

God, in you there is no darkness. Yet, in our broken world, we see so much of it. So God, inspire us to allow the light of your son Jesus Christ shine through us. AMEN.

The captain of the ship looked into the dark night and saw faint lights in the distance. Immediately he told his signalman to send a message, “Alter your course ten degrees south.”

Promptly a return message was received: “Alter your course ten degrees north.”

The captain was angered; his command had been ignored. So he sent a second message: “Alter your course ten degrees south—I am the captain!”

Soon another message was received: “Alter your course ten degrees north—I am seaman third class Jones.”

Immediately the captain sent a third message, knowing the fear it would evoke: “Alter your course ten degrees south—I am a battleship.”

Then the reply came “Alter your course ten degrees north—I am a lighthouse.”

The sermon this morning is about lights. Today, we celebrate Epiphany. We use the word *epiphany* in two slightly different ways. The popular usage is when something just suddenly clicks for you. But, the word also

means a showing or revealing of God. An insight into the Divine, given by the Divine. The Epiphany we celebrate today refers to the the wise men giving homage to Jesus.

A recent traffic stop in Houston, Texas started when Javier Diaz was pulled over for an expired registration sticker. According to an interview Javier later gave, he'd been struggling to support his wife and his two small children. "You get paid, pay your bills, and then there's no more money," Javier said. "It's gone." He told the officer he had no excuse for the expired sticker. "I said, 'There's no explanation for why I haven't done it, except I don't have the money,'" Javier said. "I said, 'It was either feed my kids or get my registration done.'"

The officer wrote a citation and handed it to the twenty-five-year-old. But, when Javier took it from the officer, he said he couldn't believe what he saw: a \$100 bill tucked into the ticket. "I broke down and cried in my car," Javier said. "What else could I do?" "He helped me out when I needed it most," Javier said. "I'll never forget him. I saw the light of Jesus Christ in that man."

There are lots of reasons to like that story, including that someone totally unexpected shows up and gives a gift that's unanticipated. That story has parallels with the Gospel story about the arrival of Jesus the Messiah, and

the wise men in the gospel according to Matthew 2:1-12. Here's the story: **1** *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 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."* **3** *When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:6 '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.'"* **7** *Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 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."* **9** *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. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The wise men were astrologers. They were also gentiles, pagans, outsiders because they were not Jewish. There's nothing in this text to suggest there were only three. But, that's what we've generally assumed because there were only three gifts. In the early church, the church believed there were twelve of them.

Also, some Bible scholars have suggested there could have been women in the group who visited Jesus. Were there? I don't know. But, I admit I'm fascinated by the possibility. You may've noticed, Joseph is not a part of the story of the wise men's visit. Only Jesus and Mary are mentioned.

Thus, it seems to me the best argument for there having been wise women is that, in the Middle East, it would've been inconceivable for a woman to be in the presence of men without there being other women around. And the word used for wise men to make it masculine can be used inclusively, in the same way the English word "men" often includes women. I love one woman's take on it: "What if the three wise men were women? They'd have asked for directions, arrived on time, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts."

So, how old was Jesus when the wise men/wise women arrived? Some biblical scholars think he was just weeks old. Others suggest he was around two. This much we do know, contrary to all of the times you may've seen it portrayed that the wise men came to the manger, it's simply not true. When the wise men/wise women come, Jesus is no longer staying in a barn. Verse eleven tells us that "*On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.*"

The wise men/wise women, verse two tells us, "observed [Jesus's] star." So, they came to worship the new king in Jerusalem. And, what's their first question? "*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews.*" And, don't miss the significance of the term "King of the Jews." Jesus was born being known as the King of the Jews. He also died that way. Listen to Matthew 27:37: "Over Jesus's head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

Some say the star was a comet, or a conjunction between some of the planets. It doesn't matter. What matters is that the wise men, the pagans, followed the light to where it led them: to Jesus.

So, a king is born in Bethlehem. But, there's already a king there; and there can be only one king at a time. So what does the king whose already there want to do with the new king? He wants to kill him. He wants to extinguish the light of Christ. It's a tyrant versus a toddler.

In verse 16, we read that Herod "sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men." The church calendar marks this event on December 28. It's called the Feast of the Holy Innocents, in remembrance of the massacre of young children in Bethlehem by King Herod in his attempt to kill the baby Jesus.

It's a party-pooper of a story. Certainly not appropriate for young children. Thankfully, few today remember that, in some European communities prior to the 17th century, the day began with parents spanking their children to remind them of the suffering of those infants.

In addition, note that in verses one through twelve, not only is Joseph never mentioned, God is never mentioned either. Not even once. God's in the background though.

With those comments, please allow me to ask you a couple questions: First, I started with saying this sermon is about light. It's about the star that led the wise men, and perhaps wise women, to Jesus Christ. It's about the light of Jesus Christ. When have you seen the light of Jesus Christ?

Back in my early twenties, I was engaged to be married. We broke up. It was one of the lowest points in my life. My pastor's wife at the time, Joyce Caldwell loved on me, prayed for me, and encouraged me. It was largely because of that dear woman that my heart started to heal and I felt called to seminary to prepare for ministry. It was in that precious pastor's wife that I saw the light of Jesus Christ. And, that light led me to a deeper relationship with God. And, like the wise men, who after having been with Jesus, verse twelve tells us "*left for their own country by another road.*" After experiencing the light of Jesus Christ through Joyce's ministry to me, I too, ended up taking a different road. My plans of a career in business changed.

After seeing the light of Jesus Christ, I took a different road and went to seminary to prepare for ministry. I've sat beside the bed of a dying saint. Sue's body racked with pain. When in those final fleeting seconds of her

life, as she transitioned from this life to the next, Sue whispers Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. There, I saw the light of Jesus in Sue, even in the darkness of death.

I've talked to some of my sisters and brothers here in this holy place. Unhoused. Beset with one misfortune after another. One I'm thinking of, as I listened to her story, I had to fight back the tears. She has every reason to be bitter. But instead, she tells me how blessed she is to have found Triune. I saw the light of Jesus in my precious sister. And, it strengthened my own faith.

What about you? When have you seen the light of Jesus Christ? Did you take a different road as a result of it? Perhaps some of your memories of when you saw the light of Jesus Christ happened long ago. And you put the memory away. But, this morning it's come back to your mind. Savor those memories. Yes to your wonderful memories.

Allow me now this second question. It's a deeply personal, spiritual, and important question: when have others seen the light of Jesus in you? How has the light of Christ shone through you, revealing God's deep and

abiding love to someone else? Many United Methodist Churches, I understand, begin each new year renewing their baptismal promises. It's called the Wesley Covenant Service. Do you remember your baptism promises?

Triune, having been a United Methodist Church earlier in our history, inherited their baptismal font from the Triune United Methodist Church. If you've ever looked at it closely, you may've noticed that it has eight sides. Seven sides represent the seven days of Creation, when God created all that is, and then rested on the seventh day. But what happened on the eighth day? Well, God got up and got back to work.

The eighth side of the baptismal font represents the day you were made new in your own baptism. You represent the eighth day of creation. You and your baptism promises are a part of God's creation.

The wonderful Georgia pastor and seminary professor Truett Gannon once said, "Few things are more inspiring than to see a person standing in someone's winter, helping them believe in a better springtime to come." That's what Joyce Caldwell did for me, and it has made all the difference. Her standing in my winter led me to go to seminary and is how I'm standing here today.

Now, I'm wondering who needs for me to see something in them that they don't yet see? I wonder who could use a word of encouragement spoken into their winter season when they lack that belief in their own selves? Perhaps someone will see the light of Jesus Christ in you because of your encouragement. Your standing in someone's winter, helping them believe in a better springtime to come. Jesus's light shining through you.

I heard on a podcast recently about a man who'd served in the military. He said he knew from his time doing medevac flights that the mere sound of a helicopter approaching can improve the vital signs of a person on the verge of death. Wouldn't we all like to be the sound of a helicopter for someone who's just about ready to give up?

I love the story of the Roman Catholic Priest who stepped to the microphone one Sunday morning and he was about to say what he said every Sunday, "The Lord be with you!" And the congregation would respond, "And, also with you." But on that Sunday, the microphone was malfunctioning, so instead of saying, "The Lord be with you," the priest said, "There's something wrong with this microphone!" And the congregation responded, "And also with you!"

Truth be told, there's something wrong with us all. That's why we need a Savior. That's why we need someone to show us how to live. That's why we need Jesus Christ.

An African boy listened carefully as his teacher explained why Christians give presents to each other on Christmas day. "The gift is an expression of our joy over the birth of Jesus and our friendship for each other," she said.

When Christmas day came, the boy brought to the teacher a seashell of lustrous beauty. "Where did you ever find such a beautiful shell?" the teacher asked as she gently fingered the gift. The boy told her that there was only one spot where such extraordinary shells could be found. When named the place, a certain bay several miles away, the teacher was left speechless.

"Why...why, it's gorgeous...wonderful, but you shouldn't have gone all that way to get a gift for me."

His eyes brightening, the boy answered, "Long walk part of gift."

So, God sent God's only begotten son on the long walk to earth. The long walk was a part of the gift. God sent God's only begotten son on the long walk to earth so that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but

have eternal life. But, that's not all! It's not just about eternal life. Far from it! Jesus is much more than fire insurance, Heaven or Hell, for us.

God also sent Jesus so that he could teach us how to live. Even today, more than 2000 years after the events we read about in Matthew's gospel, the world is still looking, still seeking for the one who can light the way forward for them.

Sisters and Brothers, there's light in your darkness, and it's time for you to shine. Will you resolve, perhaps it can be your must-be-kept New Years resolution? Will you commit to Christ this morning to be the one to stand in someone's winter, helping them believe in a better springtime to come? To be the sound of a helicopter for someone? To make a long walk for someone else in 2022?

We live in a world hungry for "life as it is supposed to be" and many will look for it all their lives. Jesus appeared to show us what that life looks like and set us free to live it. Don't let the Herods of the world, be in people or circumstances, extinguish the light of Jesus Christ in you. It's up to us to shine that light of Jesus Christ into the lives of others.

THIS IS THE GOSPEL.

THIS IS THE GOOD NEWS.

AND, IT'S TRUE.

THANKS BE TO GOD. AMEN.