

Faith That Works
(Level III: Trusting God's Ways)
When God Says "Go"
December 14, 2014

PRELUDE (Band) – Joy to the World

Welcome / Announcements – Rick

- Thanks to all the volunteers from yesterday ...

Video – Santa's Workshop Recap

- Membership class 4pm today – please let us know you are coming via tear off card (put in offering basket at end of service)
- Introduce topic “when God says go” ...
- Phil & Tawnia from AL help us worship with the OutLoud kids ...
- Elementary comes in at the end

Worship (video) – Greater / I Can't Stop

Adventureland Activity

- Elementary kids

Feature – God Rest Ye / We Three Kings

If there's one thing I *really do* love about Christmas ... it's tradition ... specifically the way we celebrate Christmas in our family – and have celebrated it for years. I'm sure you can relate to that because you, too, have your traditions.

But if there's one thing I *don't* love about Christmas ... it's also tradition ... specifically those traditions we tend to associate with the birth of Jesus which simply are not accurate.

Now, to be fair, the basic storyline reflected in most of our Nativity traditions (which we sing about in Christmas carols and see in Advent plays or movies and on Christmas Cards) *is* accurate. For example:

An angel tells Mary she will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit then tells Joseph to believe her story and marry her anyway.

They travel 80 miles to Bethlehem where Jesus is born (though the donkey is not mentioned in the Bible).

And on that night, angels appear to shepherds in the surrounding area announcing his birth.

And they go into town and see it for themselves and they – as well as Mary and Joseph – are amazed at what they've experienced.

So far so good. But what does not happen that night (and this is one of “those” traditions) ...

... is that “the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.”

Even though a very famous Christmas carol says that’s how it was ... it wasn’t.

You can be very sure Jesus *did* cry when he was hungry. And you can be sure he made poopy diapers (or poopy swaddling) too, because even though Jesus was God, he was also human – *a real human, just like you and me*. And, when we’re babies we all cry when we’re hungry. And we all make poopy diapers.

Another thing that did not happen that night (in spite of what tradition says) was the arrival from the East of the Three Kings ... or the Wise Men ... or, most accurately, the Magi.

... which means that the picture we so often have in our heads about what the Nativity might have looked like ... just isn’t accurate.

I hope that doesn’t ruin Christmas for you!

And it doesn’t have to because, as it turns out, what *really* happened as it relates to the Magi and *why* it happened is far more interesting and exciting and *instructive* than the tradition.

And I’ll explain why I say that in a just a few minutes but, first, a little context of where we are in this series.

Our Context

If you’ve been around NHCC for the past few weeks and months, you know that we’ve been talking about faith; trying to understand what it is from a biblical and Christian point of view ... because what passes for faith today isn’t biblical or Christian at all. I won’t go back into all of that today so, if you’re new or haven’t been here in a while and want to know why that’s true, you can check out the recent messages on our website where I explain it.

As we’ve looked at faith in the Bible, what we’ve discovered is that Christian faith is actually evidenced in three forms throughout the Bible. I think of them as levels because one builds on top of the other and it’s important that you have the correct form of faith at the foundation.

That first level we learned – Level I – faith is trust in God’s ultimate Word ...

... (which is not the Bible but Jesus himself). He is the Word of God in flesh the Bible says. And faith begins with trusting what God the Father says about Him and what He did for us on the cross and in His resurrection.

Level two faith builds on that with trust in God’s Wisdom ...

... primarily as it is revealed in the teachings of Jesus and his Apostles as well as the writings of the Old Testament.

And trust in God’s wisdom – faith of this kind – not only leads us to align and arrange our lives according to how He says to live life (instead of the culture, family or even ourselves) but also proves the validity of the first level. If there is no interest or effort to conform our lives to what God says then, the Apostles tell us, something is very wrong and we need to check whether we really do have faith – trust – in Jesus.

And level three faith, which we started looking at last week, trusts in God's ways.

This kind of faith has confidence that God is directing and influencing our lives for our good and for His purposes. And because of that confidence, we don't give up or quit when God's ways don't make sense to us. That doesn't mean it's easy. In fact, the purpose of faith isn't to make life easy. It's to help us handle it when life isn't easy.

I went into great detail on that last week and if you weren't here and you've recently been wondering "what the heck is God doing in my life right now? I just don't get it" and you're thinking about throwing in the towel, I strongly encourage you to go to the media tab of our website and listen to or read that message.

The Example of the Magi

So, that's where we've been over the past couple of months, but today we're going to talk about the Magi – these mysterious desert travelers who "from Orient are" and have "traveled afar." Who are they, really? And why are they "following yonder star of wonder, star of night, star of royal beauty bright?" Why do they *trust* that it will "guide them to thy perfect light?"

Now, *that's* an interesting phrase isn't it? Trusting that they are being guided to where God wants them to be – in Bethlehem. Sounds like this third form of faith, doesn't it – trusting that God is working to direct and influence our lives?

And it is. The Magi actually provide an excellent example of level III faith. So let's look at them and their story a bit more closely.

There's not a whole lot said about them in the Bible– actually just a few sentences – but it's enough to discover something amazing when you know a little history and geography.¹

The Gospel of Matthew chapter two tells us that ...

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men [Greek, "Magi"] from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem [not Bethlehem], asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."

Matthew 2:1-2 (NLT)

Matthew tells us that this was a surprise to Herod and so he called the Jewish religious leaders together and asked where their prophesied Messiah was to be born.

"Bethlehem," they told him.

And then he told the wise men "when you find him in Bethlehem let me know so I can come and worship, too." And when they resumed their journey, the star reappeared.

Matthew writes that ...

It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were

filled with joy!

They entered the house (not the stable or the cave) and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew 2:9-11 (NLT)

Best guess is, at this point, Jesus is two years old. We know that because when the Magi head home, they don't tell King Herod they found him – an angel warns them in a dream not to. So, Herod sends soldiers to kill every boy two years old and under in Bethlehem.

And that's what the Bible tells us of the Magi ... which, again, doesn't sound like a whole lot but biblical scholars and historians have determined that:

- These men (and we don't know how many there were from what we just read) were most likely from Persia ... which by the way is modern-day Iran *and also ancient Babylon* (and that's very important).
- And the Persians and the Romans had been at war with one another off and on for years ...
- And Judea – where Bethlehem and Jerusalem were – had been a hotly contested area.

Now, think about this: for three or four or however many Persian men – very *wealthy* Persian men – to travel to the capital city of Judea and meet with the Roman overseer – Herod – and ask, “where's the new king?” ... well, that wasn't something you'd do on a whim. This wasn't three guys going off on a weekend hunting trip with a few gifts stashed in their coolers! We're talking about a distance of at least 800 miles over a period of at least four months into hostile territory!

Most likely these guys arrived in Jerusalem accompanied by a first-class military escort made up of dozens and maybe even hundreds of Persian soldiers (which may explain why Matthew tells us that Herod was “deeply disturbed” at their arrival).

Of course ... as interesting as that may be, it doesn't explain *why* these guys decided to make such an incredible journey. Yes, they saw something unusual in the sky but that by itself would not be motivation enough. How would they know what it even meant? And they *did* know what it meant – they told Herod!

Well, here's one more piece of the puzzle: because these Magi are from the land of ancient Babylon ... and centuries before, Babylon had wiped out Israel and carried off most of its citizens back to Babylon ... which meant that some of the Hebrew Bible was also carried to Babylon and some was actually written in Babylon (Daniel, Ezekiel, Lamentations, Jeremiah – at the very least) ... it's highly likely that these travelers had access to at least part of the Hebrew scriptures!

And in those scriptures, there is a prophecy about a future king and a star.

It says:

“I see him, but not here and now. I perceive him, but far in the distant future. A star will rise from Jacob; a

scepter will emerge from Israel ... a ruler shall arise from Jacob.”
Numbers 24:17,19 (NLT)

Ok, so what do we know about the Magi beyond the story Matthew tells us? We know that ...

- They know the scripture.
- They see a “sign” in the sky back home in Persia.
- They obviously discuss the scripture and the sign and decide together to make the trip.
- And they accept the risk and the cost. The risk we’ve talked about. The cost (in addition to the gold, frankincense and myrrh for Jesus) is a lot of time and money. Their roundtrip may take as much as a year and they’re going to have to pay and provide for the soldiers over that same time period.

That. Is. Amazing.

Practical Application

Now, here’s what I want you to see in this as it applies to faith at this level – faith that trusts in God’s ways; faith that has confidence that He is influencing and guiding us. And I know this will probably sound overly simplistic but this is what we learn from this story:

Faith sometimes requires us to believe that we have heard from God and then take a risk of some kind.

Sometimes, God will say to us – as he did to these Magi – “go.” And when He does, sometimes it literally means “go” – quit your job, change careers, start a business, stop or start dating someone, move to a new place, make a life-altering decision of some kind. Pack up move out and follow the star to wherever it leads.

More often however ... when God says to “go” it’s not quite that radical. It simply means “stop standing still. Move off of dead-center. The light’s green so step on the gas. Get out of your comfort zone a little and do that next little thing I’ve been telling you to do.”

Now, here’s what’s really, really, important to understand. You can’t miss this or you’re going to figuratively march into enemy territory and get your head handed to you.

The way God tells you and me to “go” is pretty much the same way He said it to the Magi. They didn’t get a note on their pillows saying “I want you boys to saddle up and go to Bethlehem.” Instead, there were four factors in play.

These are typical indicators that God is saying “go.”

- A scriptural basis – understanding who God is and what He has already revealed.
- An attention-getting circumstance (sign)
- The confirmation of other people that you’re hearing from God and should go.
- A price to be paid.

When all four of those align in your life and mine, we can trust that God is speaking and then – in faith – level three faith – we can “go.” It won’t be easy – because there’s a price.

Now, I could tell you story after story of how this has played out in my life. Quitting my job and coming to seminary, starting this church. Even leading this congregation to attempt to raise \$155K for the Excellence Challenge before Christmas.

But you hear about me all the time so I asked a couple other folks to share stories of when God told them to “go” – in a radical way or not so radical. This week I had the opportunity to interview them and I’m going to show you just a portion of what they said. The entire video will be posted up on Facebook later this week if you want to hear the whole thing.

As we watch, see if you can pick up on the four indicators in each story. It’s pretty amazing, actually.

Video – Phil Wilt

Video – Amanda Primm

Video – Greg Primm

Video – Doug Loughery

Can we express appreciation for all four of those folks?

Conclusion

Is God telling you to “go” in some way? Is He saying “make a radical change?” Just stop standing still?

Maybe you need to serve or give in the ways similar to what you heard in the interviews. Maybe you just need to treat your husband or wife or kids better or be a better friend or employee.

And if you do think God might be saying “go” do you have all four factors? If you don’t and you go off thinking God has spoken, you’re heading for trouble. The two I see people overlook the most are the scripture (what God has already said about things) and the confirmation of other people who know you and know the scripture.

- We heard Phil say his friend told him God was going to do something;
- Amanda said Phil confirmed her giftedness.
- Greg said that he and Amanda decided to take the Excellence Challenge together.
- Doug said he and Tawnia made the decision to tithe *first* together.

Well, I think you get the point.

We’re going to close this morning by singing our prayer together. The OutLoud kids are going to help us and so, I’m going to ask you to stand right now.

For God's Kingdom to be carried into the world – into our city and neighborhoods – God's people have to be willing to go when He says to go, whatever that looks like. And I pray that we will.

Worship (video) – God of This Cit

Closing / Offering @door – Rick

1. Excellence Challenge
 - A. Mission slide**
 - B. Status slide**
 - C. Giving kiosk**

2. Christmas Season schedule
 - a. Christmas Eve invitation card
 - b. reserve for pancake breakfast on tear off and give to usher

Endnotes

¹ For more details see http://www.icr.org/home/resources/resources_tracts_when_they_saw_the_star/