

TrailNotes speaks to forward movement, paying attention to the “landscape” we are passing through in this trail-laced wooded hillside and valley, not to mention the world beyond. *TrailNotes* is an unfolding, ongoing journal of the people who share the trail with us and the things we’re learning and doing.

Wise men, who is your travel agent?

an after-Christmas story

Ed’s Note: Steve McKee wrote this story three years ago. He has drawn from tradition, his imagination and Home by Another Way by Barbara Brown Taylor. Read it to your family!

Once upon a time there were three very wise men. One of them, named Melchior, was a middle-aged scholar from Arabia, where ancient texts predicted the birth of a ruler that was connected to the rising of a star. One of them, named Gaspar, lived in India, where as an old man with a white beard, he studied the night sky faithfully. The third was named Balthazar, and he was a black-skinned astronomer and scholar from Ethiopia.

Although they were each wise and well-respected in their homelands, each was still seeking something—something of more meaning, something to fill an empty longing in their lives. They had tried books, they had tried wealth and power, they had tried herbs and had even tried magic and astrology. But there was something missing.

Then it happened. There in the sky was a bright light. No one else seemed to notice it, but the three scholars saw it. It was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky, or in their own imaginations, but they were so wise they knew it did not matter all that much. There was a bright light lodged in their eyes, and it was calling them, leading them. It was a leading they had been waiting for all their lives.

So they set off, one by one from Arabia, and from India, and from Ethiopia, each believing that he was the only one with a star in his eye, until they all ran into one another on the road to Jerusalem, where they decided to travel together.

When the Magi took off on their journey, they were navigating by faith. They had no idea where they were going. Now when *we* travel, we almost always know what our destination is. I’ll bet that you rarely get in your car, or take off on your camel without knowing your journey’s end.

The Magi, on the other hand, only knew that they were headed west. It reminds me of when God told Abraham to pack up and leave for a land that He would show him. There was no map, no itinerary, no GPS, no travel agent. God Himself was the “holy travel agent.”

So the wise men moved steadily westward, traversing field and fountain, moor and mountain (except “moor” is a British habitat term for open, rolling, infertile, boggy, windswept land that you find in Emily Bronte novels in the southwest of England), but the Magi traveled a *long* way.

The three wise men were unanimous that the star seemed to be leading them to Jerusalem, which made perfect sense,

since they had every reason to believe that they were on their way to meet a king. The place to meet a king was at the royal palace, of course, so that is where they went and they had no trouble gaining entrance. They looked rich and noble, and that was enough to get them a royal audience with King Herod, but the king they met was something of a disappointment. He was old, and fat, and balding, and he had terrible breath.

STEVE MCKEE



The three Wise Men on a 2011 Australian postage stamp

At this point the wise men asked the king’s permission to meet privately for a minute. When they put their heads together, they all agreed that *this* was not the king they had come to seek, so they went back and told King Herod about the star and asked if there were any *other* kings in the general area.

King Herod had been picking his fingernails up until then, but suddenly their question seemed to get his attention in a big way. He looked right at them for the first time and he thought he saw a star reflecting in their eyes, or maybe in their mind’s eye, but whatever it was, Herod’s own eyes grew perfectly round, like the eyes of a snake.

Now, it was Herod’s turn to ask permission to meet privately for a minute. He slipped into his private chambers where he conferred with his palace chaplains. They whipped out their concordances and told the king what he wanted to know.

Yes, there was a little something in the book of Micah about a new ruler for Israel, but it was nothing to get excited about. It had been written long ago...over 400 years ago...and it seemed unlikely, but you never know. It would be easy enough to send these three travelers to Bethlehem to do the reconnaissance work, and then we could check it out if it was true.

So that was what King Herod did. He combed what was left of his hair, and he gargled, and went back to encourage the wise men to visit Bethlehem at once. If they found a new

(Continued on page 3)

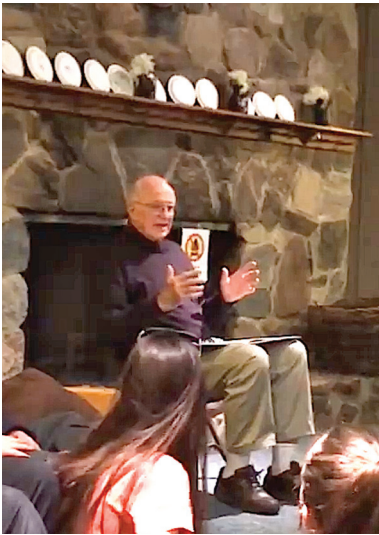
CHRISTMASTIME HAPPENINGS AT GRACE FELLOWSHIP CHURCH



Girls' Trio: Abby Heining, Talia Byrom, and Karis Vega sing *Once in David's Royal City* on Dec. 16



...and kneel by the Manger.



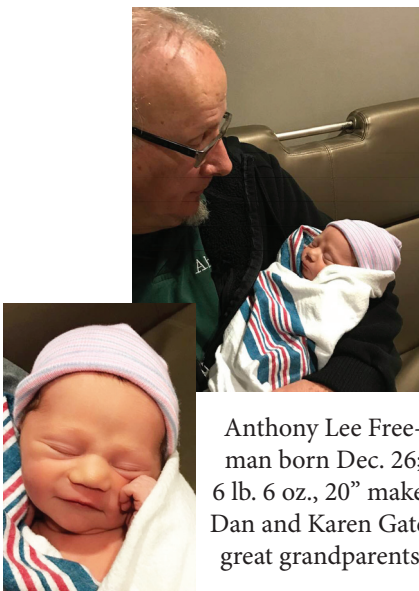
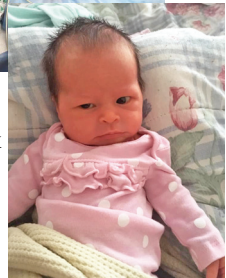
Ray Nethery reads *The Legend of the Candy Cane* at the GFC Christmas Party on Dec. 19.



Juli Parsons' Lasercraft Enterprises handmade glass ornaments adorn a Christmas Tree at Kingwood Center.



Arrow Viviana Fox born Dec. 19, 5 lb., 13 oz., 18½". Now a girl "kit" in the Fox "skulk."



Anthony Lee Freeman born Dec. 26; 6 lb. 6 oz., 20" makes Dan and Karen Gates great grandparents!

JANUARY 2019— "Open Doors in the New Year"

- 5 Men's Prayer Breakfast**, 10 am at Hanley Road McDonald's.
- 6 Worship**: 10:00 am, Eric Byrom preaching.
- 11 Child Evangelism Prayer Meeting**: 10-11 am at GFC. All are welcome to participate.
- 12 Teen Lock-in Overnighter**
- 13 Worship**: 10:00 am, Eric Byrom preaching. Communion. 🍷🍷
- 19 Women of Grace**: 10:30 am, Tim Barber Youth Building.
- 20 Worship**: 10:00 am, Jon Vega preaching.
- 27 Worship**: 10:00 am, Eric Byrom preaching. Communion. 🍷🍷

Wise Men, Who Is Your Travel Agent... (Cont. from page 1)
king, they were to come back with his successor's name so Herod could send some flowers. Herod had a big smile, but the Magi couldn't miss his clenched fists and white knuckles. You don't have to be a wise man to know that no king has ever yet bowed down to another king. It didn't take dreams to tell the Magi that they would not return to Jerusalem.

Once back outside in the cool night air, it was easy to find the star, which led them to Bethlehem. Following a star is tricky, when you think of it, because a star is up in the sky, which means the sense of direction you get from a star is a little bit general. Which house the star is right over kind of depends on where you're standing at the time.

But this was no ordinary star, and it led them to the doorway of a modest one-room house in Bethlehem, a decent house, but not the residence of a king. What was going on? If they had found this house on their own, they wouldn't have even knocked on the door, but it was the star that brought them here.

When the door opened, the couple inside almost died of fright. Has the circus come to Bethlehem, or did we miss the invitation to a costume party? But...the wise men didn't even notice because they were trying to squeeze through that small entry into the crowded room with their arms full of gifts...and they weren't looking for Joseph and Mary, of course...they were looking for the goal of their journey. And there He was. All they could see was the Child, who was not afraid, and whose eye shone with the same star that they had been following.

They had no idea who this Child was, but they knew what to do. They got on their knees and worshipped Him. Then they gave Him the gifts they had brought, although they felt a little foolish. They thought, "If we had only known the king would be a babe, we would have brought some goat's milk, or a warm blanket, or something shiny to hang above His crib."

The Child's parents were gracious, though. They thanked the foreigners for their gifts and they held the gifts up for the Baby to see. Then, to the wise men's complete alarm, the Child's mother picked Him up and handed Him around so that each one of them held that warm, soft, damp, living weight in his arms. The weeks and months of travel had been worth it.

In the morning the wise men could not find their stars-of-wonder anywhere, no matter where they looked. But they didn't need "stars with royal beauty bright" anymore since they had found the *Baby King* with royal beauty bright. As much as they hated to, they guessed they had better be on their way.

So the wise men picked up their packs, which were lighter than before, and then they lined up in front of the Baby to thank Him for the gifts He had given them. Then Jesus' mother thought, "What in the world are you talking about? *You* brought the gifts." Mary could only laugh, but they told her that she would understand someday.

Then the wise men trooped outside, stretched, kissed the Child goodbye, and went home by another way.



If you have heard my stories before, you may remember that I often ask myself Two Questions about a Bible passage: **Who am I in this story?** and **Where is the gospel in this story?**

Who am I? I would guess that most of the 100 or 1000 times we have all heard this story, we have been just "outside observers." Today, though, I have tried to put each one of us in the place of one of the Magi. **Today we are the wise men in the story.** Let's focus on that for a few minutes.

Where is the gospel in this story?

I've got three ideas.

1. The Christ Child is born! Who comes to see Him? First came the Jewish shepherds that you know well from the Christmas story in Luke 2.



*"il adorazione del 'shepherds'" ("The Adoration Of The Shepherds")
by Juan Ribalta, circa. 1620*

But soon after the Jewish shepherds, came the Gentile Magi from foreign lands. What is on display in the Christ Child is not just the King of the Jews. Jesus did come for the Jews, of course, but he also came for all people. It is not just a king on display, it is **God Himself on display. Christ has come for all the nations.**

The angels had said pretty much the same things to the shepherds on Christmas Eve. "*Fear not, for, behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*" That includes us even if we're not Jewish.

As Paul said in Gal. 3: 28-29 "*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ Jesus, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*"

2. Where is the gospel in this story? This is rather symbolic. The Magi journeyed a long way from the East, and then returned home by another way. You could say, "Of course they did! **No one ever comes to Christ and then goes back the same way he came.**" The Magi returned as changed people, and **we are not meant to stay the way we are.** At Christmas we sing the song, "O Holy Night," which includes the line, "For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn." It is a new and glorious morn for all who come to Jesus.



(Concluded on page 4)

Wise Men, Who Is Your Travel Agent... (Cont. from page 3)

3. The gospel appears in this story in a third way, and it is the one that has touched me the deepest. There is an unnamed character in this story. Who could that be? The unnamed character is God Himself. He is never once mentioned but He's always present. **God is present in the star-of-wonder, star-of-light, star with royal beauty bright. God is present in the ancient prophecy** about a baby king in Bethlehem. **God is present in the dream** about returning home by another way and the protection of Baby Jesus from King Herod's trap. And, of course, **God is present in the leading** of the Magi as they traveled.

Let Him be your "Travel Agent"

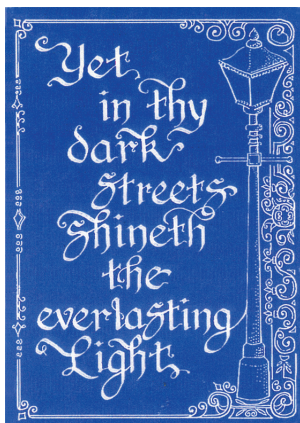
I mentioned earlier that when we travel, we almost always know our destination. The more I think about it though, we may know where we are going when we undertake *geographical* travel but we don't know our destination in the *travel of life*.

Once we turn over our lives to God, we are like Abraham going to a land and a life that God will show us. We give up the *right* to be our own travel agent and instead we trust that He will show us the path, a path sometimes with joys and sometimes with sorrows, a path sometimes with opportunities and sometimes with road blocks, a path with victories, a path with illnesses, a path with new friends, a path with lost loved ones, a path with good decisions, a path with bad choices. But when we are being obedient, we give up the right to decide our life's itinerary. Psalm 20:7 says,

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

Some trust in Lexus, Some trust in horse power, Some trust in Mapquest, Some trust in GPS, Some trust in boarding passes, but in the end, **the real question is, Who is your travel agent?**

So, for tomorrow morning, for the new week, for the new year, here is what I would suggest for you. **Remember the Magi.** For as many days as you can, remember the Magi and their faith. I would suggest that you resolve to be like the Magi, traveling over the fields and fountains, moors and mountains of life, but not traveling by yourself, not following your own GPS, but following **the light of Christ.**



(Calligraphy and artwork by Suzy Linger)

Prayer

Our God, as we have read today, the wise men were not coerced to come to Christ. They saw something so compellingly beautiful that they were lured out of their own country to find something of infinite value.

In a similar way, we have not been coerced to come to Christ, but have seen the truth and beauty He brings to life. We, too, have left our old country, our old life, to follow a new life in Christ.

You know the challenge we face each day. Do we try to find God by ourselves, or do we follow the light? Do we seek Him out on our own terms, or do we surrender our wills? Do we trust in the Lord with all our heart and lean not on our own understanding? Do we trust in chariots and horses and our own personal GPS?

Our God, we know that Jesus said, "*I, Jesus, am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.*" Thank You, Lord, that You are always leading, still proceeding. Please lead us in the year ahead and give us the faith to follow.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.

My friends, home for the wise men was not the manger where the light was gentle and God was a Child. And for us, Bethlehem is not the end of our journey but only the beginning.

The light of Christ was not extinguished in Bethlehem but it burns brightly for each one of us to follow daily.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord!

-Steve McKee

Dec. 27, 2015

Grace Fellowship Church

365 Straub Rd East • Mansfield Oh 44903
419-526-4699 • gracefellowship01@gmail.com

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Eric Byrom | Presiding Elder/Pastor |
| Jadaé Fox | Elder |
| Andy Heining | Elder |
| Robert Key | Elder |
| Jon Vega | Elder |
| Rick Widener | Treasurer |
| Kay Berry & Karen Gates | Women |
| Lori Barker | Missions |
| Andy Heining | Worship |
| Circle Church Serve Group | Greeters |
| Angel Vega | Dance |
| Judy Nichols | Prayer Chain |
| Kay Berry & Jadaé Fox | Office |
| Kathy Barth, Manfred & Janet Adalem | Communion |
| Andy Anschutz | Sound/Power Point |
| John and Donna Kurtz | TrailNotes |