

Where the Star stops for you

Matthew 2:1-12

You might be wondering why you just heard a Christmas story for our scripture,

or why we sang a Christmas carol to begin our service.

Christmas was two weeks ago – everyone’s back to work and school, right?

But in church life we’re actually only just now wrapping up Christmas.

Friday the 6th was the 12th day of Christmas, or Three Kings’ Day –

by tradition, the day that the Wise Men finally made it to the manger,

having followed that star a long, long time.

So today, I’m spending some time still in Christmas mode.

Today I’m thinking about that star that stopped over a stable.

I’m going to start with a story.

So, 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.

We feel pretty darn lucky.

But I in particular am *incredibly* lucky to be here.

You have no idea how close I came to not getting this job.

I almost lost this job not because I messed up the interview.

No, I almost lost this job

because I literally couldn't *find* this church.

For my first interview here,

I was supposed to meet Ryan Herrington and Kathy Thackaberry right here in the Sanctuary.

Ryan and Kathy are both still members here,
and they both remember how this all went down.

I was still a student up at Yale Divinity School at the time,
so I came driving down 95 in my little Geo Prizm –
there's a car you've probably forgotten existed –
and I got off where it said **Fairfield**,
and immediately I realized I was in trouble.

I didn't know exactly where Greenfield Hill Church was.

I guess I somehow thought it would be obvious when I got here.

I thought Fairfield was really small.

Also, I was young and stupid.

Amazingly, I found a map of Connecticut in my glove compartment –

remember maps? --

and it actually had enough Fairfield detail to show that Old Academy Road,

where I knew the church was located,

intersects with Burr Street.

So I got myself to Burr,

and turned left onto Old Academy.

What happens when you do that -- you may know this –

- is that you find yourself on a lovely, stone-wall-lined country lane,

which ends in less than half a mile.

And in that half mile – there is no church.

So there I was, on that Sunday afternoon 34 years ago,

trying to get to my interview at Greenfield Hill Church on Old Academy Road,

and I am on Old Academy Road,

but there is no church.

The level of panic I felt at that point is indescribable.

I drove up and down that road looking for anything resembling a church.

I actually went up people's driveways peering into their backyards;

'cause some of the houses looked big enough to me to hide a church behind.

And I know you're thinking that I should have just used my phone,

but this was the dark ages,

we had no phones.

I couldn't just text Ryan and Kathy and say "OMG, totally lost, LOL".

After a while, inevitably, I began to cry.

I was either in the wrong town,

or the wrong state,

or I had been pranked by someone who really hated seminary students.

All hope abandoned, I drove on, because there was nothing left to do.

I turned off the end of Old Academy onto Mine Hill and began to head north, aimlessly.

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 18th 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.

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.

That sense of deepest joy is what our scripture story says the wise men felt
when they finally got to *their* journey's end.

Absolute, overwhelming joy.

It's my favorite line in the whole story,

this wonderful line:

When they saw that the star had stopped, the story says,
they were overwhelmed with joy.

Sure, they were relieved that their long journey was done.

But much more than that:

the Wise Men knew that where the star stopped,

that's where God was.

That's where the Messiah was.

They knew that where the star stopped they would find God incarnate,
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 on this Epiphany Sunday, I'm thinking about this –

I'm thinking about those places where the star stops for each of us.

I'm asking where are those places, those moments,

when we know we are in the presence of God,

and we feel that joy the wise men felt?

Where does the star stop for each of us?

A week from now, I'm getting on a plane to fly to a place

where the star stops for me.

After three long years of not being able to visit the people we care for in

India,

I'll be heading to the state of Telangana in south India.

But it's not just me – Roni Widmer will be journeying with me.

We're going as Board members of Friends of Christ in India, yes –

we're going as Greenfield Hill Church members, representing the love and prayers that all of you give to the people we serve there.

But we're also going, Roni and I,

because the star stops for us over a slum neighborhood in the city of

Hyderabad,

and stops again over a school in the town of Khammam,

and over a home for the elderly in the village of Gollapudi.

In all those places,

Roni and I will find the presence of Christ.

Because in all those places, Roni and I will be witnesses to those who are offering hope --

offering hope to children of the slums in the form of books and tutors and a warm evening meal –

offering hope to widows who have no other family but our family,

and who just want to live out their years in safety and peace.

Roni I will witness love at work in those places,

we will see Christ in those places –

and because of that, the star stops there for us.

Those are places where we know ourselves to be in the presence of God,

where we, like the wise men, are overwhelmed with great joy.

Where does the star stop for you?

You don't actually have to fly to the other side of the world.

One of you has told me that, these days,

the star stops for you over the crib where your granddaughter sleeps.

That the days that she is in your care are days of greatest blessing.

In the giving and receiving of love,

you know yourself to be in a holy place.

That's where the star stops for you right now,

and the joy is overwhelming.

Or maybe the star stops over a bake sale table.

Really.

The Girl Scouts who are here today have been baking and creating so that they can raise funds for toys –

toys for kids like them who come here with nothing,

refugee children from Ukraine and the Congo and Afghanistan.

And I don't know about you, but when I'm in the presence of kids

doing their darnedest to help other kids,

I feel like Christ is pretty close at hand.

I feel the presence of love and hope.

Those children they're helping are children of the refugee families
that you've been resettling for years now.

Volunteers from this church have been working week after week
to scrub and clean and arrange apartments,
hauling in furniture and stocking food.

And for each one of those volunteers,

they're there because the star has stopped over an apartment building
where they find their truest joy:

the joy of being Christ's hands and heart for a family coming to *their*
journey's end.

Last Monday, on the New Year's holiday,

the star stopped at 755 Clinton Avenue in Bridgeport.

That's Calvary St George's Church,

where we've been providing dinners for the hungry on first Mondays since 1997.

David and I arrived with a car full of 50 bagged dinners.

dinners that our high school kids had put together,

baked the cookies for, organized, like they do each month.

The star was stopped over a crowd of people eagerly waiting for us,

greeting us with delight,

helping us carry the bags.

And in that church hall was surely the presence of Christ,

in the giving and the receiving,

in the laughter and the love.

Sometimes the star stops over a mini golf course.

Or a bowling alley.

Really.

Last summer a group from this church organized a mini golf outing which

brought together residents of Pivot Ministries

and members of this church.

As you know, the men who live at Pivot are those who have made the decision to turn their lives around – hence ‘Pivot’ – leaving addiction behind.

But they leave other things behind, too – living in the center means that they’re away from family for a long time. So our folks thought it would be good to just be family together, and off they all went to mini golf.

For the simple delight of being together, and laughing together, and remembering that we are all sisters and brothers.

So yes, on that day, the star stopped over a mini golf course in Shelton where a whole bunch of people were together as the body of Christ in that place, in that moment.

And next month – they’re going bowling.

You’re invited.

The star will be stopped overhead.

From bowling alleys to India,
wherever it is that we encounter the living Christ,

the star is shining over us.

Whether it's in fellowship that shows what unity looks like,
whether it's in service that allows us to be Christ's hands and heart,
whether it's in offering care to another in absolute love,
or simply seeing God's grace in the face of another,
all of those are the moments when we know ourselves to be in the presence
of the holy.

All of those are moments like the one the three kings experienced,
when they stepped into a dark and crowded stable
and were knocked to their knees by the presence of Love.

We need those moments, all of us, we need them.

The blessing is that they're there for us to find.

Because the star still leads.

We still journey and the star still leads --

and those places where it stops

are where we are offered the presence of Love.

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 one of the places where the star stops for you.

Our hope is that you know Christ's own presence in this place,

in prayer and song, in word and spirit,

We pray that 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.

So that 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. Amen.