighter than the whole of the sky, they could barely contain their joy. Here he was - the king long foretold! They knocked on the door of the house and anxiously waited. A young woman answered the door, a little taken aback by the gathering at her door. After some explanation about who they were and why they were there, she invited them in. As they walked into the rather humble room, they saw him - the one born king of the Jews. Even though they didn't find this king in a great palace surrounded by wealth and power, the magi were so moved and overcome, they knelt down and worshiped this child. As the group fell to their knees in the gravity of the moment, the child wasn't sure what to think. These people dressed in their finery were presenting him with some rather interesting gifts.

After this monumental moment the group spent the next few days with the family regaling them with stories of their travels and explaining all their specialized studies. Everyone enjoyed the fellowship and felt the time they were spending together was special. Early on the morning of their departure, the group was discussing their route home. One brave soul spoke first, sharing about a dream she'd had the night before, a dream about Herod and his true intentions for finding the location of this child. As she finished speaking, others felt safe to say they'd had similar dreams and weren't too keen on returning home the way they'd come. It was obvious they would not be following their planned route so the group set out on a different road for home.

Over the miles and miles of the trip home the group marveled aloud at their journey, the twists and turns it had taken, the moments they had felt unsure of what was going to happen and the ways in which they were forever changed because of all that had happened. As home finally came

just into sight, the group fell silent. They felt the weight of all they'd experienced, the way their lives had been transformed and the responsibility for sharing with others what they'd seen. One by one the group peeled off and each returned to their homes much different people than when they'd left months before. And these magi just couldn't help but to think you just never know what you'll find when you let go of your plan and go home by another way.

Friends, we are just days away from ending this year and welcoming a new one. And I'm sure we are all making plans for 2025 - the deposit has been made on that perfect AirBnB for your family's summer beach trip; the countdown has started for the large project you're in charge of for work; the tile and paint has been selected for your next home renovation; the application has been completed for that dream job and is ready for you to hit send. But I hope as we all make our plans we do so remembering to leave space for God to move in our lives.

Let us not hold on to our ideas of what needs to happen so tightly that we miss the chance to grab hold of the Spirit, to follow where the Spirit leads and to find out the rest of the story. Who knows what we might find when we go home another way. It might just be exactly what we didn't know we actually needed.