

Searching for the Star

Matthew 2:1-12

January 5, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

You know, it's hard to get lost anymore. Our cars can tell us where and when to turn, if we're in an unfamiliar place. If our cars can't do it, our phones can. We no longer need to know how to read a map. Going somewhere strange alone is not so daunting anymore, because we don't need a navigator to tell us where to go.

There have been times I've been grateful for GPS on my phone, really, I have. But I try not to use it too much. It feels like it's making me less smart, less aware of my surroundings, too dependent on it. My usual habit, if I'm going somewhere I'm unsure about, is to look up its location on the internet at home, figure out a route using the map online, and then write directions out on a piece of paper. If I want to be really fancy, I stick the piece of paper to my phone, so I can find it. Often the act of writing out the directions is enough to get a picture of the route in my mind and I never even have to look at the piece of paper. More often, though, when I get uncertain, I can look over and find my way at a glance.

I marvel when I think of early European explorers, who set off across an ocean with nothing more than a compass, a sextant, and the stars. Or the Native Americans, moving across great expanses of empty countryside, to locations that they remembered from the last time they had passed that way. I would be utterly useless and completely lost. The wise men that Matthew describes did something similar. They were from modern-day Iran, likely Persians, likely students of astronomy. They noticed a new star and decided to follow it, cross-country. Again, I would be utterly useless and completely lost.

There's a section on facebook called "Wandering Wisemen." Someone with a lot of time on their hands has children's toy versions of the three wise men and one camel. They've given the kings the traditional names of Belthazar, Gaspar, and Melchior. They've named the camel Hezekiah, who was an Old Testament king. Beginning on the first Sunday of Advent, whoever does this poses the kings and Hezekiah around their house, interacting with various objects, ostensibly as they wander in search of the star of Bethlehem. So for instance, this year the kings and camel have argued over whether they should pack sunscreen and an iron; they've been discouraged by junk mail; they've encountered monstrous dust bunnies, nail polish, the piggy bank, and just yesterday, overcame their fear and curled up with the family dog. It's completely silly, but fun to see what their creator will think of next.

Likewise, the real wise men undoubtedly encountered hazards and curiosities along their way to find the star. Given the end of the story, where Herod decrees that all children under the age of two should be killed, so he can be sure to eliminate Jesus, it seems that it must have taken the wise men a couple of years from the appearance of the star, through their journey, to when they found Jesus in Bethlehem.

All along the way, they hung on to their gifts for the Messiah they expected to find: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gifts fit for the king they had pictured: royal, connected to the powerful people, at the center of things. They found that kind of king when they encountered King Herod, but they knew he was not the one they were looking for. They had to discard their expectations even as they held on to their gifts, as they journeyed those last few miles to Bethlehem.

I ran across a sermon from an Episcopal priest named Lonnie Lacy from South Georgia this week. It is a Christmas Eve sermon, but I can't let the Christmas season end without reading part of it to you. I had a hard time condensing it—it is an exquisite piece of preaching, and I don't use that word lightly. It doesn't mention the wise men but pertains to their story too, so listen where they fit, and where you fit..

This may sound odd, but one of the most important things anyone ever said to me when I was still training to be a pastor was this: “Honey, whatever that is you’re doin’, you gotta put it down and come hold this baby.” “What?” “Put it down, and come *hold this baby*.”

I was a brand new chaplain-intern at Children’s National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. I was all of 24 years old, just two years out of college. I had just arrived and been told that the floor I would be covering was the neonatal intensive care unit. I knew *nothing*. So there I was on my first day. My starched white shirt. My coat and tie. My shiny new plastic badge. A clipboard in my hands and a clueless expression on my face. I had no idea what I was doing as I stood watching those nurses tending those babies who were fighting for their very lives. So, I did what any of us would do: I tried my best to look very busy and very important.

“Honey,” she said, “whatever that is you’re doin’, you gotta put it down and come hold this baby.” “What?” “*Put it down*, and come *hold this baby*.” Let the record show, this nurse was no Virgin Mary meek and mild. Before I knew it, she had physically yanked the clipboard from my hands, spun me around by my shoulders, popped me down into a rocking chair, and placed *somebody else’s* baby right into my arms. “There,” she said. “If you’re gonna be that baby’s chaplain, *that’s* what he needs you to do.” “Uh okay,” I said, “But *what else* am I supposed to do?” “Nothing!” she said. “There’s nothing else you *can* do. You just *hold* him. And *love* him, And *pray*.”

Turns out, she was right. A huge part of how I learned to be a pastor was by holding babies in a hospital wing for an entire summer. The thing is, when you’re holding a baby, there really *isn’t* much else you can do. . . . It’s just true. When you’re holding a baby, there’s not much else you can do except just *hold* it, and *love* it, and *pray*. And honestly, the baby can’t do all that much either. The two of you just sort of . . . melt into one another. You just sort of . . . exist . . . *together*.

So, maybe—just maybe—that’s why *you’re* here tonight. I don’t know your business. I don’t know why *you* think you’re here. . . . Whether you know it or not, you have come here tonight for one thing, and one thing only. You have come here *to hold the Baby*. Whether you know it or not, *he* is the One who has brought you here tonight, and really, *there is nothing else you can do*. You just hold him. And love him, And pray.

But be forewarned, my friends, for a night like this comes at great cost. To hold *this* Baby—this Jesus whom we proclaim tonight—means you are going to have to put some things down. When you hold *this* Baby, *nothing else matters*. Everything else falls away. When you hold this Baby, the warriors must put down their tramping boots and all their garments rolled in blood. The oppressors must put down their rods. The emperors must put down their censuses. The shepherds must put down their staves. The judges must put down their gavels. The bankers their pencils. The farmers their plows. The surgeons their scalpels. The journalists their pens. The teachers their books. The janitors their brooms. The interns their clipboards. The internet trolls their keyboards. The leaders their egos.

When you and I hold this Baby—when we hold this Jesus—everything else must fall away: our cell phones, our distractions, our ambitions, our rights, our wrongs, our hurts, our grievances . . . ***our power***. “Whatever that is you’re doin’, you gotta put it down and come hold this baby.”

So, my friends, what is it? What is it that *you* get to lay aside, even if just for this one night? The Creator of your soul has put down everything he had, because all he ever really wanted . . . *was just to be with you*. So whatever that is you’re doing, put it down. Come on. *Hold the baby*. There’s nothing else you *can* do. You just *hold* him. And *love* him. And *pray*. Amen.¹

The wise men had to put down those gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, so they could hold the baby. They had to put down their expectations of what the newborn king would be, so that they could hold *this* baby, and love him, and pray. They had to put down their own safety, for once they double-crossed Herod by going home by another way, he was not going to be happy. Herod was capable of terrible acts, and these wise people would be in danger. The wise men had to put down their

¹ Rev. Lonnie Lacy, 12/25/19 <http://lonnielacy.com/what-we-hold/?fbclid=IwAR3LUV2kVjLda1TcB8wrtUQ-p47agfIMWzoiXV1IBYdx-3zuyh4movESa9U>

investments of time and energy and money, so they could embrace this baby. And if he was two years old already, goodness knows you can't do anything else while holding a toddler, so all they could do was hold him and love him and pray.

My question to you, to me, is the same as that priest's question: what is it that we get to lay down—not have to lay down, but get to put down—so that we can hold the baby, this baby that we have long searched for?

And my question to us, all together, is what is it that we get to put down, as a congregation, as a church, so we can hold the baby, and love him, and pray? Do we need to put down our expectations, our hopes, our dreams? Do we need to put down our habits and routines? What is it that we're holding on to so closely, that is taking up so much room in our life together, that we can't hold the baby, and love him, and pray? What is it that we are so intent on *doing* that we can't hold the baby and melt into each other and just be?

This is a question worth pondering, as we leave Christmas behind and head into this new year. Whatever you're doin, you gotta put it down and hold this baby. For that's the most important thing.