

First Presbyterian Church, Spartanburg SC  
Dr. David Renwick  
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## COMING TO GUIDE

Matthew 2:1-12

Advent, the month leading up to Christmas Day, is the time of the year when we wait for God's coming to us in Jesus Christ. Advent is a word which means coming, and most frequently when we think of Advent, we think of God's coming to us in Jesus Christ that first time, that first Christmas, coming to us a baby, coming to us in weakness . . . although, traditionally, throughout the centuries, Advent in the Christian church has not just been about waiting, as it were, to recall the first coming, but it has also been a time of waiting for Christ's second coming: God coming to us the second time in Christ, not in weakness, not as a baby, but in power and in triumph and in glory, coming as our judge, holding all of the world accountable for the way in which we have lived our lives before God.

This Advent in our sermons we are broadening the focus of this theme of "God's coming" by thinking of various ways in which God comes to his people at all kinds of times, coming for various purposes. Coming, for example, as we heard a couple of weeks ago, to call us into his service, to participate in his plans and purposes for the world, to give us a call, each one us, not just to those who are ministers, but to every one of us, a call in life which gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

And this message of God's coming to call was emphasized last week when the choir beautifully shared with us in song the song of Mary in Luke chapter one, a song we call "The Magnificat," a reminder of God's call to a simple peasant woman to be the bearer of God into this world: God's call to bring the Son of God into this world. In some ways a unique calling: only once, only that first Christmas, only one mother for that child. And yet in some ways, not a unique calling, but a reflection of *the calling of every single one of us* who are to be 'Christ-bearers,' bearers of Jesus Christ into this world. What a calling! What an amazing calling that God should come to us! How, we might say, 'inconceivable' that God should come to us and ask you and me to be the ones who bear Jesus Christ into this world. What meaning, what significance, what purpose that gives to our lives! Of course, this calling of God varies, and comes to us in many ways, for many tasks, but at the very least this is our calling, every single one of us: to bear Christ into the world. What meaning and purpose and vitality that gives to our lives!

So God is a God who again and again and again comes to ordinary people and if we are listening, calls us into his service. But, when God comes to us, God doesn't just come to call: ***God comes as well to guide***. And this morning I'd like us to think together about God coming to guide our lives, God coming to us as a guide.

Now I suppose it is obvious but we all need guidance at different times and at different places in our lives – but we tend to forget it! Not only in the divine sense, not

only in the spiritual sense, but down on a human level, on the secular level as well, we all need guidance within our lives.

A number of years ago, I watched a promotional video by a vacation tour operator in Europe explaining why you and I would benefit from taking their guided tour of Europe instead of going it alone. It was a short video but it was also a memorable video: in fact, it was rather like National Lampoon's vacation videos . . . if you have ever seen those awful movies, then you'll know what I mean! But let me tell you what happens in this short video. They show a happy couple going on vacation to Europe. They get off the plane. They rent their car and immediately they get lost. They are wandering around Rome or Paris or somewhere like that. They have no clue where they are going, and what starts out as a happy vacation changes pretty quickly, so that soon they are talking to each other in a way they ought not to be talking! And from our vantage point, a bird's eye view up above them, we can see that they come really close to the exciting places and events that they want to see, they almost arrive there – but never do. They are just a block away from seeing the magnificence of Europe but they can't get there, either because of the traffic, or because there is a one way system, or because there is no place to park the car! The week goes by and they just about miss everything along the way. And so the conclusion is: "you need a guide, you need us to take you on this trip around Europe." (Of course, there would be a cheaper way of doing it – if only the husband, who was driving the car, had asked his wife for directions then they might have reached their destination!) In either case, though, with the tour company or his wife, a guide was needed!

- When you are playing a game and you want to get to a different level, you need a guide. We call that guide a coach.
- When you want to learn something that you have never learned before and you don't know how to get it into your head, you need someone to explain it to you. You need a teacher or professor or you need a mentor.
- When you are experiencing something in your health and you have never experienced it before and you don't quite know what is happening in your body, you need a guide. You need a physician or you need a nurse or in the church you may need the parish nurse to help you to know what is happening in your body.
- When you have done something wrong in the sight of the Lord or when you want to do something right, to build something new, but you want to do it in a way which is correct, you need a guide. You need an attorney. You need someone who will give you good counsel, someone who knows the system, someone who knows the ropes.

It is not that we are dumb or that we are stupid. It is just that at every stage in life when we are doing this or doing that, we come to a place that we have never been before, and how wonderful it is, how wonderful when we find *someone who has been that way before and says, "Pissst Come on follow me. I'll show you what to do. I can lead you from where you are to where you want to go."* A guide!

And if it is true in the mundane level, if it is true in the human level, if it is true in the secular sense, then it is surely also true in the spiritual sense as well with our lives as a whole. After all, we have only one life to live, and when our life is over, it is over. There

is no going back. It may cost you a lot of money if you blow it in Paris or Rome or wherever else, but you can go back and you can try it again. BUT with our lives – ah, well, you just have one shot, one time to do it. How important to have a guide for this “one shot” that we have.

So we need to ask ourselves constantly if our lives are guided lives or if we are really on our own tour with no guide but ourselves. We need to ask ourselves if our lives are guided lives,

- guided by somebody else who has ‘been there, done that,’
- guided by somebody else who knows us, and knows the way ahead,
- guided by somebody who sees the big picture and the little picture and can put all of the picture together with us at a vital place within this picture.

We need to ask ourselves if our lives are guided lives,

- guided by a God who very clearly in scripture is portrayed as a God who loves, who is waiting, who is itching, who is coming to guide his people, guiding human lives all the way from the beginning, from baptism, to the end.

This is the picture of God we see painted for us in the pages of scripture from the beginning to the end.

- Abraham. We see God coming to the forefather of the Jewish and the Christian and the Muslim people, coming to Abraham, and guiding him, leading him step by step from what is now Iraq, Mesopotamia, coming all the way to the Promised Land. Every step of the way, at each stage of the journey, Abraham builds an altar to God, and seeks to praise the God who guides his life and in whose hands he lives his life -- being led, one step after another.
- Israel. We see God coming to guide the fledgling nation of ancient Israel, when they have been slaves, leading them out of slavery to the Red Sea. It seems impossible that they will escape alive but God leads them through the Red Sea . . . and into the desert of all places! And God leads them through the desert where it seems that there is no guidance at all, but God leads them faithfully through the desert and on the way to the Promised Land.
- Samuel. We see God coming to guide a man like the prophet Samuel, guiding him to the family of a man called Jesse, guiding him to Jesse’s sons because God has said to Samuel that one of Jesse’s sons is going to be the king of all of Israel. And Samuel looks at the sons and says, “Of the ones I see, none of these is the one who is going to be the king of Israel. Do you have another son?” And Jesse says, “Well, yes I do.” And God keeps on guiding until that other son comes from watching the sheep, and there stands before Samuel, and Samuel knows that this one, David, is the one whom God has anointed to be king of his people, a king who will be like the Messiah to come.
- Ruth and Naomi. Less than one hundred years (or so) before that, we see God coming to guide two grieving women, guiding Ruth and Naomi her mother-in-law. Both of them have lost their husbands. It looks as if there is no guidance, as if there is no love from God within their lives, but God guides them back to Naomi’s home town, to, yes, the village of Bethlehem. There in Bethlehem God guides them to a man named Boaz who protects them and provides for them,

guiding them to this Boaz who becomes Ruth's husband. Together they have a child who has a child who has a child and that great grandchild is none other than the young man whom Samuel saw and anointed to be king of Israel, the great grandchild, David, the greatest king that Israel ever had.

Throughout the pages of the Old Testament scripture, the story of ancient Israel, we see God coming again and again to his people to guide them. And the same is true in the New Testament.

- Mary and Joseph. At the beginning of the New Testament story, in the Christmas stories that we read during this season of Advent, God comes to Joseph and Mary, the parents of our Lord Jesus and gives them guidance about their baby and guidance about the danger of King Herod who wants to do away with any threat to his throne. So they flee, they flee to Egypt guided by God, and they are safe.
- Wise Men. God comes as well as we heard in our scripture reading to the wise men, magi, scholars from the East who probably know very little of the living God, the God of Israel. They are astrologers after all, not faithful Jewish people. God guides even them to meet his son, to bring them to his son, to worship him and to welcome him into this world.

It is a wonderful story, the story of God's coming again and again, through the pages of the Old Testament and on in to the New. The story of God's coming. God's coming to guide. *But that was back then. What about now? What about today? What about us? What about you and me?*

I suppose we all ask these questions from time to time:

*“Does God still do this? Does God still guide?”*

*And if God does come and comes to guide, how does God do it?*

*How should we expect to be lead by God?*

- Should we expect spectacular signs? . . . stars and dreams and voices and clouds and pillars of fire and angels coming to us in great choirs or perhaps sneaking up behind our back coming to say, “Psst... Here I am. Let me guide your life”?
- Or no spectacular signs at all? You know you read the story of Ruth and Naomi that I mentioned, coming back to Bethlehem and meeting Boaz? Well, there is no spectacular evidence of guidance there; the only ‘evidence,’ really, comes at the end of the story when you look back over everything that has happen and you put two and two together and you say, “None of this could have happen without God's hand being present in the midst of it.” So there the guidance of God in a sense was silent: clearly there, but no spectacular sign of it.
- Or perhaps the answer is somewhere in between, between the spectacular and the sense of silence. Somewhere in the ordinary workings of life, and yet with God's presence in the midst of all of them.

And that I think is actually where God normally guides us: in the ordinary things of life. That is what the incarnation, in sense, is about: it is God coming to us, as a baby, in a person, in a family, in the ordinary course of life.

For me and for many, I have found the guidance of God coming to us in what we might call the nexus, or the convergence, or the overlap of three different gifts of God to us: coming to us in the overlap of the Bible, with conversation with other believers, and with the working of God within our consciences. God guiding through the Bible, God guiding through conversation with other believers and God guiding through our consciences. And just to help you remember those three ‘means of grace,’ that means that God does not speak to us through CNN or through FOX News but as you might expect from me -- through the BBC— through the **Bible, Believers, our Consciences!!** Let’s briefly think our way through how this works.

Let’s start with conscience. We often think that God speaks through our consciences. Conscience is probably the easiest way to think of God speaking and guiding us. We say ‘let conscience be your guide.’ Now, I certainly think that God frequently speaks through our consciences, but our consciences are by no stretch of the imagination an infallible channel of the guidance of God! We must never forget that our consciences can be easily corrupted, and we can easily misread our consciences – so we need to feed them with the “Word of God,” the Biblical witness, and with conversations with others, again and again and again.

Author Joni Eareckson Tada tells a story of a young man who came to visit her on one occasion with a proposal of marriage. Some of you may know of her. She had an accident in her teens about 30 years ago, in which she became paralyzed. She dived into a swimming pool and hit the bottom. A beautiful young girl. A tragedy. But this particular accident didn’t mean that she lost her faith. In fact, she gained her faith through this accident and has a wonderful testimony of faithfulness to God so that Billy Graham has called on her to speak on many occasions in his crusades. So you may have seen her on the television, -- and, apparently, this young man had seen her and felt God speaking in his conscience to come to her and say, “You know, I believe God is calling me to marry you.” And he turned up at her house, driving a long way to meet her and she very graciously welcomed him into her house and he explained why he had come. She turned to him, and said gently, “Well, you know this is very interesting. You are the tenth young man who has felt that God has called you to marry me like this. How are we to understand this? Even if God were speaking through the conscience of one of the ten, the other nine were getting the message wrong!”

Conscience certainly can convey a word from God – but how easy it is, for example, to confuse something as simple as a ‘crush’ with ‘a word from God’! In the case of Joni Eareckson and the young man, it was Joni’s conversation, a conversation with a fellow believer, that helped correct the situation.

Our consciences are a channel of God’s grace and guidance within us, but they need to be molded again and again by others – and in particular, by the stories that we find in the Bible, by the laws that we find in the Bible, by the wisdom that we find in the Bible, by the people that we read of in the Bible, by the God who is revealed in the Bible,

transforming the way we think. *Transforming the way we think as a whole*, and not just in the moment that we think guidance is needed.

And this is hard work that God gives us to do: to allow the Bible to transform us. It is far harder than simply using the Bible to guide us as if the Bible were a book of magic – some people think of the Bible as a book of magic so they want to seek a verse from God to guide them just like that. Now, I know that God may sometimes do that, but not always.

I don't know if you know of the person who wanted to use the Bible in that kind of way (which is called 'the flip and dip' method of finding God's will from the Bible). He was having financial trouble and so he just opened the Bible at a particular place and put his finger on a particular page in the Bible, and, unfortunately, apparently, his finger was between verses of scripture. It was on a chapter title. In fact, it was chapter 11 – which he immediately took to be a 'word from God,' guiding him at once to declare bankruptcy!

But, inspired as the Bible may be, the Bible is not a magic book. God asks us to work hard to find God's guidance, to allow the Bible, all of it, to inform our consciences, so that we are not led astray. And to do so in conjunction with our fellow believers, not just in private but together, communally.

It is part of the genius of our Presbyterian way of doing things to do things together. It slows us up and at times, it is burdensome, but our Presbyterian way of doing things is to give leadership not to one person but to many, so that together (believers) we discern the will of God, revealed in scripture (Bible) coming through our consciences. And through that process, frequently, discovering afresh the guidance of the God who keeps on coming to us

- to call us, to give meaning and purpose to our lives
- and to guide us when otherwise we might find ourselves in dead ends again and again and again.

Your life and mine. Are we our own guides? Or do we live guided lives? Guided by God who loves to come to people like you and me to be our guide?