



*Christmas Eve - December 24, 2013*  
*Pastor Mark Toone*  
*Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church*

## *The Detour*

### Matthew 2: 1-12

I'd like you to meet one of our newest Chapel Hill members. This is Evelyn Rose. She is the daughter of Rachel and Ellis White. You met Ellis earlier; he's the guy who talks funny. Ellis is a pastoral intern with us; he and Rachel came over from England two and one-half years ago and have become a precious part of our Chapel Hill family. And then, on August 6 at 11pm, along came Evelyn. We like to say that she was made in America from British parts.

Rachel's parents were eager to be here for the birth of their first grandchild, so they made careful plans. Flying from Greece, they made a 15-hour journey to San Francisco where they were going to spend a few days sightseeing before coming up to Gig Harbor. The baby wasn't due for another week so they had plenty of time, right? After that 15-hour journey, they landed in San Francisco, rented a car, drove to their hotel, checked in, got into their room and turned on their phones. And immediately, a call came from Ellis: "Rachel's water has broken! The baby is coming! You need to get here!"

So they hauled their suitcases back down to the lobby, checked out, returned to the airport, turned their rental car back in, got the last two seats on the last flight headed for Seattle. We picked them up, got them to the hospital and finally, at about 2:30 in the morning, they met their brand new granddaughter. But that trip to San Francisco was a very long and very expensive detour!

Detours. How many of you would agree that last summer was a very frustrating time to be driving in Gig Harbor? Especially if you were trying to get to this church! Rosedale was torn up. Skansie was torn up. Hunt was torn up. And for good measure, Harborview was torn up, too! It was a conspiracy! I lost track of how many times I sat, waiting for that flagman—who looked like Gandalf from the Hobbit... remember him—to let me through and how many times I took a detour. Because if I wasn't willing to take a detour, I was never going to get where I wanted to go.

Did you notice that the first Christmas story is full of detours? Mary was detoured from her life plans with the announcement that she was pregnant... when she was still a virgin. Joseph was detoured from his marriage plans when he wondered if his fiancée had been messing around behind his back. Both of them were

detoured with an inconvenient 90-mile trek to Bethlehem. Shepherds were detoured from their evening's watch with a terrifying announcement from angels in the night skies. Lots of detours!

But the longest detour was that of the Magi—the wise men—or as our daughter, Rachel, once called them, “the wise guys.” They were from Persia (modern day Iran) 800 miles away. The Magi were pagans who worshiped many different gods. And they were astrologers who studied the heavens because they believed that human history was guided by the movement and alignment of stars and planets. (If you read your horoscope every day, maybe you believe the same thing.) They were also students of history. They knew the prophecies—the ancient predictions—that could be found in the Jewish scriptures.

So when they discovered an unfamiliar star in the heavens, they believed it was an omen foretelling the birth of a new Jewish king. And they wanted to meet this king! So they packed their camels and headed out on a long journey; a massive detour in their lives.

But notice this: After the magi found the infant king in Bethlehem, they took another detour. Did you see that? The last line in the story: “...they returned to their country by another way.” A detour! But why? What led the magi to seek a different route home? I want us to take a closer look at three parts of this story. All of them begin with “W:” They Went, They Worshiped, They were Warned.

First, they Went. The magi ended up on a detour because they went on the journey in the first place. There were lots of wise guys in Persia... thousands, perhaps. Astrology was a national obsession. That means there were thousands who saw this new star; thousands who would have been familiar with ancient prophecy; thousands who would have recognized that something momentous was taking place somewhere west of them. But our wise guys were the only ones who did something about it! They were the only ones who Went. They ended up on a detour because they started the journey.

Then, they Worshiped. Have you ever noticed what happens to normal adults when they meet a baby? Like when we saw Evelyn for the first time that night? We go goofy! “Ahhh... you are so beautiful. Look at you... yes look at you! Oh loook... she smiled at me. (No Mark, that was gas!) No... she smiled. I’m sure of it. Goo goo... ga, ga....” We just go stupid when we come into the presence of a newborn, don’t we?

Do you know what the magi did when they came into the presence of newborn Jesus? They worshiped him! The word for worship in the Greek language means they put their faces in the dirt. Imagine these regal men in their expensive robes... face down in the dirt worshipping this heaven-sent baby king.

What's interesting is their worship would not have been kosher. Remember, these guys were pagan astrologers. Their worship would not have been acceptable according to the Jewish rules. They did not know the right words, the right prayers, the right rituals, the right songs. But as imperfect as their worship might have been... they offered it anyhow. It wasn't pure; but it was sincere. It was from their hearts. It was the best they knew how to offer in that moment.

So, the Magi took their detour because they Went, they Worshiped, and finally... because they were Warned. They were warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod. He didn't want to worship the baby; he wanted to kill him as he had so many of his own family members. He was ruthless and desperate to hold on to power. But God warned the magi in their dreams not to go back to Herod. So they paid attention and took a detour home; they went back by a different way. And when Matthew writes those words: "...they returned to their country by a different way," they have a deeper meaning. Yes, he means they took a different road back to Persia. But he is also saying, "The courses of their lives were changed. After they met and worshiped Jesus, they went back home different men. After that night, they would never be the same."

Tonight, 4000 people will come in and out these doors. Many of you are members of our church family, but many more are visitors who have joined us as our guests tonight. And by the way, you are so welcome; we are glad you are here! We will take you any time we can get you because we believe that sooner or later, the Holy Spirit of God is going to stir your heart and you are going to return home by a different way.

I'm sure of it, because it happens every Christmas to some unsuspecting visitors. Tonight, some of you will be surprised to discover that you end up on a detour... an unexpected change of direction in the course of your life. Why? Because we have all the same ingredients in our stories as the wise guys did in theirs.

First, you went! It's Christmas Eve. There are parties everywhere. You could have gone to one of those or stayed home and had a party of your own, but that wouldn't do for you. Somehow you were stirred to do something more than eat and drink and make merry. You may not be much of a church-goer, but for you, Christmas Eve would not be complete if you didn't make your journey to find Jesus. So you found our website or called a friend or saw our signs... and when the time came, you went! Good for you! You will never experience God's detour in your life if you don't begin the journey and you have... tonight!

And, like the wise guys, you Worshiped. You have joined in prayer. You have listened to the reading of scripture. You have added your voices to the singing of carols that make remarkable claims about this Jesus. "Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king!" "Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king!" Even if you don't quite understand those words... you have still worshiped Jesus tonight! Perhaps like the magi, you're not even sure you believe

all of it... or you are confused about what you do believe. Maybe your prayers and worship wouldn't be exactly "correct" —maybe not entirely "pure" —but here you are, offering your worship as best you can from your heart. And God loves that! And perhaps the more you think about it, you might even begin to see the difference between the way we greet any new baby and the way we greet the baby who is in fact, God in the flesh—God with us, Immanuel—the baby who is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. When we truly realize whom we have come to visit this night, we don't say "Goo goo, ga ga!" We say, "Glory to God in the Highest!"

And finally, like the wise guys, you have been Warned. Some of you here tonight—you know that the course you are on, the route that you are taking—know it's the wrong way. You sense that you are headed for a dead end... the death of your marriage because you are not being faithful; the death of your career because you are not being truthful; the death of your friendship because you are not being honorable; the death of your future because you are not being hopeful; the death of your family because you are not being dutiful.

Maybe it's your friends who are warning you. Maybe your gut is warning you. Maybe your circumstances are warning you. Or maybe you have had dreams that frighten you. But however the warning is coming, you sense deeply and clearly that the path you are on is not good for you. You have been warned.

Many of you came tonight expecting a sweet Christmas interlude. But what if God wants to send you on a detour? What if he wants you to discover that the things you are singing about Jesus are true? That he really is the King and that he has a loving detour in store for you that will lead you away from death and toward real life. What if he wants you to discover that the human instinct to try harder to please God is exactly wrong? That the only way we can come to God is to admit we need a savior and to welcome him into our life. What if he wants you to discover that the great detour of your eternity would be to follow Jesus who is not a baby any more... but who is the Lord of all Creation and loves you very much. Are you ready to walk another way? Are you ready to find a new way home... to the place you know you need to go? If this is true for you, what will you do about it? It might start with a simple prayer. So I'd like to pray one with you. Would you all close your eyes and join with me?

"Dear God, I thank you that I have met you tonight. Thank you for the gift of your son, Jesus. Seeing him has reminded me that I am not on the right path. I want to follow you, wherever your detour might take me. Please, lead me to life. In Jesus' name. Amen."