



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 31, 2017

"Divine Detours" - Worship the King Advent Series

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Matthew 2:1-23 - After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.""

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ 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 and of incense and of myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

¹³ When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. ¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

¹⁸ "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³ and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.

So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."

How many of you over the course of 2017 have lived the life you exactly expected to live when it started on January 1st? How many of us have found it a lot different? How many of us had things happen to us we never expected, never saw coming, or especially never wanted?

What's funny is when the New Year starts most of us will think we have some clear idea of how it is supposed to go financially, occupationally, relationally, physically and spiritually, etc. And we'll all be shocked when the "never expected" or "never wanted" *inevitably shows up*.

To be honest, I get upset just because there is unexpected traffic much less a major change in my life. It's like we live in this constant state of denial where we believe, "*Despite all the experience and evidence to the contrary, life will come out this year just like I plan.*"

I think this denial helps assuage one of the greatest and deepest fears we all have: The Loss of Control. But here's the deal, life with God doesn't always move in a way we expect, but it will move in a direction that makes our life significant.

Today I want to take one last look into the story of Christ's arrival, where we see a lot of what I am calling "Divine Detours".

Detour is defined as: A deviation from a direct, usually shorter route or course of action; a roundabout way or course, especially a road used temporarily instead of a main route.

Think of how in *all* the events of Christmas narratives God seems to "deviate from" a *normal* course of action. Think of how from the very first announcement to Mary in Nazareth, then to Joseph, and of course the shepherds, and the pregnancy of Elizabeth (Mary's cousin), God seems to really "deviate from" a *normal* course of action.

And as we just read in Matthew 2, think of how God takes Mary and Joseph on a

"roundabout" way back to Nazareth. Bottom line, the Gospels are full of times when God seems to "deviate from a *normal* course of action."

What might that tell us about the nature of life with God? What might it tell us of what we can expect and should *not* expect in our walks as Christians?

Let's now take a closer look at some of the action in this story and see what we can glean from the Divine Detours of Joseph and Mary. Let me first delve into some historical and cultural detail to add dimension to what is going on.

In this section we come across the now famous Magi, who follow a star to Jerusalem over the course of a year or so maybe two years. Magi were often seen as philosophers, astrologers, astronomers and advisors to kings, which is why they were sometimes labeled "Wise Men." They came out of either Persia, Babylon, or Arabia.

By the way, we have no idea if there were three or 300 of them. The "three thing" arose only because of the three gifts gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Somewhere along the way they interpreted a star as being a sign about a King. They likely knew to some extent the Hebrew scriptures from Jews still living in the lands of the Magi all the way back from the days of Jewish captivity. So they likely knew of a coming final king, the Messiah.

So since they are looking for a Jewish king they logically stop in the capital city of Jerusalem asking people about where the "newborn king is." When King Herod hears of this he slyly invites them to talk about it. But in meeting Herod

they have met a psychopathic insecure and vengeful man.

The fact that Herod ends up killing infants in and around Bethlehem is only par for the course with this guy (vs. 16). Herod had a bewildering reputation to say the least. He basically bought, connived, and groveled his way into the Jewish monarchy. They say he was a great administrator and a good military strategist, but he was also a power hungry killer.

So bent on obtaining and keeping power he committed all kinds of heinous acts. For example, he killed his favorite wife; he killed his mother in law; killed his brother in law; and even killed two of his own sons!! And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

My point being, killing infants in Bethlehem because he felt his power and throne threatened is chump change for this guy. Scholars estimate that since there were about 1,000 people in and around Bethlehem Herod might have killed about 15 to 20 male infants. An utterly depraved and fiendish act to be sure.

He may have gone on this murderous rage because the Magi asked, "Where is the one who *has been* born king of the Jews?" Not "*will be born*" or "*will become* king some day," but "*already been* born." In other words, this would indicate an immediate usurpation of Herod's place as king. Moreover, with such an illustrious search and welcome by the Magi for this new king it signaled to Herod that *this kind* of king meant the Christ.

We see this awareness in his panicked discussion with the scribes. In verse two the Magi say, "Where is the king?"

But Herod asks where is the Christ to be born (see verse 4), which would mean all of Israel would follow Him, not Herod.

Now in all that has been revealed to Mary and Joseph up to this point something comes up which no one saw coming.

Look again at vs. 13: ¹³ *When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill Him."* ¹⁴ *So he (Joseph) got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod.*

Here we have a Detour, which *not even* the angels have whispered about until that moment. This is a real left field kind of thing for this couple—yet again. Let me drill down on several things about Joseph and Mary (but perhaps Joseph in particular), things that may help us as Christians not only appreciate them more, but guide us in how to frame and live into the journey God has *us* on.

First of all, think of what it must have been for Joseph and Mary to have had such a mind-blowing visit by *Gentile* strangers—calling their Son King of the Jews and bearing very expensive gifts. With all those gifts, peasant carpenter Joseph must have felt like he won the lottery. And then *just hours later* the threat of death is in the air.

Now, literally, in the flash of a moment, Joseph and Mary's lives are dramatically altered *again*. Now Joseph flees with his family through a dark and dangerous desert carrying very expensive stuff!

Reflect for a moment about this crazy scene. What is going through their minds as they have to quickly pack things? I wonder what Joseph was thinking as they packed up and looked into the pitch-black desert, the place of great vulnerability and risk, not having a clue as to when they could ever return (remember n vs. 13 the angel says, "Stay there until..." That is a very open-ended timeline. I'm not sure how comfortable I would be with that).

As a man you feel a tremendous sense of responsibility for your family. You're thinking and praying like crazy, "Please God protect my wife and child!"

As a woman I can only imagine the vulnerability Mary felt with every mile through the desert night.

And as they walk quietly and anxiously out of town during a time to travel that is by no means safe in the ancient world, do they talk? Do they just remain silent? Do they *regret* taking on this responsibility? I wonder if they were thinking at some point, "How can this make *any* sense?"

Have you ever been in that place of, "How can this make *any* sense?" Life has turned so upside down you can't make *any sense* of it? Maybe it's from an economic downturn that led to a complete change of lifestyle. Or maybe it was from broken dreams or from shattered trust in a relationship. Or perhaps it was from sickness or from losses in a myriad of ways. And you are left thinking, "How can this ever make *any* sense?"

Sometimes losses and change feel like we are soulfully walking into a desert or wasteland. Experiencing losses can lead us to

falling in deep cynicism and despair can't they?

This reminds me of a quote by spiritual writer Henri Nouwen: "One of the most radical demands for you and me is the discovery of our lives as a series of movements or passages. Your whole life is filled with losses, endless losses. And every time there are losses there are choices to be made. You choose to live your losses as passages to anger, blame, hatred, depression, and resentment, or you choose to let these losses be passages to something new, something wider, and deeper. The question is not how to avoid loss and make it not happen, but how to choose it as a passage, as an exodus to greater life and freedom."

Think of how much of our lives our big and little decisions and actions are about avoiding losses? The loss of a job, the loss of a relationship, loss of reputation, loss of health, loss of hair, perhaps loss of youthfulness, etc. These, of course, are not bad decisions or actions in and of themselves, but my point is we spend much effort and money to avoid losses.

For example, think of the massive industries that are built for helping you avoid the loss of your youthfulness: Skin creams, exercise machines, clothes, hair dyes, surgeries, etc. You get the idea. Helping people avoid losses is big business because we are so fearful of them.

But as Nouwen poignantly points out, like it or not life is filled with losses. And the question is *not* how to avoid loss and make it not happen, but how to choose it as a passage, as an exodus to greater life and freedom.

Let's be honest and admit this: Detours can be hazardous to your hope. When they are hard and even harsh they can leave behind not greater faith and character, but bitterness and cynicism or even worse.

I wonder if Joseph ever ruminated over what he got himself into: "What *else* is going to happen to me in raising this child? I endured shame from my village, now I'm a refugee in a foreign land with no family. I can't seem to live in peace. What else do I have to endure to live for God?"

Ever feel like that? What else do I have to endure to live for God? I have come to such places let me assure you.

Let me share a very dark period in my own life. This was definitely a detour I never saw coming or ever desired.

Many years ago in another ministry setting on the mainland, my wife and I were on the wrong end of church politics. People whom I thought were our closest friends said things and did things that were mind boggling—even about my wife.

In fact, after I resigned one of the leaders was asked by a member of our church what was the real reason behind my resignation. In order to protect their "circle of leadership" that leader told the member, "Steve's wife had an emotional breakdown and so he resigned to take care of her." When we heard this we were utterly stunned.

Of course we tried to meet with the leadership to confront this situation before it went any further. In that meeting my wife asked that leader, "Do you believe this is the

reason Steve resigned or did you just get caught off guard and didn't know what to say?" She was trying to open up a window for redemption and make it right.

To our chagrin he said, "Yes, that's why I think Steve resigned." In that meeting I asked the rest of the leaders, "Is this okay by you that such a thing was said? You know that's not true. What do you have to say to this man?"

They just looked at the ground and remained completely silent.

Mere words could not describe the betrayal and anger and powerlessness my wife and I felt. You could imagine how I started to feel inside my heart, "Do I want to do ministry and pastoring again?"

For the next two years my wife and I "left for Egypt" to find refuge. For us that turned out to be Fuller Seminary. To be honest, I went there to get a PhD so I could go into teaching and out of pastoring, but only ended up getting a Master of Divinity.

For nearly a year the only thing I could do spiritually was just sit in a Sunday service. And I mean just *sit*. I couldn't sing, I couldn't raise my hands, I couldn't pray, I just sat there often ruminating about one more conversation I would have with those leaders. Ever do that? Ever have all kinds of conversations with people who have hurt you in the past? I did that for months.

But in that "soulful wasteland" God put us in an apartment community of seminary students that transformed our lives. These folks were amazing. Through their love, prayers, compassion,

encouragement, laughter and friendship, the losses we encountered slowly became as Nouwen said, "A passage, an exodus to greater life and freedom."

That season of brokenness changed me to the core. It changed the way I saw the Christian life. It changed how I preached. It changed the way I ministered to others, now out of my brokenness. It led me to reimagine church, which eventually led me to plant a church—which was *never* on my radar to ever do that in my life. That church brought all kinds of people to Christ and impacted our local culture.

So here I am today many years later with a life, with a church, with a church staff that was not in the picture, but which is far better than I thought could ever happen and I'm so grateful for where I have ended up and the people I work with and the people I work for.

In the Old Testament in Isaiah 43, God sends a message to the Israelites who were going through a world-shattering season from the Babylonians. While in captivity God makes this promise to them in Isaiah 43:19-21 - ¹⁹*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*

²⁰*The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise."*

What a promise amidst a bleak situation.

This is exactly what my wife and I have experienced again and again in our journey with God. He gives us a new way a way in the wilderness. He gives streams in the wasteland that lead us back to praise God.

Don't get me wrong, many of those little detours I whined about an awful lot. I got angry about some of those detours. When I would go jogging God would get an earful. In fact, some detours were out right painful and extremely distressing. But by the grace of God I'm *still moving forward* for Jesus because we have a God who makes a way where there is no way.

Brothers and sisters, there will be times in *all* our lives where we will travel like Joseph and Mary "into the night" and it will feel like a detour into the wasteland. But know this, God will make a way through that wasteland.

It may come through friends, or a small group, or a therapist, or by some miracle through a pastor, or a new kind of job you never saw coming, or seeing a star filled sky that fills you once again with the awe of God, but it will come. He will make a way where there is no way. Hang in there because it will get better.

Let's continue with our story with Joseph and Mary in Egypt. Let me make two quick final points about what happens after Herod dies. Matt 2:21-22: ²¹ So (after Herod died) Joseph got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.

Think about this for a second. Joseph is afraid. Here is a guy who has had angel visitations and been

given life-saving dreams. Angels, shepherds, and old people sang praises about his adopted Son. He's had foreign wise men baring elaborate gifts, God's protection through a dark desert and staying in Egypt, etc. And yet he is "afraid" again. What do you make of that? I find that fascinating.

For one thing, it certainly makes Joseph a little more human and relatable, doesn't it?

To be fair, there is good reason to fear Archelaus, son of Herod the Great. Not long after his father died he over-reacted to an uprising at the Temple and killed 3,000 Jews at the Temple! That guy was crazy, so I get Joseph's fears.

But what is encouraging is this: being faithful does not mean being fearless. God *doesn't* get all wiggled out by Joseph's fear—or by our fear. Rather He provides a way to send Joseph and his family back to Nazareth.

This part also speaks to me in that even the best of us, no matter how much God has done or provided in our past, can still become fearful in our present or about our future—and yet God will *still* uses them to serve Him. In other words, heroic confidence is not a necessary prerequisite to being used by God.

Every risk I have taken for serving God has involved anxiety and fear on some level: when I first preached on the streets of New York City; when I first took off to live in a refugee camp as a missionary; when I went to Thailand with a wife and a little two-year-old year daughter; when I started a new church; when I went to pursue a degree in marriage and family therapy at the age 50!! Or when I have had to confront

people that needed confronting—fear and anxiety were always close by.

I could tell you stories, but let me just say that things like uncertainty, vulnerability, anxiety, and even fear have *always* been a part of my journey as a Christian and as a minister.

So my point is, I can't wait until anxiety is gone or I don't feel vulnerable *before* I take another step for Jesus. I would miss out on so much with God! Reality is, this life with God *is not* a steady march from certainty to certainty, but it is often infused with periods of doubt, fear, and anxiety.

Martin Luther King said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

What anxiety-provoking step is God asking *you* to take this coming year?

Which leads me to make one final point: Joseph models a life of what I call Obscure Yet Impactful Faithfulness. That sounds odd what do I mean by that?

Joseph went back to Nazareth. Nazareth is a real backwater town (maybe had about 1,500 people then). To live there is an automatic sentence to obscurity. Yet this is exactly the place where the Heavenly Father will raise His Heavenly Son—and where God's primary servants (at this point Joe Mary) will serve.

If you think about the people in the Christmas stories: Zechariah, Elizabeth, the shepherds, Anna and Simeon, all came *from* obscurity and then, went *back* to obscurity.

Furthermore, for all the incredible faith and trust and danger and peril Joseph has lived up to this point, he becomes immediately and continually obscure by the end of Matthew 2. In fact, have you ever noticed nowhere in *any* New Testament writing do we ever hear Joseph actually speak?

Joseph is this silent, but vital character with a huge responsibility in the world altering drama of raising Jesus and he is doing all this in an *incredibly obscure* place!! He never says anything profound but the actions he took and the life he lived spoke and accomplished volumes!!

I make this point because very often the American view is that we should make big splashes on a consistent basis for God. Here's a *seminar title* that will never pack a room: *How to Live in Faithful Obscurity for God*. No American is coming to that one.

I remember a conference I went to when I was a Christian for just about two years. I was 23 years old and full of fire. The theme for the conference was "*Make Your Mark and Make It Last*."

That's such an American way of being a Christian. No small footprints *for us* baby, we're Americans!! Yes, Joseph made his mark, but *most of it* was done in obscurity without too much fanfare.

It involved a lot of "unproductive" travel, and incredible amounts of faithful waiting, sawing wood, and hugging his Son, and taking out the garbage. Bottom line, he lived as an ordinary guy yet *fully involved* in an extraordinary work of God—and so can we.

This is why I like this quote by the Bishop of Canterbury in England, "Even a small difference is a real difference." We don't have to make big differences, we just need to make real differences.

After 33 years of ministry it is my deep belief that *most* of the kingdom of God is manifested in our world *not in* the periodic or sporadic big huge things, but it is manifested in the common, frequent, small acts of faithfulness in the most ordinary of Christians.

Each time the ways of this world smack into the way of Jesus and *you* chose to live the way of Jesus – that's impact! That's making a difference—a real, powerful, and God-pleasing difference. It may not be flashy, or make the news, or be the focus of a Christian book, or get you a speaking gig at the next HIM conference. But it is exactly the "ordinariness," which God uses to change His world.

May God bless *you* to make a real difference in 2018. And may you experience the love and mercy of our Savior in the detours you will come to know this year.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com