

December 2, 2007

The Christmas Story
According to Dr. Luke

Luke 2:1-20

The Christmas stories are among the favorites in all the Bible. They evoke feelings and memories in us in ways that few other stories can do.

Christmas is the most widely celebrated holiday in the world and the two stories, one in Matthew and the other in Luke, are at the center of Christmas. Christians and non-Christians alike know about the star and stable, shepherds and sages. At the center of the stories lies a baby, lying in a manger, far from home.

Mary Jane and I propose this year to take a close look at each of these Christmas stories. We won't mix and match them. This morning we'll listen to Luke, the Gentile, the doctor, the author of the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, the one who never saw Jesus in the flesh but who compiled out of all the stories told about him an orderly account for the lovers of God.

Next Sunday Mary Jane will lead us in listening to a very different story - the one in Matthew. Matthew and Luke do not tell the same story at all. We harmonize them, we've done that all our lives, we hardly know which comes from what. There's no great harm in harmonizing the stories, except that we don't hear either one of them very well.

For example: Do you know that Matthew has no angels and no shepherds? Do you know that in Matthew Mary never says even one word? Matthew tells a wonderful story, but it is not the same story we have in Luke.

Mary Jane and I believe that if we can hear each story for what it's worth we will see Jesus in a new light. The stories are not only about comfort and joy, they are also about the powers of this world political and subversive. And they are richer and more challenging than we have first believed.

Kay Scott is teaching a short term Sunday School class on the brand new book, *The First Christmas*, by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. It may not be too late to get into her class. Mary Jane and I are using the same book as background text for our Advent sermons this year. It will be quite a ride. If you remember Lent last year when we traced the steps of Jesus that last week in Jerusalem, you may also remember that we used a book by Borg and Crossan, *The Last Week*. This is the sequel, that was the ending, this is the beginning.

Although I read today's story from the New Revised Standard translation of the Bible, if you grew up in the church, it sounded a bit strange to you, I imagine. Part of the power of the story is its familiarity. You probably grew up with it in the King James. I did. The worship service we change the least around here is the Christmas Eve service when the sanctuary is filled to capacity and we hear the prophecies from Isaiah and the gospel from Luke. For many of us those shepherds should abide out in the field and the babe should be wrapped in swaddling clothes, and as Jim Gaunt often reminds us, "Those shepherds had better be sore afraid!"

One reason we need to look behind the familiarity to the deep meanings is because those meanings are so important for our faith. Some people have

trouble with Christianity because they can no longer accept the veracity of all the events in the story. Were there angels hovering in the night sky? Are the stories fact or fable? If they are fable, then is our faith in trouble? If they are fact, is our science in trouble?

In our modern world we often think that truth is what can be verified. Truth is the facts. If something isn't factual it isn't true. That's what people have come to believe in the past several hundred years. And the facts rest on natural laws of cause and effect. Modern thinking has trouble imagining hovering angels singing to shepherds who are sore afraid. And that makes the claims of Christianity questionable in the minds of many.

Some Christians believe that if Jesus wasn't conceived by the Holy Spirit and that Mary was a virgin then he wasn't God's son and not divine at all. So many of us just cannot afford to press the Christmas stories very deeply or we'll be over our heads in dangerous theological waters.

It's not necessary to drown in those waters. The way Borg and Crossan suggest reading the stories is not as fact and not as fable, but as parable. Parables are stories that teach important truth, but the events of the parable may never have happened. The language of parables is more than literal. If we get hung up on the facts of a parable we may miss the meaning. Was there really a Good Samaritan on the Jericho road? Who knows. What we do know is that Jesus told a story about a man who showed compassion and we've been learning it ever since.

In the ancient world the phrase, "Son of God", as everybody knew, meant Caesar. The Empire carefully taught that Caesar was the son of God. Caesar was the one to bring peace on earth. Caesar was the Lord and savior of the world. Caesar was Redeemer and Liberator. And Luke comes along with a beautiful story, like a parable, saying, "No Caesar. You are wrong. You are not Son of God. You are not the one to bring peace on earth. And you are not Lord and Savior of the world." Luke, in his own day, is either engaged in low lampoon or high treason. And Rome was not laughing. See, we have lost, over the years, the sharp edge of the titles that both Luke and Matthew take from the Empire and give to Jesus.

When we read the Christmas story we need to be aware of the Empire grinding against Judaism. In the first century the contest was between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Rome. Both Judaism and Rome had a vision of the future of the world. Both thought that they were near the end of time. Rome won peace through victory over all enemies. Biblical prophecies look forward to the time when there will be no war, no mourning, no crying, no dying anymore for all the peoples will stream to the holy mountain of God and God will cleanse the earth of all injustice. Jesus was about God's vision, not Rome's.

But Rome was the superpower of the age, whose buildings awed the world, whose armies subjugated the nations, and whose wealth drained the economies of many nations. Rome had 28 legions, each composed of 5 to 6 thousand fighting engineers. First they conquered. Then they build all-weather ports, roads and bridges to solidify their control. Political

domination in place, they set out to build trade and commerce - using Roman coins - completing the domination of the lands and establishment of the empire.

Into that world, says Luke, was a miraculous birth of a divine child, God's true son. Into that world has God scattered the proud, brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. Into that world will God fill the hungry with good things and the rich will be sent empty away. Incredible! As Rome plunged into civil war, with its armies sapped by disease, desertion and despair and rulers committing suicide those prophecies about the kingdom of God began to take on a richer meaning.

Shall we follow the one scriptures and Christians call Lord, Savior, maker of peace, Son of God. Shall we dare to follow him into rejection of violence as the path to salvation - for the healing of the nations? Shall we learn from him the creation of peace through justice: focusing on what he said were most important: justice, mercy, and faith. O come, all ye faithful, O come let us adore him, Christ, the Lord!

The First Christmas According to Matthew: The New Moses
12-09-07
By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Does that Christmas story sound at all familiar to you? You've probably at least heard of the wise men and the star. But did you notice that Matthew's story of the first Christmas is rather conspicuously missing most of the elements we think of when we think of the Christmas story. There are no shepherds, no sheep, no choirs of angels, no traveling pregnant Mary, no inn, no manger, no swaddling clothes. Those are all a part of Luke's story of the first Christmas, the favorite version, the one that makes it into the Christmas carols and pageants, the one we love to read and hear and tell. But for today, we will focus on that overlooked story of Jesus' birth found in Matthew.

Last week, David introduced us to the idea of the first Christmas and the fact that though there are 4 gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), there are only two gospels (Matthew and Luke) who even

include a story of Jesus birth. And each of those two accounts is quite different from the other. Indeed, the earliest New Testament writings, the gospel Mark and the letters of Paul, give no account of Jesus' birth at all, nor does the gospel of John. And the two stories we do have could hardly be more different. They do share in common that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit and that Mary and Joseph were to be wed when this divine conception took place, but that's about it.

So, if there are two completely different accounts of the birth of Jesus, how do we know which one is true? Some may ask that question. Or some may ask if these stories are fact or fable? But those questions are modern questions, questions that presume that something has to be factual in order to be true. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their new book, The First Christmas say the truth of these birth stories in Matthew and Luke lies in their meaning, not in their factuality. They ask, "What did these stories mean for the Christian communities that told them near the end of the first

century?" Looking at these birth stories with an eye toward meaning in their context can help us find deeper meaning in our context as well.

Borg and Crossan's book, The First Christmas is the springboard for my and David's Advent preaching which began last Sunday, but it is also the basis for an adult study class from 9-10:15 taught by Rev. Kay Scott who was a minister on staff here until she retired. Anyone is welcome to join the study if that sounds interesting.

One of the contextual realities of both of these Christmas stories is they are set in the backdrop of Imperial Rome. At that time, there were also stories being told of the Roman emperor's birth. In those stories, there is a divine/human conception which results in the birth of a special pre-destined child. That child, the emperor, was born to bring peace to the land and to save the people from certain destruction and chaos. The stories of Jesus' birth are important, in part, because they directly challenge the power of Rome as bringing salvation and peace through military campaigns and victory. The stories of Jesus' birth, along with his life and death, offer a sharp

contrast and direct alternative to Roman imperial theology of the day. Savior, Lord, Son of God - those terms we think of as unique to Jesus - were all designations for the Roman Emperor. To use them for Jesus was a political statement. It was nothing short of treason.

Okay, so here we are in Matthew. Do you know how hard it is to find hymns that correspond to Matthew's version of the first Christmas? Our beloved Christmas carols all seem to have shepherds and choirs of angels and a manger. So, if you notice the hymns we are singing today are lesser known than those from last Sunday, that is the reason. Even "We Three Kings" doesn't exactly correspond to the story in Matthew because they were not kings, but magi or wise men, and we don't know how many there were, just that they were carrying three gifts. This Advent, we are trying to hear again these two stories as they are written in Luke and Matthew in order to deepen our understanding of what Christmas is all about. Not that there is anything wrong with blending the stories together, but it is also good

to know them apart as well - as they were written - we may discover some things we didn't know or understand before.

One difference between Luke's and Matthew's birth story you may notice right away is how much of a bigger role Joseph has in the Matthew version. Joseph is the main character. He is the one who has dreams which then lead to action. Mary is mentioned, but she does not speak in Matthew's story. You also may have noticed that instead of lowly shepherds, we have magi traveling from afar. Instead of a manger, Jesus is born at home. And here in Matthew's story we have a bad guy. King Herod, who is so frightened by the news of the birth of a baby that he orders the slaughter of all male children under 2 in the region where Jesus was born. You can see why that'd not part of children's Christmas pageants.

For Matthew's audience, there was no mistaking the parallels between the story of the birth of Jesus and another birth story that they knew very well - the birth of Moses. The way Matthew tells the story, Jesus is the new Moses. Like in the story Moses, there was a

person in power who threatened God's purposes. For Moses it was Pharaoh. For Jesus it was King Herod. In both stories, God had to intervene in order that the pre-destined savior might be born. Both Moses and Jesus have come to save the people and both come to give the law. Moses, the Ten Commandments, and Jesus, the sermon on the mount, enhancing the concepts and demands of the law of Moses.

Both Matthew and Luke use the stories of Jesus birth as the overture to the rest of their gospel story. The birth story tells in miniature the story that is to follow. For Matthew, right from the beginning, the readers sees how Jesus is the new Moses; only greater. While their birth stories have some similarities, Jesus divine, virginal conception tells us that Jesus is Moses, plus. Throughout the birth story in Matthew, the number 5 is very important. In your bulletin you will find a bright yellow insert. On that insert is listed some of the fives. There are five dreams - four are Joseph's and one is the magi's. There are five scriptural fulfillments. You'll find those listed on the insert, too. Five was a very important number for the Jews Matthew

was addressing. You see we have the five books of Moses which is also called the Pentateuch. Matthew's readers couldn't have not immediately gotten the parallels between Jesus and Moses. It would have been terribly obvious.

Another thing that would have been terribly obvious to Matthew's readers is the suggestion that Jesus was not only the new Moses, but also the new David, the new King of the Jews (which is why King Herod was so frightened by his birth). Imperial Rome had appointed Herod as King of the Jews. Now there was the birth of the Messiah, the anointed one, the one who was to come and bring peace and justice to the land.

The Jews were *expecting* a warrior King, like David, who would destroy the enemies of Israel and bring peace through victory. Jesus did not fit that profile at all. So people had to rethink their understanding of Messiah if they were to believe that Jesus was the one. In Matthew, Jesus comes not only to save the Jews, but the gentiles as well. Those old stories are now being fulfilled in this new

birth, but with a twist that tells us something of who Jesus was and is, just as it tells us something about God.

In Matthew, we read that Jesus was born of God, in the lineage of the great King David, born, like Moses, to save the people, to set them free, and to give them a code to live by. He came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it and to interpret it and expound upon it, actually making it more demanding, that the people might understand God's plan for God's people. Though the story of the first Christmas in Matthew doesn't receive as much attention, it is a story rich with meaning and truth about one who was born to show us another way, an alternative to the theology of the Empire of Rome. Jesus was born the Messiah, the anointed one, the one for whom the people had waited so long, and the one for whom we prepare to receive this Advent - the new Moses, the new King David - the new law of hope, peace, joy and love, brought from heaven to earth for the sake and blessing of all. Amen.

December 15, 2007

Luke 1:11-18; 26-33; 3:16-19; 7:18-23

John... to Jesus... to Just-ness

Old Zechariah, working in the temple, is surprised by an angel announcing the birth of a baby, his son John, who would become a prophet to prepare the way for the Lord. Zechariah can't believe it.

Young Mary, living in Nazareth, is frightened by an angel announcing the birth of a baby, her son Jesus, who would be Son of the Most High. Mary believes it.

John grows up announcing the coming messiah. John predicts him baptizing with Holy Spirit and fire. John sees a mighty harvester: winnowing fork in hand, threshing floor ready to be cleared: wheat gathered, chaff burned. But, Herod locked John up. From his prison cell John questioned whether he'd been wrong to point the way to Jesus. He saw no winnowing fork, no burning chaff. So he sent disciples to ask.

Jesus, a young man answers John:

"The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

John saw himself in the tradition of Elijah and Isaiah: a voice crying in the wilderness. His life work was painting a word picture. Imagine the rough wilderness baking under the sun; harsh rocks littering the ground; snakes and scorpions; scrub, dry, hard land. Imagine a highway running straight

through that wilderness: a highway for God, a road running straight and true. Imagine ravines filled in and sharp mountains cut level so commerce and culture and civilization and control can flow.

Jesus is that highway running straight and true, a highway of our God, making the rough places plain, bringing order and ease, delivering the goods of God across the chaos of wilderness so people rejoice.

When they asked Jesus about his vision he replied in prophetic tradition: blind people are seeing; lame people are walking; deaf people are hearing; dead people are living; and poor people are rejoicing at good news.

Blind, lame, deaf, dead and poor people are outsiders. You'd expect the hale, the hearty, and whole to be riding the royal highway through the wilderness. But Jesus is the path for everyone else: those who'd never get through without him.

It's all God's doing.

- Old Zechariah and post menopausal Elizabeth having a son is God's action.
- Young Mary, unmarried and virginal, having a son is God's plan.
- Old prophecies coming alive and dancing in the hearts of people is God's work.
- Shepherds seeing angels and shouting their way in to see a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger is God's announcement.
- People cured and cared for, sinners all, rejoicing at God's Great Good

News Revival right through the wilderness rising up with hope and joy -
not that is God's joy!

God loves the world. Thanks be to God!

Prophets imagined a world where God rules and governments don't.

Isaiah said:

"The Spirit of the Lord will rest on the Chosen One who will judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek. There will be no more violence. The wolf and lamb will lie down together in peace. Nations will beat swords into plowshares and refuse to learn war any more."

We wait in wonder for we know violence and war. We know how the poor get squashed down by big money. We long for God to step in and bind up the brokenhearted and release the captives.

John saw a winnowing fork and ax laid to the root of the tree. John said,
"Change your ways or die."

When Jesus came gently, with healing and hope, John wondered if he'd been wrong.

- The question about Jesus **still** lingers.
- The highway blazed through the wilderness sometimes seems a mirage dancing under the sun.
- The numbers of blind, lame, deaf, dead and poor people increases.
- We have not changed our ways. We study war. We know violence.

We sometimes wonder if Jesus had it right.

In this church we pray with and for each other. Because Christ is present among us we see each other differently than we otherwise might. We help each other come in from exile and when some of can't see the royal highway of God others of us point the way to it. God uses each of us to speak peace. The Holy Child of Bethlehem is born in us today.

And we think about the world Jesus dreamed. We live in a wonderful country. Our country shapes the world for we are rich, powerful, and visionary. We have an inherent love of liberty and a thirst for justice that we have inherited from these old stories from prophets and poets in scripture.

One way to see our work and role is the way of power. We can blast down mountains and fill in valleys to construct the roadway that civilizes wilderness. That was the Roman Empire's plan. We understand it well.

I wonder, however, if God's plan follows a different route. That somehow, in God prophetic vision of wolves and lambs co-existing peacefully, there is something for people. I believe more than I have ever known how to believe that the vision of Jesus is the way of the salvation of the world. It begins with blind, deaf, lame, and lost people getting gospel and getting onto the highway of God. It extends to a divine transformation of the world with the end of the era of war and violence, injustice and oppression. What we receive from him is justice and peace. Who wouldn't want that?

We have a part in God's plan in redeeming the world because we have heard angels of our own. We hope to be like Mary who said, "Let it be with me according to your will." We once were blind and now we see, deaf and now we hear, poor and now are rich. Because we follow Jesus unannounced angels hold no terror for us, indeed, we welcome the call of God. Peace. Goodwill to all. God loves the world.

That is the Christmas story I know. Joy to the world, the Lord is come.
Thanks be to God!

A Light Shines in the Darkness 12-30-07

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Have you ever been completely and utterly in the dark? A darkness so great that you can't even see your hand in front of your face? A darkness so vast that you become disoriented and lose all perspective? It is no accident that we celebrate the light that shines in the darkness this time of year. Each day leading up to Christmas eve, there was less light than the day before. And this year, Christmas eve was the shortest day of the whole year. The night when we gathered here in this sanctuary and sang Silent Night and It Came Upon a Midnight Clear was the longest night - the greatest amount of darkness.

I don't know about you, but that is something I don't like about this time of the year. I sometimes tell people that I am solar powered. My spirit seems to cry out for the sun, and so, for me, winter is a struggle as each day becomes darker and darker. But we modern people don't truly understand darkness because most of us grew up in

homes with electric lighting. With the onset of the electrical age, people no longer need to change their lifestyle as the days grow shorter, as they did in the days of old, the days about which the prophets spoke and the gospel writers told. To those in Jesus' time, darkness was a very real experience and people had to adjust their lives around the darkness... to make sure they were under some kind of cover by the time night fell, somewhere safe and warm where they could rest until the light came again.

So you see, when Isaiah spoke of how people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them has light shined. Or in John when we read that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. And that light is the true light which enlightens everyone, and that light is Jesus Christ. When we hear these scriptures, maybe we can appreciate how life-giving and life-changing light truly was in that day.

Light shining in the deep and utter darkness is one of the great metaphors for understanding the event of Jesus coming into the world.

And the stories of Jesus birth, happening at night, and great light, and a star... all this is to foreshadow what is to come and the meaning of Jesus birth. And so we celebrate that the light has come. And we sing those beautiful songs of night. Those songs about the birth of a Savior, and the holy family, and peace and calm, and that gives us that warm feeling and inspires us each year, and gives us hope and relieves our fears, even if only for a little while.

But then there is this story from the gospel of Matthew; this story that is also a Christmas story, but that no one wants to think about; this story that is sometimes referred to as "the slaughter of the innocents." You see, the Christmas stories aren't only sweetness and light. The Christmas stories aren't just sentimental stories to make us feel good. The Christmas stories in both Matthew and Luke are the Gospel of Jesus Christ in miniature. They are stories that help frame the larger story of Jesus' life and death and resurrection and to help us understand those larger meanings. And the darkness into which

Jesus was born was not only the darkness of night, but also the darkness of the time into which he was born.

When I first started talking to my family about special music for today, we thought we'd sing O Holy Night. That is a beautiful and beloved song, one appropriate for this day and which helps highlight the contrast between light and dark. The last verse of that song goes like this, "Truly He taught us to love one another, his law is love and His gospel is peace. Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother, and in His name all oppression shall cease. Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we, let all within us praise His holy name."

That is a message of good news for some, but for others, not so much. Matthew tells us that Herod asked the magi, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" And that is precisely what the gospel tells us about Jesus... he was born of God, king of the Jews, the promised one who was to come. But this king of the Jews was nothing like Herod, who was appointed by Rome as king of the Jews.

The birth of another king of the Jews was a threat to Herod. For this

newborn king would rule with love and justice and put an end to oppression just as we sing. But Herod's rule depended upon oppressing the people and rather than love, fear was his mode of operation, and rather than justice, he ruled by violence. And so it is that he ordered the slaughter of all those innocent children; all those, who, for Herod, were expendable children, but for whom Jesus came to love and set free. Truly there was a great darkness, and that the baby Jesus escaped such a terrible fate was a sign that God's light cannot be put out, that it will shine even through the deepest darkness. That is the miracle of Christmas. That is the wonder of a baby born to save us.

Anglican Priest, Joy Carroll Wallis writes, "Herod represents the dark side of the gospel. He reminds us that Jesus didn't enter a world of sparkly Christmas cards or a world of warm spiritual sentiment. Jesus enters a world of real pain, of serious dysfunction, a world of brokenness and political oppression. Jesus was born an outcast, a homeless person, a refugee, and finally he becomes a victim to the

powers that be. Jesus is the perfect savior for outcasts, refugees, and nobodies. That's how the church is described in scripture time and time again - not as the best and the brightest - but those who in their weakness become a sign for the world of the wisdom and power of God."

And so it is that the Christmas stories shine a light on just who is this Jesus born in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph. And the story for today gives us a glimpse of just how great is the darkness. Jesus came, a light shining in the darkness. But we still live in a time of great darkness. We still live in a world where children die needlessly because of the political decisions of rulers. We still live in a world where fear and violence and oppression are used to keep some in power and others in chains. And we still need the light and life of Jesus to shine in those dark places and reveal to us that God's way is the way of love and justice and peace, and breaking the chains of oppression. For that is our salvation.

My family and I chose to sing a different song this morning. Not O Holy Night, though we love that song. Rather, we sang a song about a Star-child, this go-between of God, and about children, all children, street children, used and abused children, as well as spared and spoiled children; all the children whom God loves, all the children who we remember, and especially those innocent victims of the darkness. The last verse of the song goes like this:

"Hope for peace Child, God's stupendous sign, down to earth Child, Star of stars that shine, This year, this year, let the day arrive when Christmas comes for every, everyone alive!" May that be our hope and our prayer and that which we live to see by the light of Christ. Amen.

Guided by the Light 1-6-08

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

For the last six weeks we have been looking at the first Christmas - what the gospels of Matthew and Luke teach about the birth of Jesus. We've come to see how these Christmas stories serve to set the stage for Jesus' life and ministry as each of these gospels unfold. We've come to see that the reason Matthew's and Luke's account of Jesus' birth are so different is because each wanted to emphasize different aspects of Jesus, who he was, the meaning of his life, and just what was the gospel he came to proclaim and the rule he ushered in. We see that from the beginning of Jesus' life, his message was both personal and political. Yes, he came to save me and you, but he also came to save the world and to show the way of God's rule of love and compassion, justice and peace.

This Sunday, we bring the focus on the first Christmas to a close with our celebration of Epiphany - hearing once again about the magi,

who came from the east - how they traveled a great distance, following the light of a star - in order to offer gifts to a small child, the one about whom the prophets foretold. Epiphany is a celebration of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ and how that was given not only to the Jews, but that "God with us" or "Emmanuel" was meant for all people. Those magi from the east represent "the nations," the foreigner, the gentile, to whom God is also revealed. It is significant to note that Matthew, the gospel writer who is speaking to a Jewish audience, is the one who, from the very beginning, foreshadows that the gospel revealed in Jesus Christ is for *all* people, not just those considered to be the chosen people of God. Here, we are shown just how inclusive is God's salvation, just how bright is God's glory. God's love and grace is big enough for all people and extends to the far reaches of the earth.

Have you ever wondered about those magi from the east? Just who are they and why did they travel all that way? We know that from the east came most of Israel's conquerors - Assyria, Babylon, and

Persia. These wise men may have been ones who knew some of the Jewish community who stayed behind in Babylon when the rest of the Jews returned to rebuild the Temple and Jerusalem after the Exile. They may have been familiar with some of the prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures.

You've got to wonder, though, whether these were really "wise" men. How wise is it to take off on such a journey, far from your home with nothing but a promise of a newborn king. One commentator I read suggested these magi may have been "sincere and persistent" in their search, but maybe not wise. Not only did they leave their own country and that which was familiar to them, they went to Jerusalem and asked King Herod, who was the official "King of the Jews," where they could find this new, rival king who had been born. Maybe that wasn't the wisest thing they could have done. But eventually, guided by the light of a star, as well as the light of scripture, they found the child, the promised one of God and offered both their gifts and their worship.

It is a wonder that those magi made such a long and perilous journey. Something called to them, something gave them the courage and the motivation to embark on such an adventure and to continue despite struggle and challenge and obstacle to find this new king, born of God, born to rule all the nations with peace and justice, and to raise up those who lived in darkness; to shine on those who had no hope. And so it was that these magi followed the light of a star to discover the light of the world, the light shining in the darkness, the light so great, the light which *is* life.

In a sense, we've been on a journey right along with those magi. During Advent, we've been guided by the light of a star that leads to a child, born of Mary and Joseph, born in Bethlehem, as the song goes, "born to give us second birth." This has been a journey to offer our gifts to the one we call king and Lord; the one who is to bring good news of great joy to all people; who shines bright through the darkness; who proclaims peace and goodwill to all.

We've come to the manger, each of us. And now, in the glow of that great light that has given us vision of a new kingdom, indeed a new creation, we can see our way forward. We can see a new way of living and being people of the light. But we must allow ourselves to be guided by the light if Christmas is to have any real impact on us.

This time of year, we hear of that great Charles Dickens story, "A Christmas Carol." A story of Ebenezer Scrooge, one living in great darkness. Scrooge cared about no one except himself and making money. He was a mean, stingy, old soul who was miserable and didn't mind passing his misery on to those around him. Though he had much wealth, he wouldn't give any of it to help his fellow neighbor. He didn't even pay his own employee, Bob Cratchit, enough to live on, let alone enough to pay the doctor bills for Cratchit's son, Tiny Tim, who was quite ill. He shunned the generous offers of relationship and hospitality from relatives and others. And he insulted people for being kind or giving or selfless.

Well, if you know the story, you know that one Christmas eve as Scrooge sat alone, grumpy because of all the holiday cheer around him, he was visited by the ghost of his dead business partner, Jacob Marley. That night, after he went to sleep, Scrooge was visited by three more ghosts, the Ghost of Christmas past, the Ghost of Christmas present, and the Ghost of Christmas future. The light shining in on his dark life was blinding! As he watched himself become a bitter, dislikeable, selfish, lonely person, something happened inside. And when he woke up the next morning, Christmas morning, he was a different man. Christmas had come, indeed, and the light of God's goodness shone upon his life and changed it, transformed it, giving him a new beginning, a new life. Scrooge then allowed himself to be guided by that light. For when he woke up and discovered that Christmas had come, all he could think about was sharing the joy with others and giving gifts to others and giving his time and energy to others.

We have been on a journey to the manger. And, like the magi, we've been guided by a star, a light shining in the darkness. And we've seen the miracle of God come to us in the form of a child to set us free from selfishness and greed and hatred and injustice and to show us the world intended by God, the *kingdom* of God about which Jesus preached and for which Jesus lived and died and was resurrected.

This is the first Sunday of the new year. This is a time of thinking about the past and looking toward the future. If we have truly experienced Christmas, if we've seen the light, caught the vision, experienced the joy, then now what do we do? Will we allow ourselves to be guided by the light? Will we be willing to go out of our comfort zone, to reach beyond that which is known to follow the light and to participate in what God is doing in our midst to bring about transformation and rebirth of the world? As you heard in the reading earlier, "Our journey isn't over yet. We've come to Bethlehem, and we've seen amazing things...But we have places to go. A story to tell. A

new world to help bring to birth." Guided by the light, let's go on this journey together. Amen.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'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.'

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.