

“Shining God’s Light”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Epiphany – January 5, 2020

Matthew 2: 1-12

Raise your hand if you have already put away your Christmas decorations (see how many people raise their hands). Now, of those of you who have already put your decorations away, how many of you put them up the weekend of Thanksgiving? Alright, put your hands down.

Raise your hand if you still have your decorations up. Of those of you who still have them up, how many will put them away this coming week? This month? How many still have decorations up from last year? You laugh – there’s a house in our neighborhood that keeps its Christmas tree up 12 months a year, and you can see it through their living room window.

Before we had a child go off to college, we would always get our tree earlier in December and let the girls decorate it. Even with Erin going off to school, we still hold on to that tradition. But that means getting the tree later and waiting for her to get home for the girls to decorate it. As a result, we finally got our decorations and tree up one week before Christmas this year. And with Heather going away to college next fall, I imagine we’ll hold on to this new timeline as long as we can. Amid all that changes in life, some routines and practices are comforting to experience year-after-year.

For some odd reason, though, this past week I got it in my mind that it was time to put the decorations away. After my first day back at work on Thursday, I felt motivated to clean things up and put everything away. In less than an hour, the tree was stripped and taken outside, the stockings and decorations were boxed up and put away, and the living room was returned to its normal state. And by the way – purchasing a tree bag to pull over the tree and take outside was the best \$2 I have ever spent! For some reason this week, I was ready to put things away.

Whether you have already taken them down, or whether you will do so this week or later this month, there comes a time after Christmas when we put all the decorations away. We will place them in boxes and bags, and haul them off to the basement, to closets, or to the attic. The transformation is usually swift and stark. This space is an example of that. Most of the poinsettias are gone, the trees and other decorations are gone, the Advent Wreath is put away, and all that is left are our Advent Visitors with the kings paying their homage to baby Jesus. By next week, the sanctuary will seem somewhat barren and empty, with everything packed away for another year. This turn of the calendar can feel like a shock to the system: we go from celebrating the birth of Jesus one day, and one week later we are closing the books on the year that just ended, looking ahead to a new year.

I wonder if sometimes we mentally and spiritually do the same thing when Christmas is over. We have celebrated God's gift to the world in Jesus Christ. We have been uplifted by special worship services, gatherings with family and friends, exchanging of gifts, and an emotional "high" which comes from the Christmas season. But when the decorations are put away and the calendar turns to January, we tend to "put away" the light of the world that we celebrated less than two weeks ago. We leave behind the warm and inspiring memories of Christmas, and instead go back to our routines of work, family, even church – tempted to feel as if nothing has really changed.

The prophet Isaiah says: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (60:1). Before we can physically and spiritually leave Christmas behind, we are met today by the magi and the gifts they bring to the newborn king. Before we can leave behind the candlelight shining in the darkness, we are reminded that God's light is still here, still shining, still breaking through the darkness of this world.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, the twelfth day after Christmas when the kings from the east came to Bethlehem. These wise men are an ambiguous group in the Christmas narrative. All we know is that they came from "the East," with nothing more specific about their homeland. They are called "magi" in Matthew, which could mean any number of things, from kings to astrologers to scholars. And we don't even have in the biblical witness proof that there were three of them, as no number is given. All we know is that these magi traveled a great distance, following the star which they saw, to the place where the newborn king lay.

To be honest, it's not terribly important to know exactly who the magi were, because their role in the Christmas narrative is important for who they represented and how they welcomed Jesus into the world. Once they saw that the star had stopped over Bethlehem, their reaction was significant: "they were overwhelmed with joy." These men were likely at the top of their social class, not ones who would have showed much emotion. But when they realized that their search was at an end, they couldn't hold back their joy.

The gifts which the magi brought were precious, valuable offerings to the newborn king. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were the most valuable of items in those days, representing the wealth which the magi likely possessed. These were gifts which would have been the best of their belongings, reserved for only the most special of occasions.

And yet, underlying the value of these gifts was the intention which the magi had in coming in the first place. These wise rulers believed this tiny baby to be a king, the "King of the Jews," and as such he deserved the very best of what they owned. They gave their gifts to honor the newborn king, gifts which embodied their joy, reverence and gratitude for this gift into their lives. Their gracious intention is further deepened by their actions. They had journeyed who knows how many days on camels, across the desert of present-day Iraq, Iran, and Syria, following a star which they had read about in the prophets of old, finally arriving at the place which the star had led them

to. Mary and Joseph must have been taken aback by the arrival of these kings from the east.

And these magi were not even Jews, yet they made this great effort to welcome the “King of the Jews” into the world. They honored him, respected him, and worshipped him in that manger stall, paying him homage as they would any other ruler of that day. Those men were outsiders to that part of the world; they would have been looked upon as strangers, perhaps even seen as unwelcome by the locals. But that didn’t matter to them: they were on a mission. Matthew begins his gospel with this important statement, and he continues to remind us of it throughout his gospel with figures like the Canaanite woman (chap. 15), the Roman centurion at Jesus’ death (chap. 27), and Jesus’ commissioning of the disciples to go to all the nations (chap. 28). The gift of God is not reserved for the Jews, for the Christians, for a particular group: the baby in the manger is for all the world.

It would be a mistake to limit our worship of Emmanuel to one season each year, then pack our adoration away just as we put away the decorations this month. It would be a mistake to think God came only for us, when in fact the magi remind us that all people are invited to receive God’s gift found in Bethlehem. It would be a mistake to snuff out God’s light the way we extinguish our candles on Christmas Eve, for there are so many corners of this world which need to be illumined by God’s light.

The light of courage and strength needs to shine brightly in this world, as Jewish sisters and brothers are persecuted through acts of violence in our country. The light of compassion needs to shine brightly in this world, as the impoverished and forgotten are left to die on our streets each and every day. The light of understanding and reconciliation needs to shine brightly in this world, as voices of discontent and division shout louder and louder every day. The light of love and grace needs to shine brightly in this world, as we walk alongside sisters and brothers who are broken, hurting, and struggling to face one more day. We are all called to shine God’s light, not pack it away after Christmas, for it is needed today more than ever before to bring the hope which God’s gives us in Emmanuel, God with us, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Which brings me back to my neighbor and their year-long Christmas tree in the window. Perhaps that tree will no longer be a source of laughter for me, but rather inspiration. For when I see it, I will remember that the gift of God which the magi adored, which the shepherds worshipped, which Mary and Joseph cherished – the gift which changed all of our lives – is not to be celebrated one day or one month a year. That gift is to be cherished and honored and celebrated every day we are blessed to be upon this earth.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (60:1).

Thanks be to God. Amen.