

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, CT 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: 1/6/2013

Sermon Title: **Where The Star Stops**

Scripture: **Matthew 2:1-12**

Pastor: **Rev. Alida Ward**

Every day – every single day – David and I thank God for this church, for the privilege of serving this church – for the amazing blessing of ending up in a place like this. This is a church which is beautiful inside and out – lovely to look at, yes, but made even lovelier by the people within these walls. We are really lucky to be here, and we know it. But I in particular am incredibly lucky to be here. You have no idea how close I came to not getting this job. I'm not talking about messing up the interview, although I did say some stupid stuff, and I'm not talking about the sermon that I had to preach right here in order for the congregation to vote me in, although honestly that was not a great sermon & you were really nice to give me the job anyway.

I'm talking about almost not getting this job because I could not FIND this church. I mean literally I couldn't find it. It was a Sunday afternoon, long long ago, and the deal was that I was to meet Ryan Herrington and Kathy Thackaberry here at the church, where they would give me a tour, and then the whole committee would interview me. I had driven down from New Haven, where I was a student, in the pouring rain – got off at Exit 21, with a map of Fairfield spread out next to me, headed up Burr Street, and turned onto Old Academy Road.

Now, I'm not sure if everyone's familiar with what happens when you turn onto Old Academy Road from Burr Street. Here's what happens. You find yourself on a lovely, stone-wall-lined country lane, barely wide enough for a couple Mini Coopers, and you meander along that for less than half a mile and then

Old Academy Road ends. It ends. That's it. And in that half mile – there is no church. Maybe a dozen houses –no church. So there I was, on that rainy spring day many years ago, trying to get to my interview at Greenfield Hill Church on Old Academy Road, and I am on Old Academy Road, and there is no church. I must have driven back and forth on that half-mile of road ten times. Easily.

I actually drove into people's driveways to see if somehow the church was in someone's back yard. Maybe it wasn't actually as large as it looked in the pictures, maybe it was hidden behind one of these pretty big houses? After a while, inevitably, I began to cry. There was clearly no church on Old Academy road. Maybe the whole thing was just a cruel joke, I thought, and someone would soon leap out with a video camera and tell me that I'd been pranked. But who does that to a seminary student?

Finally, in tears, and abandoning all hope, I drove away. Turned off Old Academy onto Mine Hill and began to head north, still crying. If you know your local geography, you know what happened then. Driving up Mine Hill, I discovered – yes – the other half of Old Academy Road. Were there really so few available street names in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that they couldn't have come up with two separate names for two separate streets? Because *they are two separate streets*.

But there it was – the rest of Old Academy Road. And rising above the hillside, a sight that filled me with profound relief: a steeple, a gleaming white steeple as glorious to see as any star. And beneath the steeple, a very patient Kathy Thackaberry and Ryan Herrington, whom I still thank on a regular basis for waiting for me. I still remember what it was like to see this steeple, to know that I had arrived where I was supposed to be; I still remember that incredible relief, and another feeling, too – a sense of deepest joy, a feeling, truly, of journey's end.

The Bible tells us that that's exactly what the wise men felt, what the Kings from the East felt. Absolute, overwhelming joy. It's my favorite line in the whole story, and it's a great story from start to finish. But there's this wonderful line: When they saw that the star

had stopped, the story says, they were overwhelmed with joy. When they saw that the star had stopped they were overwhelmed with joy. Journey's end. Deepest relief. But more than that: they knew that where the star stopped there God was present. They knew that where the star stopped, there they would find God incarnate, there they would find the birth of hope, the dawn of love, the presence of peace. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. So here's my question to you on this Three Kings Day, this Epiphany Sunday. Where does the star stop for you? Which is to say, where do you find the presence of God, the nearness of Christ, the gift of hope?

Because the star still leads and we still journey and those places where it stops for each of us are those places in our lives where we are in the presence of Love, where we know ourselves to be in Christ's own presence.

There was once a great, great Christian writer and teacher named Henri Nouwen, a priest. He spoke around the country, inspired thousands. His books were on the bedside table of his devoted followers. I heard him speak just once, and I was moved to tears; I felt the star stop there for me -- by his gentle words and compassionate wisdom I knew myself to be in Christ's own presence. And then one day he stopped. Henri Nouwen quit. He quit writing, teaching, speaking, traveling. Instead, baffling everyone, he went to work in a community home for the mentally handicapped as an aide. He was assigned a patient, a young man in his twenties named Adam, who could not speak, and could not walk or eat without help. Henri Nouwen, gifted spiritual leader, now spent his days feeding, changing and bathing a man who could barely respond to his love and care.

After a time, a friend of his from Harvard University came to visit, and Nouwen wrote of their encounter in his journal: *"Henri," the friend said, "why are you spending your time here?" He was not only disturbed, but angry. "How could you leave your work, where you were such an inspiration to so many, to give your time and energy to this Adam?" ... I didn't answer my friend's questions,* wrote Nouwen. *I didn't know how to explain that with Adam I knew a*

*sacred presence, I saw the face of God. With Adam I realized that incarnation is much more than something that took place long ago in Bethlehem. It occurs whenever people meet each other in God's name... I have heard about and read about the life of Jesus, but I was never able to touch or see him. I was able to touch Adam. I saw him and I touched his life. I dressed him, walked him to the breakfast table, and helped him bring the spoon to his mouth. And what was said of Jesus I could say of Adam: "He who touched him was healed."*

For Henri Nouwen, in whose presence **I** felt the star stop, for him, the star stopped over the home of a young man named Adam who brought healing and hope to this gentle priest who had himself brought healing to so many. Where does the star stop for you?

Tomorrow afternoon, around 4:00, the star will stop over a church in Bridgeport, where about a dozen of our high school kids, or more, will gather to make dinner for the hungry and homeless. For two hours they will cook and serve and clean up. And I never have any trouble finding plenty of kids to help; often times it's more than we even need – because for them, for each teenager who comes and helps, that church, that kitchen, those tables full of people, are where the star stops. That place is where they know themselves to be in the presence of Christ, where they see the face of Christ in everyone they meet.

And last night .... last night the star stopped over one brick building in downtown Fairfield, where a whole bunch of kids from this church, with their friends, came together to grieve for Newtown, to celebrate the power of hope, and to offer the gift of music to lift us up and bind us together in love. It was the brainchild of one of our Confirmands, Cameron Luther, whose brother Niles, as you know, is a gifted cellist. Why don't you organize a concert for Newtown, Niles? said Cameron. And three weeks later, there we all were at the Fairfield Theater Company. Two sold-out shows last night. And I need to tell you –if you were there you know that this truth -- I need to tell you that the young people of this church brought Christ's own presence into that place last night. Liam Reynolds, confirmed here four years ago, stepped on stage with the members of his

band, all of them from Newtown:

“It’s not easy for us to make music,” they said, “but tonight we do it out of love.” And they blew us away. Meghan Baer, our Meghan, sang a song of heartbreaking sweetness and power, a song of love. Alex Beyer’s fingers flew across the piano keys; Niles’ fingers danced across the cello strings. Jordan Lauf and Jerelyn Luther, our Jordan, our Jerelyn, well, they preached, each of them. Better sermons than we preach, David whispered to me, and he’s right - - they were. Jordan told us that what happened on December 14 was without meaning, but that everything that has happened since has shown life’s truest meaning, our truest purpose: to love, to bear each other’s burdens, to be people of kindness. Jerelyn’s speech urged us forward, called us to acts of compassion, justice, and goodness. And Katherine Waugh, our Katherine, drew the evening to a close and lifted us to new heights by singing *You Raise Me up*, with Alex on piano and Niles on the cello, and the voices of two dozen others behind her, our kids, the children of Fairfield and Newtown together.

The star stopped over Sanford Street last night, and the presence of Christ was made known in the faces of young people who have grown up in this church seeing love at work all around them, and now themselves being love to others. The star stopped over Sanford Street last night and God’s own spirit was alive in that place, and I felt blessed and I felt proud.

Where does the star stop for you? I began this sermon by telling you of the moment I found this place, this church, that sense of overwhelming joy. Our hope, of course, is that you, too, know that joy in being here – that this place, this steepled Sanctuary is a place where the star stops for you. That you know Christ’s own presence in this place, in prayer and song, in word and spirit, in bread and cup. We hope the star stops here for you. But not just here. The point of being here, really, is so that when we leave this place our eyes are open to wherever it is the star stops. Our eyes are open to see those places where Christ himself awaits us. Our hearts are open to feel his nearness. Our spirits are open, wide open, to know that overwhelming joy the wise men knew, the joy of loving and

being loved, of serving and being served, of giving  
and being given to.

Watch for the star. Stop where it stops. And enter in. Enter in to  
that place  
of joy.

Amen.