

Matthew 2:1-12

"Trusting God with the Light that We Have"

Over the last year, we here at Nazareth have embarked on a journey which might be compared to that of the wise men and their search for the newborn king. We don't really know much about these wise men – who they were or where they came from. In fact, the Bible never mentions a number but, over the years, they have manifested themselves as three kings in our hymns, stories and nativity scenes. The truth is that they were probably astrologers from Syria or Persia. And they were curious about the birth of a new king and came prepared to honor him with gifts.

What we DO know is that these men were *certain* that they were being led by something or someone more powerful than they. And not really knowing where they would end up, they set out in complete reliance on the bright, heavenly presence that guided their way. They were seeking something new and exciting, a mysterious presence that led them on their journey.

Through twists and turns, dangers and deceptions, illumination and ill-will they followed the star, trusting its wisdom. They were seeking a new way of being that would change the course of their lives. That would bring new light and new hope and new ways of serving with the gifts they had been given. They were following a brilliance that sparkled with possibility.

In much the same way, we have been trusting the light that we have. I believe that we, as a church family, have recognized that there is a new and exciting way of being the church that is just over the horizon. A sense that we can become more than we have been. A call to follow God's light into a new land.

We have done this by supporting the Session as they have explored new ideas about being the church in the 21st Century. Some of us have done this by being willing to read a book entitled Shift, about different ways to minister to God's people and to make disciples whenever we can. We have created a new Mission statement without really knowing what it will mean or what kind of changes it will bring about. "To worship and glorify God and to make disciples for Christ". We have been bold enough to invite the author of the book Shift to share his thoughts with our entire congregation. In many ways, we are on a journey whose ending is unknown, just as the wise men were.

Of course, anyone with a lick of sense would choose the safety and sanctuary of comfortable surroundings over the vulnerability and exposure of new lands. I have said this before and I will say it again - no one likes change but a wet baby!

Yet at Nazareth we have felt called, as surely as the wise men did, to venture into unknown lands. We have trusted in our own star – which shines on us though the leading of the Holy Spirit. We committed ourselves to 40 days of intentional prayer to be sure that we are on the right course. We have trusted the Spirit to choose just the right individuals to follow the star that leads to the pastor that God has already chosen for Nazareth Presbyterian. We have relied on God's will and God's wisdom.

So what a blessing for us that Matthew tells us that, when they saw that the star had stopped, the wise men were "overwhelmed with joy". And friends, that is a powerful description. I dare say that to be overwhelmed with joy is not an every day occurrence.

One definition of overwhelmed is to "bury something or drown beneath a huge mass." Given that meaning, I am sure that many of us have been overwhelmed recently. Buried beneath grief, uncertainty or fear. Drowning in sorrow, guilt or resentment. We can feel overwhelmed

on any given day by schedules and family obligations and unrealistic expectations from others or from ourselves. Or we might just be drowning in dirty laundry or math homework or driving to work in traffic. **But when was the last time you felt like you were drowning in joy?**

I know when it happened to me. You all know too because I have shared the story with you. Just five months ago when my daughter Katie went into labor 4 weeks early. We were in the middle of hosting a baby shower for her best friend. Her poor husband was in a wedding in Charleston and missed the whole event. But I didn't! I was right there at her head when that beautiful baby boy was delivered by C section. I was the first one to hold that miracle of God and introduce him to his mommy. I was the first one to call him by name. Welcome to the world baby Douglas.

But while MY joy is understandable, the joy of the wise men was even more astounding because they hadn't even seen the baby king yet! The Scriptures tell us that the star had stopped but the baby had not been revealed and still their joy was overwhelming. They did not know what the star had led them too and yet, they sensed that something magnificent, something uniquely important, was just on the other side.

Well, friends, that's where we are today. We are just outside the door. We are trusting God with the light that we have yet we don't know what the finished product will look like. How will Nazareth Church be different? How will it be the same? What will our work and worship, our discipleship and devotions, our offerings and obligations look like when we open that door of possibilities on the next step of our journey?

One thing is certain - we too can be overwhelmed with joy. You see we, like the wise men, have been led this far by something so much more brilliant than we are on our own. We

know this because our forefathers and mothers trusted in God with the light that ***THEY*** had been given and this beautiful body of Christ we know as Nazareth Presbyterian Church was born.

Our church history tells us that, before this area was even the United States of America, a group of Scotch-Irish Presbyterian families from Pennsylvania began to worship in what is now Spartanburg County. Soon they were joined by some other Scotch-Irish families who had come by way of Charles Towne. When they decided to worship together, a man from the upper settlement and a man from the lower settlement began walking towards each other and where they met, they chose a place to worship.

Of course, the light that led them to the spot that would one day be this church that is historic to so many and truly home to those of us gathered here today was the SAME light that led the kings. Because the joy that overwhelmed the kings was the joy of our God made flesh – Emmanuel – God with us. The light of the world. And that light dwells within us still today and leads us to joy.

We can also be overwhelmed with joy as individuals because the light that led the kings and the founders of this church is shining in each life here – even now. It is the light that helps us make decisions when we are uncertain. It is the light that comforts us when we lose someone we love or when life seems almost too much to bear. It is the light that quickens our heartbeat when we meet our one true love or lay eyes on our first grandbaby or watch a sunrise or see white snowfall cover the mud of our world. It is the light of joy that enables us to trust in God in all circumstances. It is our very own epiphany.

Epiphany – a time of excitement and revelation. The wise men did not know what was waiting on the other side of the door. But they knew in their hearts that they would find a king that would reign in their lives in a way that was different from any other king they had known.

Epiphany – a time pregnant with possibilities – a new born baby meeting his mother who will nurture the gift that God has leant her, trusting in God's leading for what she doesn't know.

Epiphany – a time to trust in the light that we have and lean *into* that trust as we open the door to the next step on our journey as Nazareth Presbyterian Church.

And there is one last thing that our Scripture teaches us. A true epiphany will leave you changed – different than you were before. Matthew tells us that the wise men, after being overwhelmed with joy, left for their own country by another road. I do not believe that they were simply afraid to go back to Herod and make a report or even that they didn't want to be responsible for leading the jealous king to the baby. I believe that Matthew means that they went away as different people. They followed the star, were overwhelmed with joy, came to the manger and found the babe, and they could only go away changed. They had ABSOLUTELY no choice but to go home by another way.

What I mean is that the lives of these three kings were never the same again. They went home and made new decrees to their people if they were true kings. Decrees of loving and sharing and taking care of each other and above all, of worshiping Christ with their lives. If they were astrologers, they never saw the stars the way they had before. Rather than superstitions or predictions they saw only the glorious artwork of God. If they were sages who had been given the gifts of understanding dreams, ALL their future dream interpretations were of an ETERNAL PARADISE with the one true God. They simply could not do what they had done before. They could not feel what they had felt before. They could not believe what they had believed before. They were called to follow a new light from that moment on into eternity.

I don't know how many of you know this, but I am an avid Clemson fan. Monday night, I was privileged to be with 72,000 of my closest friends at the National Championship Game.

Before the game, they were interviewing Clemson's head coach, Dabo Swinney. When asked about how he kept the team from getting too stressed out with all the hype that goes along with the kind of spotlight they have been in, he answered: "I've told the boys to remember that the light that is **in** you should always be brighter than the light that shines **on** you."

As soon as I heard him say that, I said to myself, NOW THAT CAN PREACH! And it leads me to a question for each one here. Are you ready for an Epiphany? Are you ready for something new and exciting? Are we as a church truly willing to trust in the light that God has given us and know that God will not lead us astray? Because when we, like the wise men, trust in God with the light that we have, we become a brilliance for our God that enables us to sparkle with possibility. Amen.