

“Where Does the Light Go?”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday of Christmas
January 5, 2020

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 60:1-6

¹Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

New Testament Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They 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.’” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.” ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.



Sermon: “Where Does the Light Go?”

Where does the light go when you close the refrigerator door? Does it stay on? Does it go off? As a kid I remember opening and closing the door of our refrigerator really fast to try and find out. My dad caught me once and asked what I was doing and when I told him he explained to me that yes, the light does go on and off when you open and shut the door.

When I asked him “how?” He replied in all seriousness, “Well, I’ll let you in on a little secret: there’s a little man that lives inside there and he flips a switch on and off when you open and shut the door.” Then he walked away. And I spent the next 30 minutes opening and closing the refrigerator door trying to catch the little man flipping the switch on and off. At Christmas, light is a big deal. It seems like most people decorate their tree with lights and many people deck out their houses and yards with lights, too. Clark Griswold decorated his house with 10,000 imported Italian twinkle lights requiring the power company to switch to the emergency nuclear auxiliary.¹

It’s a tradition in our family to go out for milk shakes and then drive around town looking at all the cool Christmas lights and trying to find those individuals who have done to their homes what we have come to term “Griswolding.” And sometimes we’ll swing through the light displays at Alum Creek or the Columbus Zoo or Franklin Conservatory, too.

On Christmas Eve, several neighborhoods around Columbus line their streets with luminaries that burn quietly in the night and the culminating event of our own Christmas Eve services here at Overbrook Church is lighting candles and the passing of candlelight around the sanctuary.

Lights are an important part of the Christmas tradition, largely because of the star of Bethlehem by whose light the magi were guided across the wilderness to the birthplace of the baby Jesus. Matthew tells us that when the magi had set out from the palace of King Herod “there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.”² But what happens to the light after Christmas is over? Where do the lights go?

Oh, I know; in a very literal sense those strings of lights get packed up in boxes and placed in the attic or the garage where, over the next 10-11 months, no matter how carefully you’ve stored them, they will slowly and inexplicably twist

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and tie themselves into an almost impossible knot that you will have to untangle once again next Christmas. But I'm not speaking literally here. At Christmas the light of Christ shines brightly, even in the hearts of those who do not know him.

At Christmas we hear people speak of "peace on earth" and "good will to all" in terms that make it sound as though they really believe those things to be possible. And charitable giving is, statistically speaking, at its highest point of the year at Christmas. *Network for Giving*, an agency that tracks such things, estimates that more than 30% of all charitable giving occurs in the month of December.³ Now, granted, at least some of that is folks trying to beat the end of the year to ensure their gifts count for that year's taxes. But people genuinely seem to be more generous at Christmas.

Each year our hometown paper in South Carolina sponsors the Brighter Christmas Fund which raises money for needy families at Christmas.-Like the single mom of two who lost her house in a fire just a few weeks before Christmas,⁴ or the woman making just \$2,000 a month who took in her 2 and 3 year old nieces when their parents were no longer able to care for them.⁵ If you pay attention, you'll hear stories like these all year long, but at Christmas they seem to take on a certain sense of urgency and people respond. Last year, the Brighter Christmas Fund raised over \$70,000.00 to help families in need.⁶

But it's not just money. In Dayton, there's a group of tow truck drivers who invite all first responders and companies that own vehicles with flashing lights to come and park outside the Dayton Children's Hospital at an appointed day and time and they all honk their horns and flash their lights at the same time to create a cool Christmas display for all the kids who can't be home for Christmas.⁷

There was the Maryland woman who apparently eats at Chick-Fil-A a lot. I mean, A Lot. She saved up her loyalty points for over a year and had accumulated over 50,000, so this Christmas she cashed them all in for 100 chicken sandwiches that she then took to share with members of her community who were homeless.⁸

Then there was the security officer I read about who worked the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day shifts back-to-back because he didn't have a family and he wanted his co-workers who did have families to be able to spend Christmas with them.⁹

The Christmas season is a season of light; a season for making the world a brighter place. There is a warmth; a glow that fills the world at Christmas. People are more generous; more welcoming; more forgiving. As Bill Murray says in the movie *Scrooged*, at Christmas we all "act a little nicer" and "smile a little easier" and "For a couple of hours out of the whole year, we are the people that we always hoped we would be!"¹⁰ It is a time when we come to better understand the words of the Gospel of John "in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."¹¹ But after Christmas, where does the light go?



The magi travelled from very far away, guided by the light of the star, seeking the child who had been born King of the Jews. Scholars and believers have often discussed the nature of this star. Was it a comet or a super nova? Does it refer to a constellation or the conjunction of Jupiter and Venus in the night sky? Matthew seems to suggest something supernatural; a light moving across the sky, leading the wise men until "it stopped over the place where the child was." The Magi were led by the light of the star; led to a place and a moment in time when they experienced divine revelation. There, before them, in the light of this star was the child Jesus, the baby born as a savior and a king. And after worshipping him (paying him homage) they presented him with their gifts. Then, Matthew tells us, they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they departed by another way.

But what became of the star? Did it remain for a time to guide other worshippers to the Christ child? Did it move on again or just go out? Did the supernova fade; the planets move out of alignment? Did the comet pass out of view? One legend says that the star fell into a well in Bethlehem where it can still be seen by "those whose hearts are pure."¹²

But for Matthew, the star itself is no longer important to the story. The Magi do not need it to find their way home. But though the star is no longer a part of the story, the *light* is. When the Magi looked upon Jesus, worshipped him and gave to him of themselves, the light of the star that guided them to Christ, became a light burning within their hearts that continued to guide them long after the star was no longer visible. The light of the star led them to Jesus, but the light of Jesus led them forever after.



Another Christmas has come and gone. We've put away the decorations and have turned our thoughts back towards jobs and plans for the coming months. But if we have seen the light of Christ; if we have basked in its warmth and

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experienced the sense of joy and goodwill that comes with the celebration of the birth of Christ, we cannot simply return to lives lived fumbling through the darkness.

Once we have worshipped at the manger and seen the face of Jesus, we can't walk away unchanged. The lights of Christmas have been put out, but the light of Christ still shines in the hearts of those who know him. It is that light which guides us forward along our daily journeys, just as it guided the magi before us. And we choose whether or not we will be led by that light. If we are guided by that light then we are seeking to share the love and peace and good will that is so prevalent during the holiday season, every day of the year.

I hear so often during the Christmas season that it's sad when a person is lonely *at Christmas*; it's a shame for someone to be hungry *at Christmas*"; it's a tragedy when someone loses a family member *at Christmas*." Well, the truth of the matter is that loneliness and hunger and loss are tragic *any* time.

The light of Christmas guides us to Christ; the light of Christ guides us on the journey beyond Christmas showing us the places where love and peace and joy are needed; leading us to the people who need care and companionship; illuminating the places where love and understanding are in short supply; bringing light to the dark places in our own lives where we sometimes find ourselves when times are difficult. That light guides us to the places where we are needed, but it also comforts us when we find ourselves alone in the dark.

After Christmas is over, where does the light go? It goes inside of us, burning brightly, lighting the path of discipleship to which we have all been called, beckoning us to follow where Christ leads.

"Arise, shine; for your light has come!"¹³

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. Dir. Jeremiah Chechik. By John Hughes. Perf. Chevy Chase, Beverly D'Angelo, Juliette Lewis, Johnny Galecki. Warner Brothers/Hughes Entertainment, 1989. DVD.

² Matthew 2:9, NRSV

³ Online Giving Statistics : Charity Navigator." *Charity Navigator: Your Guide to Intelligent Giving*. Charity Navigator, n.d. Web. 05 Jan. 2015. <http://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=content.view&cpid=1360#.VJH-FDHF_T9>.

⁴"Mother and Her Two Children Lose Home, Belongings in Fire." *Anderson Independent Mail*. Scripps Media, Inc., 12 Dec. 2014. Web. 05 Jan. 2015. <http://www.independentmail.com/news/mother-and-her-two-children-lose-home-belongings-in-fire_20712464>.

⁵ "Woman Takes in Her Two Great Nieces to Raise." *Anderson Independent Mail*. Scripps Media, Inc., 16 Dec. 2014. Web. 05 Jan. 2015. <http://www.independentmail.com/news/woman-takes-in-her-two-great-nieces-to-raise_03190279>.

⁶ Pierre, Kathy. "Brighter Christmas Fund begins awarding families while raising money for next year." *Independent Mail*, 15 Nov. 2018, www.independentmail.com/story/news/2018/11/15/brighter-christmas-fund-raising-money-awarding-families-need/2002568002.

⁷ "Christmas Eve Good Night Lights." 5 Jan. 2020, www.facebook.com/events/dayton-childrens-hospital/christmas-eve-good-night-lights/2169563123137302.

⁸ "A Maryland woman gathering her Chick-fil-A points for more than a year and on the Monday before Christmas she cashed in all 50,000 to help feed the homeless for the holidays." reddit, 5 Jan. 2020, www.reddit.com/r/HumansBeingBros/comments/eh9b6k/a_maryland_woman_gathering_her_chickfila_points.

⁹ "Redditor sacrifices his Christmas for co workers with children." reddit, 5 Jan. 2020, www.reddit.com/r/HumansBeingBros/comments/efgi3j/redditor_sacrifices_his_christmas_for_co_workers.

¹⁰ *Scrooged*. Dir. Richard Donner. By Mitch Glazer and Michael O'Donoghue. Perf. Bill Murray, Karen Allen, John Forsythe. Paramount Pictures/Mirage Productions, 1988. DVD.

¹¹ John 1:4-5, NRSV

¹² Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. 31. Print.

¹³ Isaiah 60:1, NRSV