



So, one of the first times I experienced that whole Gospel being brought out to the pews thing was during my year of seminary internship. That, to better train us future pastors, we would come to the campus for two years before basically moving in with a congregation for several months to do more hands-on learning about the inner-workings of church-everything and then come back to complete our studies. The whole near half-decade of our life was meant to broaden our horizons about God or something, especially that middle time when we went away to serve in a church.

Except, I had this desperate hope about just how far my horizons would be stretched. I had preferred those vistas would remain inside the borders of our great state of Ohio. It was where I grew up, after all. It's where nearly all family and friends lived. So, in case any anxiety would arise about this whole learning-to-be-a-pastor thing, I could always make a quick trip for what I knew would be the great dose of the tried-and-true comfort and assurance, those parts of life I had grown so lovingly accustomed to, to say the least. It was just...home. Nevertheless, I guess my horizons had to expand.

With that, in the midst of my whole trying to learn more about God and the inner-workings of church everything, I was paired up with a congregation in Dallas of the Lone Star State. And yes, I quickly realized just how much bigger everything was in Texas, not just with land or sizes of New York Strip steaks or seating capacities for high school football stadiums, but just how much I did not understand how this universal Gospel could truly reach Texans and Ohioans and children of God all over the world, including to my hesitant horizon-expanding self.

After feeling like I made a trek to rival the distance of the magi for Epiphany, I did feel a little homesick, not just with the family and friends, but the church I called home for all my growing-up years. The home church that never brought the Gospel out to the pews, but stayed in the pulpit where it belonged, to better convey the sense of holiness or something. That maybe if the Gospel stayed higher up, it was almost like it was coming straight from God. Except, I never realized that the Gospel was being unleashed even closer into my life by many people in that home congregation.

One was the youth director named Denny, who was one of those special church people with a heart of gold. During Sunday school, he would help us high schoolers feel at home in a building of organized religion that sometimes conveys a God who's too holy for us, the God who must be kept at some far-off in the horizons distance. To combat that mindset, during the holiday season, Denny would take us teenagers, who were often more concerned about what gifts we would be getting, to the local store to purchase presents for children in more impoverished circumstances. Denny was one of those precious souls who brought the wondrous Gospel incredibly close to our young hearts, as we tried to figure out our own life lay of the land.

Unfortunately, it was during my year of seminary internship, when my comfort zone was being tested much more than I hoped, that our beloved Denny died from cancer. I felt rather distant that day, including from God, perhaps as distant as the magi might have felt as they kept on following that most far-off in the horizons star. Evidently, my supervising pastor must have noticed something was up. That wisest man who didn't mind bringing the Gospel down from the sometimes high-and-mighty pulpit out into the pews on the bigger celebration days in the church, as a reminder that God is not so far off from us, after all; as if the Gospel was meant to get eerily

close to our very hearts. That compassionate pastor asked me into his office, just to check in. And soon enough, the tears started to fall over Denny, over a precious piece of home. I had hoped that wasn't going to happen in front of his desk: that my emotions would be kept at a distance to maintain some sort of professionalism or something. But I guess this most personal Gospel is meant to reach even the depths of us, including the parts we're not so comfortable sharing: the parts that not many know about. That, evidently, God does not wait in some far-off distant horizon for us to reach when we're ready to make some arduous trek. God has already made the decision to come to us in Jesus Christ.

So, I like to think that the ultimate Gospel with the magi is not that they found Jesus after following a star in a desperate search for him. God was with them the whole time, after all. However, sometimes we stubborn humans need a holy visual of the Great News being brought into the thick of our lives, whether they be in church pews or retail store aisles or where we may feel the loneliest away from all the comforts we cling to of home. In the end, the magi didn't need to find Jesus. Our Lord already found them. And that Gospel remains true for us: we don't have to do this or that to find the Messiah in our life. Jesus already made the decision to come to us, and not just in this sanctuary, or at home, but everywhere we go. That there will never ever come a point in our life-long journey where we are separated from God's love in Christ Jesus, our Lord. For that Great News shared by the past and present-day magi, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!