Road Trip
Reading from the Prophets: Micah 5: 2-5
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 2: 1-12

If camels came with Spotify, I wonder what playlist the wise men listened to during their road trip to Bethlehem? Was it one of the great road songs? Tom Cochrane singing *Life is a Highway* or Aretha Franklin singing about the *Freeway of Love* or Golden Earring singing *Radar Love* or Asleep at the Wheel singing *Hot Rod Lincoln* or Nat King Cole getting his kicks on *Route 66*?

So, we are going to have a little fun this week. I asked the staff to name a song and artist that would be a highlight on their road trip playlist, and while there was some overlap, there was also a surprising variety to their choices. So, on the Thursday email this week we are going to include a quiz, allowing you to see if you can match the song to the staff member. Here is your preview of the songs included:

- *Another One Bites the Dust* — Queen
- *The Schuyler Sisters* — Hamilton
- *Born to Run* — Bruce Springsteen
- *Mr. Jones* — Counting Crows
- *Eminence Front* — The Who
- *Brandy* — Looking Glass

- *This is How We Do It* — Montell Jordan
- *Wanted Dead or Alive* — Bon Jovi
- *Paradise City* — Guns and Roses
- *Love on Top* — Beyonce
- *Country Road* — James Taylor

Can you match the song to the staff member? This could be more challenging than your bracket for March Madness. Of course, this is a staff of over-achievers so we have a whole slew of other recommendations for your road trip pleasure, along with a fully curated list of essential tunes for use as a parental teaching tool. I wonder who could have done that? What song would you add to the list?

I read recently that most folks highlight songs and artists from the time they were in high school and college. That would imply that our ears continue to be trained to that period of life when it was so much easier to answer the call to adventure. Do you remember the days? Most folks have a classic road trip story – sleeping on the linoleum kitchen floor of some stranger's apartment with ten other guys from the dorm on your way to a football game at a rival college. A friend calls at the last minute with an

extra ticket to see the Stones in concert, and immediately you're out the door and on the road to Chicago.

I remember stuffing myself into the back of a friend's beat up Mustang and driving all night to the gulf coast of Florida. We went straight to the beach and late that afternoon with sun-blistered backs, we drove over to a college campus where Henry Kissinger was scheduled to speak. Honestly, I was so sleepy by that point that the only thing I remember is the flash of camera lights as he entered and as he left. The rest of the time it was as though my head was attached to a pulley that someone kept yanking toward the ground.

The road trip. I wonder if the wise men were so exhausted by the time they arrived in Bethlehem that, even with the presence of the Lord, they had a hard time keeping their eyes open. Of course, those college road trips may have included activities that added to your exhaustion, but often, that exhilaration at the beginning of a road trip will fade before you are halfway to your destination. Road trips evolve as you mature, but leave you no less exhausted at the end of the road. It may take a month for a parent to clean all the Cheerios out of the Suburban.

The world-wide-web offered up a variety of lists of those things that are essential to have with you on a road trip. Again, age reveals a lot. For one young blogger, three of the top four items on his list were electronic devices.

However, the list of a parent with young children put a lot of emphasis on having clothing, cleaning supplies, and trash bags readily available for when one of the kids throws up. I saw a neighbor with an infant, packing for a road trip, and it looked like a major military operation.

You know you are a young parent when it takes as much time to pack and unpack the SUV as it does to drive to your destination. It is a little different from those days when a friend called and you were out the door with only a coat and a toothbrush, and maybe not even that.

What is the goal of the road trip? Is it a destination that you want to mark off your bucket list? Mount Rushmore. The Grand Canyon. Maybe you can't imagine leaving this earth until you actually see Rock City. Is it an event that lures you from life's routine on a whim? The Kentucky Derby. The Northern Lights. The Final Four. The Indy 500. Or, is it the journey itself that beckons. I once had a church member who was an upholsterer

and when the furniture factory annually shut down for the week of July 4th on Friday at 3:00; at 3:01 he was on his Harley headed for South Dakota, or Canada, or maybe even Alaska. In another community, I knew a group of judges that each summer would select a few major league ballparks and hit the road for some baseball games.

Of course, at other times the road trip takes the form of an obligation. A niece's wedding. A parent's surgery. A friend's funeral.

The road beckons us for any number of reasons, but there are many of us who envy those who possess the freedom to follow the siren call of the road at will. "Sure. I'll go." How did Woody Guthrie put it?

As I was walking a ribbon of highway
I saw above me an endless skyway
I saw below me a golden valley
This land was made for you and me.

We can't say what the wise men were doing when the rising star enticed them to hit the road, but we can say that they probably weren't kings. We can't say whether they knew one another before striking out together or if their paths intersected and they realized they were following the same thing. Whatever the background, we can say that the same star

beckoned each of them. 500 years later, having grown tired of their anonymity, we gave them names: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar.

Matthew doesn't only fail to give us any names, he doesn't actually tell us how many there were. We get the number three from the gifts that were given to this Christ child, but NT scholar Paul Achtemeier tells us that it was probably more of a caravan, equipped for a long trip: magi, servants, beasts of burden carrying food and supplies; and he proposes that the trip took quite some time. The shepherds had departed long before they arrived and Mary, Joseph, and the baby had moved out of the barn and into a house.

When the caravan arrives in the area, the magi start asking around about a baby born to be king of the Jews, sort of like Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*; and word of their investigation quickly finds its way up the food chain to Herod's palace. Matthew tells us that Herod and all of Jerusalem were suddenly agitated, troubled, worked up by the rumors in a way that is not so dissimilar from the way our culture gets worked up and overwrought over everything from drones over Jersey to Beyonce going country. Herod was spooked, the same way you would be spooked upon hearing that someone was out there campaigning for your job. King of the

Jews? Herod was under the impression that the job had already been filled, at least as long as he was alive.

So Herod had one of his advisors recruit a couple of beefy security guards to collect the magi for a meeting. You know, the kind of meeting where the long black sedan pulls up beside you. The linebacker in a dark suit two sizes too small steps out, and without a word opens the back door; and you know that there is really not any choice but to get in. Later, in a darkened smoky room, Herod leans in close, a la Don Vito Corleone, and whispers, "Tell me where you find him, so I can come and pay my respects. My associates say you may want to snoop around over in Bethlehem."

Sure enough, the magi step out into the clear Jerusalem sky and the world's first and brightest GPS leads them directly to the house where Jesus was to be found. The text almost suggests they were more thrilled that their method of tracking the star actually worked than they were about seeing the Christ child. Of course, stars were their specialty. What has been traditionally translated as wise men, doesn't do full justice to the Greek word magoi, which is a precursor to the English word magic. In other words, these guys weren't so much seminary professors as they were

astrologers, reading the stars and looking for signs. While we are more comfortable identifying the travelers as wise men or even kings, the original text forces us to wrestle with the notion that God can step outside the bounds of orthodoxy to draw people into relationship with him.

You know, theologically we don't have much regard for or patience with astrology. We just don't. And I don't give a moment's thought to whether the moon is aligning with your Venus. Sometimes, Presbyterians are labeled with the word mainline used in the pejorative sense of being hidebound, shackled to tradition, behind the times, out of touch and headed down the drain. I don't buy that label; not when I see the vitality and witness of this community of disciples; not when I'm privileged to observe the depth of your faith and the spirit of your commitment; not when I see the openness of the congregation to what the Spirit of God may be calling us to do. So, no, I don't buy that label.

But, I'll gladly affirm the label of mainline in the sense of being a people bearing forth the basic theology and beliefs of the Reformed tradition: the sovereignty of God; the Lordship of Christ; the affirmation of the Trinity; the authority of Scripture; the notion that God alone is Lord of

the conscience; the radical idea that a diversity of understanding and conviction is a healthy thing; that thoughtful, respectful discourse among those who may disagree but are committed to relationship with one another is healthier than an environment where everyone is expected to have the same worldview. In that sense, I'll gladly wear the label of mainline.

I don't know the first thing about astrology and I don't harbor any desire to look into it. I can't be a resource for you about the belief systems and practices of other faith traditions. I'm a Christian and a Presbyterian. That's who I am and what I know. But one thing the story of the Magi tells us is that if God is sovereign, then we cannot place limits on how God works to draw seekers into relationship with him. It may be by a star; it may be in a bar. It could be in the midst of pain or when relationships are strained. It may be through a blind date or possibly when you feel your life is consumed by hate. We cannot place limits on how God works to draw seekers into relationship with Christ.

NT scholar Eugene Boring (a most unfortunate name for a professor) offers this helpful perspective: "Even this "most Jewish" of the Gospels is aware, from its first page onward, that it is not necessary first to have the

biblical and Jewish hope, before one can come to the Messiah and accept him as Lord. In following the light they have, the magi find the goal of their quest in bowing before the Jewish Messiah. The task of the church is often to discern the ultimate quest that is expressed in non-biblical and non-theistic ways in contemporary life, and continue Matthew's witness that the yearnings even of those who do not know fully what they seek are met in the act of God at Bethlehem."

We enter these doors fresh from all sorts of life experiences, all forms of spiritual experimentation. The journey on the way here has led us down many roads, a few dead ends, a couple gravel paths swallowed by weeds, and a number of points where it dawned on us that we were going in circles. For many of us the journey here resembles not so much a straight line as it does a pretzel. Over the years I think I've developed the ability to mask any signs of shock when someone tells me the twists and turns of their faith journey. "You believed in what?" Maybe the pretzel is an apt image for the faith journey because one tradition proposes that the shape reminds us of arms folded across the chest in prayer. Even though we probably didn't have a clue, God was there through all the twists turns and dead

ends. Somehow, some way, God has drawn you here in a manner far beyond our understanding and far above our pay grade.

Now, upon entering these doors, we're not going to be handing out crystals, Zodiac charts, incense, prayer mats, or orange Tibetan robes. As Paul says, "We preach Christ crucified." That's who we are. That what we understand as truth. Yet, one thing the story of the Magi tells us is that if God is sovereign, then we cannot place limits on how God works to draw seekers into relationship with Christ.

I'd still like to hear the road trip songs that you listened to along the way, but we cannot limit the ways God has drawn you to this place. Our task, our call, is to reflect the welcome, hospitality, and love of Christ. How does the treasured Christmas hymn describe the journey we share together?

Yet in thy dark streets shineth,
The everlasting light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.

Amen.