

January 3, 2021
Epiphany of Our Lord
United, Oak Park

Finding our Way to Jesus

When our family first heard about this year's drive-through light illumination at the Morton Arboretum we wanted to go it, but the tickets sold out early, so instead we decided to tour some of the area's homes that are festooned with lights. After going to see lights on Mapleton or East avenues that we usually check out every year here in Oak Park, we went further afield to Franklin Avenue in River Forest, and even wound our way up to Newland Avenue in Galewood before returning home. Most of these locations were easy enough for us to find, since they were along streets that we have been down a number of times before.

But this year we heard that the Lombard Park District had a holiday decorating contest among homes there. The entrants in the contest were indicated on a map that was easy to download from the park district's web site, and we were also able to discover in advance which of the homes had already earned first, second, and third place in the contest. So armed with the map, we went looking for some of the

most interesting holiday light displays among streets that we really didn't know at all.

My wife, Linda, likes to drive and have me do the navigating when we are going to an unfamiliar location. And since the front passenger seat is still an exciting place for our 13-year old grandson to be—because it's been less than a year since he could actually start riding up front—I'm usually relegated to the second row of our Honda Odyssey these days. But I did what I could to read the map of Lombard's holiday decorating contest from the second row and to match it up with street signs and other landmarks that were visible through the windshield before us.

Our grandson, Jayden, quickly identified that the first place winner of the contest was actually a show, where flashing lights coordinated with a musical program. It was certainly spectacular, as was the collection of lit-up Santas we saw covering an entire front yard as we drove up Main Street in Lombard.

By then I had relinquished my customary navigator role though, with my wife and grandson insisting that I just provide them with the street addresses of houses so that they could enter them into the

navigation feature of our minivan, that way enabling a clear set of visual and audible instructions that were much more reliable than what I could offer on my own from the second row. Moreover, the GPS system didn't struggle with reading street signs in the middle of dark intersections, and it didn't attempt to lead us down dead-end streets either. Though I have decades of experience in being able to find my way through most unfamiliar locations with just a map, clearly my navigating days are coming to an end with the ever-increasing accuracy of modern technology.

Of course the advantage that the wise men had in finding their way, according to the second chapter of Matthew, was that a star pointed right to where Jesus was in Bethlehem. It seems to have been like some celestial police helicopter shining a search light to the exact location. When they arrived in Bethlehem, there doesn't seem to have been any confusion for them. They found Jesus exactly in the place where the star had guided them.

The wise men also became important symbols of Jesus' mission. Right near the start of the gospel according to Matthew, the wise men

give us an indication that Jesus was born for the whole world, and the gospel also picks up on that theme at its conclusion, when Jesus commissioned his disciples to go into all the world to share its saving message. The wise men perform an important function in the gospel story by proclaiming that outsiders were welcome with Jesus, even those who came from a different country, no doubt speaking other languages, not likely sharing in the same faith, and bringing exotic gifts with them.

Now the question for us is: how do we find Jesus? Yes we have devices that can pinpoint how much further we have to go to reach our destination. And we also have apps that can inform us about where the car is that's delivering our Super Supreme pizza. But where is Jesus? There isn't some kind of special antenna built into the cellphones we carry around that lets us know where we are able to find Jesus in our world today.

Certainly we can find Jesus whenever we open our Bibles. We don't even need a special edition where the precise words that Jesus

was recorded as saying are highlighted in red letters either. Jesus is quite clearly in the gospels and in the other books that witness to his life and work.

We also believe that Jesus is right here among us today. Jesus is right among the church as it gathers in person and even among the various remote connections that congregations use these days to gather more safely during a global pandemic. Jesus is here, right among us, even while we meet in a physically distanced way today.

But what is it that people are looking for when they come to see Jesus? Not everyone who comes to worship Jesus is necessarily seeking the same things. Many Christians might be attracted to the extraordinary—even supernatural—stories about Jesus, such as the virgin birth, his miracles of healing, or turning water to wine, or feeding thousands of people from just a few small loaves of bread. Other people may not necessarily be focused on all of the amazing things that have been recorded about Jesus' life, but they still look to him primarily for providing some kind of direction in which to live their lives today. Quite

simply, Jesus often gives us meaning and purpose, even if we struggle with some of the more spectacular aspects of the stories about him.

Queen Elizabeth of Great Britain touched on this aspect of Christian faith just a few days ago in her annual Christmas message that centered on the theme of light amidst this very dark and challenging time when she said, “The teachings of Christ have served as my inner light, as has the sense of purpose we can find in coming together to worship.”

Queen Elizabeth’s Christmas message went on to praise the many ways in which people of all faiths have extended kindness and have become beacons of God’s light to others in the past year. In mentioning how the light of a star guided shepherds and wise men to the scene of Jesus’ birth, the queen also shared her hope that “the light of Christmas—the spirit of selflessness, love, and above all hope—guide us in the times ahead.”

Perhaps there is no greater mission statement for all Christians in the coming year than in those exact words. There are many people right

now who have not had the opportunity to be on the receiving end of selflessness, love, and hope. They may have deep longings and may experience extreme emptiness. They may have yet to encounter someone who shines the light of Christ into their lives in such a way that is life-giving for them. The voids that many people are seeking to fill in their lives will give us all something to do in the coming year.

Yes, as this New Year dawns, there are still plenty of people who are searching for the redeemer of the world. Plenty of people may seem lost, abandoned, and forgotten. But the gift of this season isn't simply that we have come with the shepherds and wise men to see the infant Jesus for ourselves. The ultimate gift of this season is that we are also able to share the joys of this happiness with everyone, and that the whole world is welcome to find its way into the eternal light of God's love. Even better yet—no one needs to worry about following any directions whatsoever to get to this place—because God's home is already right here among everyone.