

# **Journeying through Advent**



**Wakefield Baptist Church**

**29 Nov – 24 Dec 2020**

**The definition of a journey can be described as ‘an act of travelling from one place to another.’**

**Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem as they waited for the birth of Jesus. Advent is the time when we wait in joyful hope for the coming of Christ. We are reminded that Jesus is the Emmanuel – God with us. We do not journey alone. God is with each one of us, in every situation. No one is beyond the reach of God’s love.**

**Today, around the world, millions of our brothers and sisters are facing journeys similar to that of Mary and Joseph. They leave their homes, not because of a census but because of war, natural disaster, poverty or persecution. We are on a journey this year through Covid-19. People’s lives have been changed forever by the circumstances we face.**

**Throughout all the festive hustle and bustle and the uncertainty during this pandemic, we invite you to hold on to the idea that what we are really journeying towards is God’s overwhelming love.**

**That deep love of God is with us even at the most difficult of times. Through this unifying love we reach out to each other.**

*Christmas in Bethlehem. The ancient dream: a cold, clear night made brilliant by a glorious star, the smell of incense, shepherds and wise men falling to their knees in adoration of the sweet baby, the incarnation of perfect love.*

Lucinda Franks

**We invite you to consider 5 aspects of the Magi’s journey, one each Sunday in Advent perhaps; commencing on 29 November and culminating on Christmas Eve - or whenever you feel led to do so.**

**Will you take a spiritual journey with us this Advent season?**

## WEEK 1: STARS

### Something to think about:

We read in Matthew's gospel that before the journey even began, the Magi looked up and out...



The Magi at that time would have looked up and out at a great bowl of stars and moonlight when darkness fell. There was none of the light pollution that has dimmed the stars for us. No one had ever ventured into the sky – it was the home of bats, birds and insects. The only artificial light would have come from flickering fires. Ancient peoples sought to make sense of the moving stars - the wanderers - that we now know as the planets. Any new thing would be noticed, and in the time of Jesus, new and unusual phenomena in the night sky would be understood as signs from God. God created the heavens as well as the earth, so such rare and wonderful sights must surely, those people thought, be signs of something really extraordinary happening. Those who looked up and out would talk about this amongst themselves and say 'We really need to find out what God is doing.'

Looking up and out is fundamental to Christian mission. When we engage in prayer and reflection we often think of the search for stillness and silence, closing our eyes and folding our hands, becoming inward looking and focused as we dig deep down inside ourselves for God. Yet prayer and reflection can be the opposite as well, an opening of our eyes to become more aware, more connected with those around us, more aware of the needs of our fellow brothers and sisters around us, and of our place in creation.

We now know so much more about the moon and the stars, but for Christians, knowing about the heavens doesn't lessen the impact of the marvel of creation for us. We still need to find out what God is doing and what He is saying to us.

Something to read and reflect on:

*Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him.*

Matthew 24, 42-44

The Magi, the ones who kept watch, were ready. When they saw the sign they decided to go on a journey, a spiritual quest, to see and experience what God was doing for themselves.

Are we keeping our eyes open for what God is doing, through prayer & reflection? Are we called to be in the place where God is at work?

Something to do:

On the next cloudless night, go outside & look up at the stars. Jesus himself looked up at the same moon and stars. What do you imagine He felt when He looked up at the night sky? What do you feel He is saying to you?

*'God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.'*

Martin Luther

Something to pray about:

Use your own words to respond to your meditation in prayer. What does God want you to do, and with whom do you share your learning and God's story?

And ...

*Jesus, thank you for your abiding presence.  
We see signs of Your great love for us.  
We listen for signs of Your call to us.  
Help us always to be alert to Your will for us  
and to be ready to continue this advent journey  
together with joy. Amen*

*In the beauty of creation, may the face of  
God bless us each day as we journey.  
May the gentle breeze of the Spirit  
strengthen our love for each other.  
May the God of beauty touch our souls  
with compassion and justice.  
In the stillness of our hearts and creation,  
God give us peace, rest and healing.  
May we ponder our deep and personal  
experiences, and may our hearts be  
strengthened as we take this advent  
journey into the extravagant love of God.  
Amen*



## WEEK 2: TRAVELS



### Something to think about:

Why do we begin a journey? Some of us may just set out into the unknown, buy a ticket to anywhere, just for fun and adventure, but most of us have a reason, an idea where we are going, why and what we may find when we reach our journey's end.

The ability to journey is a remarkable feat of the human imagination; an ability to plan for the future and aim for a vision of something which has not yet come to pass: a meeting, a holiday, a new place to live or work or settle a family. Many journeys are anticipated with pleasure and excitement; others are the forced result of natural disaster, war, or persecution.

That ability to imagine a future is an important part of Christian mission. Without it, we are stuck dealing only with what we see and experience around us on our current coalface. But God calls us into our own future, to be prophetic about what the world could be and look like.

The Magi looked up and out and imagined what they might find at journey's end? Would it be worth the trouble and toil of those travels? They didn't just decide on a whim - in Matthew we see that they came to ask for 'he that has been born King of the Jews'. They had in their minds a hope and an expectation.

In our nativity productions the journey of the Magi is often brief. Perhaps they travel from one side of the church to the other, or maybe they hide behind the stable for a little while. But it's hard to get across the sheer scale of the journey Matthew hints at.

Christian traditions have tried to give us a sense of this vast undertaking. Matthew only tells us that the Magi came from the 'east', from the direction of the sun rising. One tradition has it that the Magi came from India, Persia, and Arabia. Imagine coming to Jerusalem all the way from India!

So the Magi began a journey, a spiritual journey, to find the person of their religious prophecy, a person born to be a king, a person who would change the world. In Advent, we too are on this journey. God continues to call us to set out to meet him in Jesus Christ. How will we prepare for and set out on this journey?

### Something to read and reflect on:

<sup>6</sup>*An oracle concerning the animals of the Negeb.*

*Through a land of trouble and distress,  
of lioness and roaring lion,  
of viper and flying serpent,  
they carry their riches on the backs of donkeys,  
and their treasures on the humps of camels,  
to a people that cannot profit them.*

<sup>8</sup> *Go now, write it before them on a tablet,  
and inscribe it in a book,  
so that it may be for the time to come  
as a witness for ever.*

Isaiah 30: 6 & 8

Here Isaiah gives us a much clearer picture of the hazards of travel. The Magi would almost certainly have had to use camels to cross the desert and would have needed access to water. They would have had to carry and find food, perhaps from traders on the desert routes or in towns and villages. Perhaps they were seasoned travellers, used to carrying articles for trade. But even if they were, the journey most likely took months, through uncertain weather and difficult terrain. They must have been very determined and very driven but that hard and dangerous journey, crossing such a distance could have cost them their lives. Yet they continued on their journey inspired and lead by a star.



As we journey through Advent towards the birth of Christ the Saviour, perhaps we can find some of this determination and vision. Yet we cannot sugar-coat what it might cost us to make the journey, what it might mean to find Christ. The journey in Advent, as in the journey of life, asks us the uncomfortable question: are we ready to meet God?

Something to do:



If you have a photograph album of a holiday in the UK or abroad, have a look through the photos you took. Make a list of the things you did to prepare for that holiday. Then write down what you needed to do beforehand. How did you get there and what happened on the way?



Now imagine you are a camel driver in the Magi's party. What will you need to prepare for this journey? What must you take with you and what will you do if you run out of supplies?

Something to pray about:

Use your own words to respond to your meditation in prayer. What does God want you to do, and with whom do you share your learning and God's story?

And ...

*God of the sea and desert,  
You have made us travellers, explorers,  
wonderers and wanderers.  
You have made us restless  
Till we rest in you.  
Walk with us in our journey this Advent,  
Guarding and guiding us,  
until we find the miracle you promised,  
The Son you sent us.  
Amen.*

## WEEK 3: GIFTS

### Something to think about:

Middle Eastern hospitality required that journeys and visits were marked by the giving or exchange of gifts. Monarchs, statesmen and religious leaders still bring and receive gifts today when they meet leaders in other countries. If we are invited to a party or for a meal at a friend's house, we often bring a gift and are sometimes given one too. But if we are to accompany the Magi on their journey towards Jesus, we have to stop and wonder: what does gift giving *really involve*?

Gifts are words and emotions in concrete form. They mean that you have thought about the recipient, and your friendship, love, esteem or gratitude for them is reflected in the gift you offer. You may take food round to a new neighbour or to a friend who is busy caring for another, flowers or wine to a dinner party, magazines or fruit to someone who is sick, or gifts of clothes, nappies, soft toys to a new baby.



Yet the Magi come as we read in Matthew's gospel, with gold, frankincense and myrrh. These are expensive, costly gifts, but they also come laden with spiritual significance. **Gold** is the king of all metals – a gift fit for Jesus, King of Kings.

**Frankincense** offers the idea of sacrifice and worship pleasing to God – Jesus is God, to be worshipped and adored. **Myrrh** comes with the idea of purification and death – perhaps hinting that Jesus was going to give up His life in order to be the Saviour of the world.

King – God – Saviour – the wise men said it all!

What do you think may have happened to those gifts? Did Jesus grow up remembering or being told about exotic strangers who brought him symbolic treasures? What might his parents have told Him about the people who journeyed so far to find Him?

### Something to read and reflect on

*I will send my messenger before me to prepare the way. And then the One you are looking for will come suddenly to his temple – the messenger of God's promises, to bring you great joy. Yes, he is surely coming," says the Lord Almighty. "But who can live when he appears? Who can endure his coming? For he is like a blazing fire refining precious metal, and he can bleach the dirtiest garments! Like a refiner of silver he will sit and closely watch as the dross is burned away. He will purify the Levites, the ministers of God, refining them like gold or silver, so that they will do their work for God with pure hearts. Then once more the Lord will enjoy the offerings brought to him by the people of Judah and Jerusalem, as he did before.*

Malachi 3:1-4

*'There is nothing in the true believer's power which he would not do for his Lord: nothing in our substance which we would not give to Him, nothing in ourselves which we would not devote to His service.'*

C.H. Spurgeon Christmas Eve Sermon 1882

What has Christian mission got to do with gifts? If we journey with the Magi to encounter Jesus, what are we bringing with us to offer to Him? ...In every encounter in our lives, be it within family, work, leisure activities, whatever it is, there is an exchange of gifts: gifts of conversation, of learning new things, of discovering something about yourself and about others,. Journeys create stories and stories are gifts of imagination and experience which we give to one another.

### Something to do:

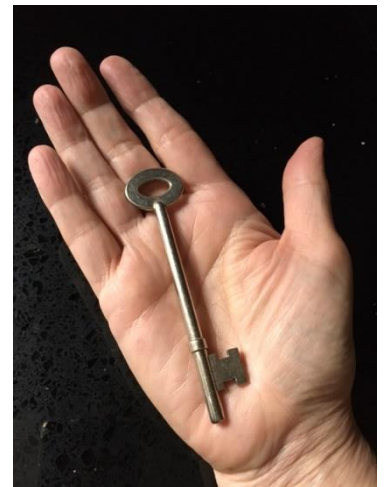
How are you getting on with your gift list? Next time you think about finding a gift for someone, see if you can put more of yourself into the gift. Maybe it's something you could make; maybe it could come with a special message; maybe it could be wrapped in a more thoughtful way? What about giving the gift? Is there a way it could be given which captures your relationship with the recipient? What could you do to spend less or love more?

Find a key and place it in the palm of your hand. Feel the contours; is it hard or soft, rough or smooth? What can your key do? Does it need oiling to turn? Would it fit your heart?

Meditate on these words:

'What can I give Him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.'

Christina Rossetti



### Something to pray about:

Use your own words to respond to your meditation in prayer. What does God want you to do, and with whom do you share your learning and God's story?

And ...

*Lord, we thank you for all the gifts you have given us;  
and all the gifts we have received from others.  
Help us be good stewards of all entrusted to us,  
that we may become new gifts of love and hope  
to all who need us.  
Amen*



## WEEK 4: MEETING HEROD

### Something to think about:

On any pilgrimage or spiritual journey we need guides and guidance. Mission doesn't happen in a vacuum. If we seek to do God's will, how do we find out where God wants us to go?

Matthew tells us that the Magi made for the holy city of Jerusalem. If a Messiah were to arise, surely it was in Jerusalem that they would find out the details. So the Magi arrived and spoke about the star they had followed and asked for directions to the new-born 'King of the Jews'.



Not surprisingly this bothered Herod. After all he was the local ruler, and his authority came from the Romans. Now these foreigners had arrived and were talking about a prophecy of a Messiah, a ruler for all Israel. Any Messiah would be a powerful religious leader who could take over and remove him from power, and Herod enjoyed his power very much. So, Herod searched out all the information he could, and had a secret meeting with these Magi who had made such an extraordinary journey.

Herod was clever. He had narrowed down the end point of the journey through the prophecy in Micah (5:2) and he had these willing visitors who could get him the information he needed. He lied to the Magi, saying he wanted to find out where Jesus was so that he could go and worship him.

At this point in Matthew's story, the fate of Jesus was in the hands of the Magi. Suppose they had found Jesus and gone straight back to Herod? What chance would that family have had, if the Magi had given Herod the information he wanted?

### Something to read and reflect on:

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

*When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "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 shepherd 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 search carefully 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 when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.*

Matthew 2: 1-10

Christian life is a spiritual journey in which we both learn and grow, but if we are to journey with the Magi we have to realise that life is not plain sailing. The Magi had a star to follow but it led them initially to a dangerous and wily leader who tried to use them in his own pursuit of power. We are used to the awe, wonder and miracle side of the nativity, that we forget that Jesus was born among many dangers. The Magi had walked into a world of political scheming, violence and conspiracy.

On their journey the Magi had to act with discernment - to bear witness to Christ was not only good news, but it could be dangerous news. This is as true today as it was then. There are people in the world today who will be killed if they tell the authorities that they have found Jesus. There are people who stand before him in worship, in awe and wonder and then return to their homes secretly to prevent them being arrested.

We are told that even without the Magi's information, Herod decided to act. As the story unfolds, we see the presence of Herod's power, fear and rage. This Advent we can stand with all people seeking Jesus, whose journey brings them face to face with a 'Herod'. We can pray that they may be guided in their journey with Jesus, walk in His presence and remain safe. We are called to work for a world where faith can be open and shared freely.

#### Something to do:



Reflect on a time when you had to stand up to someone for the sake of your principles or your faith. What did that feel like? How do you think we can stand up to oppressive power today?

Next time you are listening to or watching the news, or maybe out and about locally watch out for the police/police station, law courts, council offices, town hall, or places of government. Pray for all who work there, that they may do their work fairly and with justice for all.

#### Something to pray about:

Use your own words to respond to your meditation in prayer. What does God want you to do, and with whom do you share your learning and God's story?

And ...

*Lord, We pray for all who come before the courts of the King,  
who are tested and questioned,  
whose purpose is interrogated.  
We pray for all who profess the Christian faith  
knowing that it may cost them their homes, their churches,  
their livelihoods or their lives.  
We give thanks for those who protect and nurture them  
and pray for a time when  
all people can worship in peace and safety  
Amen*

## CHRISTMAS: MEETING JESUS

### Something to think about:

What did the Magi really expect to find? What are miracles supposed to look like? Do you suppose they might have been disappointed when they tracked down the child that had been born to be the Messiah, the King of the Jews? Is this what the star was all about, this young woman, this carpenter husband, the poverty of their lives?

For many people the journey through Advent to Christmas ends up feeling a bit like this. Advent is all anticipation: putting up decorations, looking forward to being off work or



school, hoping for presents, getting together with family. But when it comes to Christmas itself, there's a flat feeling: is this it? Maybe what you are hoping for doesn't materialise or the sheer effort of buying and wrapping presents, preparing and cooking for the family always wears you out. Especially this year when the Christmas we normally look forward to may not happen in the same way, we can't look forward to our usual traditions; are we going to feel even more: is this it?

Matthew doesn't tell us specifically what the Magi thought or felt, but that on finding the child Jesus they worshipped him. And that suggests that Matthew wants us to understand that when they found him, when they met Jesus face to face, they knew they were in the presence of God. And that takes the Christmas moment to a whole new level; that's the moment that people are searching for and sometimes miss. It is the encounter with the Christ child that transfigures Christmas, that gives Christmas meaning. That is what Advent leads up to, something utterly awe-inspiring; meeting with God not in some distant, heavenly domain, but right now, right here, in our own world. That's right at the heart of Christian mission, not endless words about Jesus, but ways of meeting Jesus, for real, right here among us, right now.

### Something to read and reflect on:

*On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.*

*And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route*

Matthew 2: 11-12

This was their journey's end. A journey of walking, riding, striding, covering ground. But at journey's end the Magi halted before the child and bowed down. In many paintings and nativity sets, we find the Magi kneeling in the straw and the dirt of the child's dwelling. Have you ever thought about kneeling?

Kneeling in the course of worship is traditional in some churches, but in ours we prefer to sit or stand. It's not something we do much in daily life either, except perhaps for housework or gardening. So why should anyone kneel at all in worship? What is so significant about the act of kneeling?

The Magi are depicted as great and powerful men bowing or kneeling before the tiny child. If you bow your head you make yourself shorter and give away your power. If you kneel you cannot run away. To kneel down is to become vulnerable, to submit to the will of another, to show that you give up your strength and autonomy. Kneeling is a mark of obedience (not my will, but yours), humility and supplication, asking for compassion and mercy. It also is a mark of recognition, and veneration, acknowledging that we are in the presence of one who is greater. All these things can be combined in the action of kneeling in worship where we demonstrate the understanding that in Jesus, God is among us.



Not everyone can, or wants to, kneel in worship. But there is something about those figures humbling themselves, casting down their crowns, which reminds us that we worship God with our whole being, bodies as well as minds and spirits. To meet the Christ-child, to offer the gift of ourselves, means to kneel before him in order to meet him face to face. And as we kneel before him, Christ raises us up. On their rising, the Magi learn a new truth, the truth about Herod, and begin their return journey by turning their backs on his evil, for they have met God and seen his truth.

#### Something to do:

Imagine a 'photo album' of the journey of the Magi. What would they tell their friends and family when they got back? What would they tell their own people about their journey, about meeting and then keeping away from Herod and about finding Jesus?

How can we be more like the Magi telling people about Jesus for the first time? What would be the story of our meeting and journey with Christ, the Messiah?

#### Something to pray about:

Use your own words to respond to your meditation in prayer. What does God want you to do, and with whom do you share your learning and God's story?

And ...

*Lord, as the Magi came to you,  
into the place where you lived,  
they knew they were at journey's end.*

*This Christmas, after the journey through Advent,  
may we come before you in awe and wonder at your birth  
and be filled with wonder, thanks, and praise.*

*But we know this is not the end of the journey,  
but the new day's beginning of our journey with you.  
Walk with us, guide our steps and give us the words we need  
to share your story of salvation with others.  
Amen*