

"DETOURS FOR THE NEW YEAR"

(Matthew 2:1-12)

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[PROP NEEDED: "*The Fourth Wiseman*" video from SkitGuys.com]

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 1-5-25]

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1. Read Text: Matthew 2:1-12 and Pray.

2. [STORY OF NEW YEAR'S IN ITALY]

It's 11:59 P.M., New Year's Eve, in many small towns in the country of Italy. But though the New Year is fast approaching, the streets are clear; there is no traffic; no pedestrians; even the local police are conspicuously absent from public view. And why at this time when the rest of the world is about to celebrate, do many towns in Italy seem to vacate the public areas?

Well, it all has to do with an old but interesting Italian custom called "*Lancio dei Cocci*" (literally "*to launch shards*"): At the stroke of midnight, the windows of many of these towns fly open. And as you listen to sounds of laughter coming from inside and fireworks going on outside, from out of these windows come old pieces of cookware, disliked Christmas ornaments, hated furniture, a whole lists of personal possessions which remind the members of that household of things in the past year that they want to forget in the next.

So you can see, then, that the public areas of town would not be very safe at midnight on New Year's Eve, for the Italians take very seriously the famous New Year's phrase "*Out with the old; in with the new.*" ¹

4. Well, just as the Italians have their unique New Year's customs, so we also have ours:

A--Whether it's watching the big Apple drop at Times Square in New York City, watching the big Peach drop in Atlanta, sharing in a New Year's "Watch Night Service" at church, or simply counting down privately with family and friends,...

B--...All of our New Year's customs are geared to remind us that with the New Year comes a new chance to begin again -- to put behind us things which WERE, and to start afresh with new things that ARE.

C--That's precisely why many people make "New Year's resolutions" -- to resolve to leave behind the old and to "begin again." ²

5. In today's scripture from Matthew 2, we see something similar taking place in the story of the coming of the Magi ("Wise Men/3 Kings") to see the child Jesus.

A--In many ways, they are the first to set the stage for Jesus' later introduction to reach the whole world in his name for -- unlike the story of the local Shepherds -- here we have a story of those who have traveled far to greet this new hope of Israel.

B--Now, despite what we sing in the carol "We Three Kings," there's nothing in the biblical story to indicate that these were Gentile "kings" from the "Orient", that they arrived on the actual *night* of Jesus' birth, or that there were even *three* of them!

1--More likely, they were *Jewish* astrologers from Persia (modern-day Iran/Iraq) who were descendants of those exiled there in the time of Daniel (remember Daniel in the Lion's den?), who arrived in Bethlehem up to a year after Jesus' birth --Verse 11 says they entered a "*house*" to see the "*toddler*" (not "*infant*").³

2--And from their three expensive gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (the origin of there being three of them), and the fact that they were able to financially make this trip in the first place, we can at least deduce that they were men of power, influence, and wealth.

C--And even though we don't usually associate this story with New Year's, I think it nevertheless has a very powerful message for us as we begin 2025.

--II--

6. You'll remember that in Verse 8, King Herod had asked the Magi to report back to him after they found the baby Jesus, so that he, too, might "*go and worship him.*"

A--Yet, we know that the true reason he wanted to know was so he could *kill* the newborn King of Kings.

B--But God's plan was not to be thwarted. So, we find these Magi spoken to again in Verse 12: "*Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route*" -- the Living Bible translation says that they "*went home another way.*"

C--In other words, they took a **DETOUR** -- now, it was *GOD'S* detour, but it was a "detour," nonetheless.

1--Webster's dictionary defines "detour" as "*a roundabout way temporarily replacing part of a route.*"

2--But in this story, notice that these Magi didn't take a "temporary" detour, but a *permanent* one, and I believe that there's something very powerful in that.

D--In other words, after these Magi met Jesus, they took a "detour" *not only* in the direction of their travels, but I believe also in the direction of their *lives*, as well.

8. And I believe that once we (like those Magi) encounter the Christ and accept him into our hearts, then we (also like them) can "*go home by another way/route.*"

A--2 Corinthians 5:17 says that, "*If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has passed away; Behold, the new has come.*"

1--When you and I truly encounter the living Christ, all that we have done and been in the past is wiped clean-- and we're able to begin again.

2--And isn't THAT, after all, the message of New Year's?...

(a) ...That in Christ, we are forever changed?

(b) ...That in Christ, we can begin again?

(c) ...That in Christ, we never NEED to "*take the old routes home*" again?

B--One Christian author described the New Year this way:

"I am the new year. I am an unspoiled page in your book of time.

I am your next chance at the art of living.

I am your opportunity to practice what you have learned about life during the last twelve months.

All that you sought and didn't find is hidden in me, waiting for you to search it but with more determination.

All the good that you tried for and didn't achieve is mine to grant when you have fewer conflicting desires.

All that you dreamed but didn't dare to do, all that you hoped but did not will, all the faith that you claimed but did not have these slumber lightly, waiting to be awakened by the touch of a strong purpose.

I am your opportunity to renew your allegiance to Him who said, 'Behold, I make all things new.' I am the new year." [--Author Unknown]

--III--

9. So as we begin this new year, are there some things within your control for 2025 that you want to be different than they were in 2024?

A--Perhaps some BAD habits that you want to give up? ...GOOD habits that you want to take on?

B--Perhaps a hatchet of un-forgiveness against someone that you've been holding a grudge against for many years that you'd like to bury once and for all?

C--Perhaps resolving to follow Christ more closely not only through more intentional personal spiritual growth but also through better participation in your own church?

10. Perhaps your resolve to be different could look at least somewhat like what we see in this version of the story of the Magi...

[WATCH "*The Fourth Wise Man*" video from SkitGuys.com (Total Time 3:59) 4]

11. Of course, what we learn in the Bible is that Jesus truly IS that kind of Savior -- the kind who enables us to "*go home another way*" and to never "*go back to our own country the old route again.*"

A--He's the kind of Savior who looks beyond our mistakes and shortcomings,; who offers us "detours" around our pasts and gives us new and fresh starts for the future.

B--So, what will YOU do with YOUR chance to start afresh this year?

12. [PRAY]

13. [HOLY COMMUNION & COVENANT OF BAPTISMAL RENEWAL]

ENDNOTES:

¹ From the article "*New Year's in Italy*" at website <https://lifeinitaly.com/new-years-in-italy/>

² In fact, even our secular Western calendar contains this sense of getting rid of the old and welcoming in the new, for the month of January is named after the Roman god Janus, who represented beginnings. And he was symbolized as a man with two faces, one looking back and the other looking forward

³ The case for these being *Jewish* astrologers descended from Jews who were exiled to Persia during the time of Daniel has been well made in many circles. After all, why would *Gentile* astrologers be interested in who would be king in the small *Jewish* land of Palestine hundreds of miles from their own home? More likely, these were *Jewish* astrologers living in Persia who were studying their own homeland's scriptures *along with* the reading of the stars that they learned while living in the land where their ancestors had been exiled hundreds of years earlier.

⁴ <https://skitguys.com/videos/the-fourth-wise-man>