

“Star Search”
Matthew 2: 1-12
January 4, 2009

The Rev. Corey Nelson
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Today is Epiphany Sunday. Welcome to this day of epiphany—literally this “sudden moment of intuitive understanding” Sunday. A day for Epiphany is a nice way to begin our calendar year. For the past ten days, the camera has been slowly pulling back from the manger scene. But today, Epiphany zooms us in for one final close-up. Once more, before we pack up the boxes, before the Christmastide’s gone completely back out for another year, the crèche comes back into view as we add the final characters to Jesus’ birth story.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men* from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd* my people Israel.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men* and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,* until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped,* they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of

gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

PRAYER: Loving God, may these moments and the moments and days to follow bring us epiphany as we learn to listen and worship and love more fluently. Amen.

Well, it happened again this year.

Santas and shepherds,

Carols and cards

Shopping and strife, It's a Wonderful Life!

Silent night. Holy night, a get-together with family night

Tidings of comfort and joy, new cool techie toys,

The Polar Express, American Express,

Emmanuel, the mall as well

In-laws at home and outlaws in Springfield,

Snow and ice, even rain and floods,

Jingle bells, Christmas smells like cookies, turkey and pine,

Peace and love, gift-wrap and groceries,

O little town of Bethlehem, and did they play hockey in Wrigleyville?

It happened again this year. It all happened again. And now like squirrels after a storm we're tentatively emerging from our Christmas burrows, beholding our world as it is, as it was, and this week we may wonder if perhaps we let the frankincense go to our heads this year.

Wasn't it just two weeks ago that we sang, "Hail the newborn Prince of Peace," but when will that kid grow up to be prince and take charge of things where in the world is this peace? Nevertheless, our culture and calendars and busy schedules all demand that we move on. We box up the ornaments, eat the rest of the cookies, set the tree out at the curb, and like grandparents who've just lovingly spoiled their grandchild with affection, we know it's time to leave baby Jesus with Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem.

As the nativity fades in our rear view mirror, we look ahead, to the full year ahead and begin making plans, forming new hopes and dreams and

committing ourselves to new New Year's resolutions. It's common, isn't it, this time of year for us to resolve ourselves to new ideas, new commitments, new expectations. It would be interesting to find out how many of you have made resolutions this year and, only four days in, how many of you have perhaps already broken a resolution or two. I confess that I certainly have mine. For some reason a few years ago, I started this annual resolution to lose six pounds in the six weeks between New Year's Day and Valentine's Day. I'm not sure how that got started, but it seemed at the time like a reasonable goal that I could probably attain. It was certainly more realistic than the grander resolutions I used to make about learning a foreign language or a new musical instrument. If you can relate, then you know that often times, our resolutions fall short.

However, as we reflect on our scripture lessons this morning, I do want to invite us as a congregation to explore how we might make a common New Year's resolution together.

We begin this morning with the story of the Magi. It's a story that, in truth, contains very few details. Matthew's telling of the story of Christ's incarnation is quite different from the one that we heard ten days ago on Christmas Eve. Luke's story is the one that is filled with angels and shepherds and manger scenes behind an inn with a "No Vacancy" sign hanging out front. But Matthew begins with a band of foreigners ... strangers ... arriving. Their motives seem pure and straightforward enough: they see a star, they appear, they worship and then they leave, never to be heard from again. But, we don't know much more than that.

In fact, some scholars have theorized that part of the reason this story was preserved is because it is the first example in human history of a group of men stopping to ask for directions when they were lost. (I know, an old joke...but you only get to tell it once a year!) I'm not sure if that's true. In fact, much of our tradition surrounding this story, including their names and physical characteristics, comes from legends and myths formed over time and not the biblical story itself. We don't actually know if there were three kings, just that there were three gifts, appropriate as there were for a child who was just as likely to eat frankincense rather than appreciate its symbolic meaning.

However, what I do understand about the wise men is that they were searching for and then following a light. There is something about that I inherently understand. I know what it means to search for light in the darkness. I know that there is something within me, perhaps created within me, that is inevitably drawn towards the light.

How many of you remember the first time you went camping or traveled out into a distant rural or wilderness landscape and you saw the full spectrum of stars? Wasn't it amazing?

A couple of years ago, I was driving around the city on the freeway and spotted one of those big search lights shining against the clouds in the sky. They are usually out for big parties or movie premiers or something special so I was eager to see where it was coming from as I kept getting closer. In the end, I discovered that it was sitting on top of a McDonald's Restaurant—for a grand opening. What a disappointment! Yes, there is something so compelling about the light in the darkness that draws us to be guided by it, to be comforted by it, even before we know for certain where it is coming from, but, in the end, the light only matters when it points us towards something substantial, something profound, something transforming ... when it points us towards “epiphany.”

I think Isaiah understood this, too, when he proclaimed to the people of Israel, “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” The nation of Israel had been living in exile for generations, in virtual darkness. Now their time had come, once again, to arise. But they would not arise from their own light, but rather bathed in the warm glow of God's light. Isaiah uses very ambiguous language to describe “your light.” As if to imply that that light is both from an external source—from God—and also becomes reflected by Israel so that they themselves become a light, radiated out to the world around them. Perhaps that can be a seed for us as we consider a New Year's resolution for ourselves.

Typically, an Epiphany sermon might focus on how we as individuals continue to discern where God's star is leading us today on our spiritual journey. Instead this year, I want to offer a different twist. I want to ask the question, “What if our church was a ‘star’ in this community? What light

shines forth from this place that draws people towards it and what do they find when they get here—fast food or a community meal that nourishes and sustains?

This Christmas, as I do every year, I watched, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Personally, I prefer the original black and white version over the new colorized one, but either way there is something about George Bailey’s story that is always so compelling—the desire to understand what difference my life makes in the world around me. I wonder if we might take that same lesson as a congregation and ask ourselves, “What difference does it make to this community that this church is sitting here? How different would Lake Forest be, as a village, if this church did not exist? Would it make a difference at all? Would anyone notice? Would anyone’s life be different if this church were not here?”

This New Year’s, I invite us to consider a resolution about how our star might shine brighter and might guide people to a place of profound transformation, a place filled with hospitality and generosity, a community of living, breathing examples of Christ’s compassion and love.

Now, there is a risk involved in this. If we hang our star out to shine, then people will come to find out where that light is coming from. Those people, like the Magi, might be strangers from a strange land. We’ve dressed up the Christmas story to make the Magi’s arrival on camels a beautiful part of the story, but remember that they came as strangers. They came from a different culture, a different tradition, a different religion. Yet, they came guided by the star to worship, to be a part of that community—the Holy Family—and then to return. We don’t have any dramatic story about their conversion, about them sticking around. We don’t really know what happened to them, but we do know that they came because of the light and for a moment joined a new community.

I wonder if we, too, are willing to hang our star in such a way that people will come and then be willing to reach out beyond the comfort of our close knit circle of friends and family even if, heaven forbid, they sit in your pew? Perhaps even people from different traditions, religions, or denominations;

with different perspectives and ideas. Will we, like the Holy Family, offer hospitality to them and receive the treasures they bring to us, the wealth of their experience, skills and gifts; their sorrows and aches and their dreams and the milestones of their lives? Can we hang out that kind of star?

This morning we gather once again around the table, reminded that as Christ gave us the gift of his life—that gift is only real when it is broken and shared with others. This New Year's, while you may also want to lose weight or read more books, I invite us as a congregation to consider how we might be a brighter light within this community—shining out for all to see, for all to come, so that the riches of Christ that have been given to us might also be given to others, so that people everywhere might arise and shine—reflections of God's light together in community.

It happened again this year. A child was born. A light is shining. Now won't it be exciting to find out why?

Amen.