

## “Holiday Travel”

### Matthew 2:1-12

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The holidays have always been a time to travel for Jackie and me. As young adults, we lived away from family and would go home for Christmas each year. Now as empty nesters, we have to travel to see our children because their work schedules do not allow them time to come this way. On Christmas Day, we'll load presents in the car and go to our eighteen-month-old granddaughter's house in Kentucky. Oh, her parents live there, too, our son and daughter-in-law, Jason and Emily.

Holidays and travel go together for most families. Very few family members live within a few miles of each other anymore. Holiday gatherings require travel time for many.

I thought the 1987 Steve Martin and John Candy film was appropriately named, “Planes, Trains and Automobiles.” It was about a mismatched pair of travelers on their way home to Chicago from New York City for Thanksgiving. When I watched the movie, I could relate to some of their frustrations for I had experienced them on holiday trips, though not as severe as they had to endure. I'm not sure anyone has actually gone through what they did or could survive it if they did.

In your holiday travel this year, I wonder if you will go to Bethlehem. Not everybody will and this is sad. So much of the real meaning of the holiday season is missed when people don't travel to Jesus' birthplace.

I'm not talking about boarding a plane and heading to Israel this month. That might be too dangerous under present circumstances. However, it is possible to travel down the road that Matthew has built for us that leads to Bethlehem and discover what happened there that changed the course of history.

You will find the beginning of this road in the first two chapters of Matthew's gospel. After tracing Jesus' lineage, he tells us of the angels' visit to Joseph explaining why Mary was going to have a baby. Being the good man that Joseph was, he took Mary home as his wife and took care of her until she gave birth to God's Son.

Sometime later, Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem seeking this holy baby so they might worship him and present him gifts. They sought King Herod's assistance which alarmed him. His jealousy would not tolerate a rival to his throne, so he called in the chief priests and teachers of the law to find out where this baby had been born.

They replied, “In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written, ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’ ”

“Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me so that I too may go and worship him.’ ”

“After they had heard the king, they went on their way and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child and his mother Mary and they bowed down and worshiped him. They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route” Matthew 2:6-12.

Dr. Alan Culpepper asks a question of this text that is most interesting. **Why didn't the chief priests and scribes go to Bethlehem?** If they knew this prophecy, which they certainly did, why didn't they go with the Wise Men or follow closely behind them?

Matthew doesn't tell us, so we have to speculate. Did they not connect the dots between Micah's prophecy and the Wise Men's search? Were they too busy with religious activities and legal discussions? I suppose there is no way to know for sure why they did not go to Bethlehem.

However, there is a question we might be able to answer with more certainty this morning. **How many will not go to Bethlehem this year?** I wonder why?

**Perhaps they don't know how to get there.** They would like to go but have no directions. They are not aware of the road that Matthew paved to the manger in Bethlehem.

As you know, Jackie and I spent Thanksgiving in New York with our daughter and son-in-law. We enjoyed the sights and sounds of the city for the holiday weekend. Whenever we left their apartment to go to an event, one thing was always in our possession, a map of the city, especially the subway system. Without it, we would have been lost and never arrived at our destination. With it, we could get wherever we wanted to go.

During Advent, we need a map to get to Bethlehem. There are far too many distractions and detours that can cause us to lose our way. Matthew provides a map. So does Luke. Others do, too. Bookshelves are lined with devotional materials that lead to Bethlehem. Find one and let it guide you to the manger this month.

**I suppose some people will not go to Bethlehem because they are too busy.** I really think this was why the Chief Priests did not go. They could not break away from their religious activities and responsibilities.

This can happen to us, too. Religious activities can take us to church but not Bethlehem. We must never confuse the two. All that is done here during December is meant to guide us along our journey to the manger. The church is not our destination but the information and inspiration center for our pilgrimage. At least it should be.

**Some may not go to Bethlehem because they feel they need a break from the holidays.** Perhaps they are depressed, stressed out or grieving too much to make the trip.

The year my mother died was my most difficult Christmas. It meant both of my parents were gone and there was no home to return to for a holiday visit. I was depressed and did not realize it at the time. This was the year that I did not put the outside lights on the shrubs until the week before Christmas and that was only because the kids kept wondering when I was going to do it. When they referred to me as "Bob-Humbug," I got the lights down from the attic. I didn't go to Bethlehem that year. My heart was not in it. It was broken.

Maybe that's where you are this year. You're thinking about skipping Christmas. If you are, read John Grisham's book by that title or go see the movie, "Christmas with the Cranks," which is loosely based upon Grisham's theme. It might help you.

**I really want everyone to go to Bethlehem this year, though.** I think it would be good. Actually, I know it would. You see, Bethlehem means "House of Bread." It is surrounded by fertile fields that yield bountiful crops.

Bethlehem is a place that nourishes, replenishes and refreshes its visitors. It is a place where faith can be born and cultivated. It is a place that forces us to focus upon what is important and helpful. It is a place where dreams come true and hope abounds. It is a place where we can learn the meaning of love and the purpose of life. It is a place where we can connect with God and one another in ways we'll never forget and will forever be changed. It is a place you don't want to overlook or a journey you want to skip.

So come with me. Let's join hearts and hands this month and take this trip together. I've always enjoyed traveling with others more than alone. I would love to have you accompany me.