

**January 3, 2021**

*Epiphany Sunday*

Matthew 2: 1-12

Isaiah 60: 1-6

***Following the Light***  
**The Reverend Mark Mares**

About a year and a half ago, Jenna and I were packing and getting ready to make the move from Upstate NY to begin our life anew and experience ministry here in Ann Arbor. We were excited. We were nervous. We were hopeful. We were also a little anxious. New beginnings are exciting because of the promise of the unexpected, but they are also terrifying, because of the promise of the unexpected. Moving from one home, to create another. Moving from old friends, to new friends. Moving from one community that's become family, to join a new community and expand that family.

Perhaps many of you have experienced this. And if not, I'm sure you know the feeling of new beginnings, because 2020 was filled with them... regular zoom meetings at work and for fun, masked protests, virtual school at home. Maybe you can recall the feeling one gets at the beginning of a new year, and new, new year's resolutions, or the beginning of life in a new home, or the beginning of a new job, or the beginning of a new school year, or the beginning of a new season in your life. Whatever new beginnings you experience or long for, they all come with the promise of the unexpected – sometimes wonderful – sometimes not so much. Either way, there's always uncertainty.

During Advent we journeyed together in that 'in-between' time as we waited for the wonder of that Holy Christmas night, the birth of a vulnerable baby born into a feeding trough amidst fear and chaos, the Word became flesh, Emmanuel, God-with-us.

I found it quite fitting that on the first Sunday AFTER Christmas, Rev. Amy Ruhf invited us to imagine ourselves getting "into the work of Christmas," joining God who is at work in the world!

On this Sunday, a day we recognize as Epiphany Sunday, we look toward those who visited the Christ child, following a certain star.

Arise, shine, for your light has come.

In our passage from the Gospel of Matthew, we encounter wise-men who came from the East. These visitors studied the sky, and at the rising of a star, immediately left to pay homage to Christ. We think of these visitors to Jesus as being *kings* or *wise* men. That’s how the tradition has domesticated them and handed them down to us. But the word in the Greek for wise men is *magoi*, which goes back to the word *magos*... which is where we get the word “magician” or “sorcerer”. These were men known for their abilities in reading the stars and understanding the signs of the times. It was said that wise kings wanted wise men like these magi as counselors to their kingdom. These magicians were understood as an almost priestly class.<sup>1</sup>

At the time when the biblical story of Jesus’ birth was written, the ancient magicians were mysterious foreigners, very different from what the Jews and Romans were used to: exotic outsiders from faraway places. Yet, we know that God often speaks to us through the stranger, so what might we learn from these strangers of the ancient east?

Did you notice what these strangers did, when they arrived to the place where Jesus was? “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.”

Their response is joy, which is pretty remarkable when you think about it. Upon entering the house, and for all intents and purposes, all the magi saw was an ordinary house with an ordinary Jewish mother with her baby. Yet, “these highly educated foreigners, distinguished enough to be summoned for a private consultation with King Herod, were the first to worship our Lord.”<sup>2</sup> And then they offered gifts with tribute for a king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. For something seemingly so ordinary, what led these magi to feel so much joy?

I’m leaning on the work of the wonderful scholar Ellen Davis who suggests “that this may be something more than an idle question, because it seems to me that for many of us (and I include myself) joy in Christ has more the status of a pious wish than a deeply felt reality.”<sup>3</sup>

Joy, we know, is connected to something much deeper. It’s a current that runs through us, beyond us, especially in our connection to others. These Magi are tapping into something deeper. They’ve mastered the art of hoping in God. Proverbs 10:28 helps us understand what this deep hope looks like – listen: “The hope of the righteous is gladness.”

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<sup>1</sup> I’m grateful for the work of Roger Nelson on the distinction.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Davis, [Preaching the Luminous Word: Biblical Sermons and Homiletical Essays](#), 250.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 250.

You'll notice it isn't conditional. It doesn't say the hope of the righteous leads to gladness – though some translations change it that way – but it says the hope of the righteous IS gladness – already now, in the present tense.

“Those who train their sights on the faithfulness of God, ‘the righteous’ – they already experience joy, even before they see their hopes fulfilled, even if they never live to see the clear fulfillment of all that God has promised,”<sup>4</sup> in this world at least.

Joy in the midst of pain.  
Joy in the midst of suffering.  
Joy in the midst of unknowing.

Joy in the midst of fear.  
These Magi responded in Joy,  
but did you notice how everyone else reacted?

*“When King Herod heard this, he was  
frightened, and all of Jerusalem with him.”*

Fear has captured King Herod and ALL of Jerusalem. And it leads to a destruction on a massive scale, and the deaths of so many children. “Fear spreads like a plague through an unhealthy system, infecting not only those who are powerless to defend themselves – the Jewish families in Bethlehem—but also the relatively powerful, the ruling elite in Jerusalem, who sensed the fragility of the base on which their power rested.”

Even in this reality, with fear captivating the hearts of so many, the Magi respond in a different way, they respond in a joy that's rooted in hope. It's a joy that can burst forth that night in a Roman-occupied Bethlehem. Like a water spring bursting in a desert, like a flower springing suddenly out of stone pavement.

This is an image of joy rooted in hope. If the first thing we can learn from these strangers is that a biblical vision for joy is rooted in hope, then the second is that no matter how uncertain you may feel, each of us is called to follow the light.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 250.

The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor begins her sermon on the journey of the Magi this way: “Once upon a time there were some very wise men who were all sitting in their own countries minding their own business when a bright star lodged in the right eye of each of them. It was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imagination, but they were wise enough to know that it didn’t matter. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives.”<sup>5</sup>

We know that these visitors, these Magi, were well-equipped to follow the star. There is a reason they were called – there is a reason, they saw the light, and followed it.

My friends, we are called for reasons that are grounded in who we are – it might not always be clear, there is always uncertainty, fear, and doubt – but the truth and wonder of that night is that the same light that called out to these Magi beckons each and every one of us. And the grace in that is that there is a purpose for each and every one of us.

I still remember when we had our emergency meeting way back in March, when we knew the state was going to shut down. I remember trying to figure things out and create a plan, amid so much uncertainty. As I put together a weekly email to youth and their families, trying to provide some sense of hope, all I could think about was a scene from the movie *Lord of the Rings, the Fellowship of the Ring*.

In this film, the wise wizard Gandalf assures the young hobbit, Frodo Baggins, that he is indeed the one destined to carry the evil ring back to its destruction in the fires of Mordor. From an outward glance you might not think this young hobbit, who was small, innocent, and afraid, would be a good choice to carry this big task. It was a ring that contained incredible, dark power. Yet, there was something about Frodo – an inner strength, an innate capacity to resist the ring’s evil, and a loyalty to his friends, that made him the one to do this. “The ring came to you for a reason, Frodo” Gandalf tells him, “There is comfort in that.”

“I wish the ring had never come to me,” Frodo despairs. “I wish this had never happened.”

“So do all who live in such times,” Gandalf replies, “But while we cannot choose the times we live in, we can choose how to respond to the time we are given.”

Then in perhaps the bravest words uttered by hobbit or human, Frodo says at last, “I will take the ring, but I do not know the way.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, [Home by Another Way](#), 1999.

<sup>6</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, [Lord of the Rings: the Fellowship of the Ring](#).



My friends, it is often like that. In this moment in our lives, it certainly feels like that. As we move into 2021, we may find that it feels like we don't know the way.

It takes great courage to follow the light, especially when we don't know the way. But if you're watching this, or reading this, or listening to this, whatever it is that inspired you to be here, to begin the journey in the first place -- well, that is the light calling to you. And here's something else... as the Magi had each other, as Frodo had his friends, as we have each other, perhaps in our "togetherness," we can follow and discern the light.

If I'm honest with you, I don't know if a lot more can be said about 2020. Perhaps we can say that it's easy to pin some of the things we've experienced on a "bad year." Oh look at that, just another 2020 thing. But as the calendar turns, that reality doesn't really change. There isn't a button somewhere we can click, a new year, new us.

Many of us have experienced deep wounds, pain, and so much loss.

It may be comforting to pin things on a calendar year and hope for something better in 2021. Believe me, I do hope it's better. But if we're deeply honest with ourselves, I think this Epiphany story sheds light on how we can just as easily be captured by the same fear and destruction that takes hold of King Herod and all of Jerusalem.

Matthew is showing us a way forward in this season of Epiphany, this season of hope, in which we are gripped by fear. Matthew is calling on us -- as a church -- a community of faith, to be a place of resistance -- to examine and deepen our understanding of all the systems that generate fear for ourselves and others.

It takes work. Because the 'work of Christmas' is lifelong work. Arise, shine, for your light has come.

May we rise to follow the light, living boldly in the hope of the Magi, rejoicing with them at the first coming of Christ so that we may rejoice evermore when we know the fullness of Christ's reign forevermore.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## **Closing Sentences**

Dear friends,  
no one lights a candle and hides it under a bushel,  
but they put it on a lampstand,  
so, it gives light to the whole house!

May you carry the light of Christ,  
wherever you go!

And may the God of hope,  
fill you with all joy and peace,  
as you trust in Christ,  
so that you may abound in hope,  
by the power of the Holy Spirit.  
This day and always. Amen.

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