

LORD OF LIFE LUTHERAN CHURCH
January 8 & 11, 2012
Lilja M. Behr

TEXTS Isaiah 60:1-6 Psalm 72:1-4, 10-14
 Matthew 2:1-18

SERMON

After reading these closing verses of our Gospel lesson , Charles Dickens words from A Tale of Two Cities seem to describe the world when Jesus was born: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us . . ."

It was the best of times: the Messiah had been born in Bethlehem.

It was the worst of times: out of fear and paranoia, Herod killed all little children who were under the age of two in and around Bethlehem.

It was the age of wisdom: wise men from the East -- non-Jews, scholars, Gentiles! -- came to pay homage to Jesus.

It was the age of foolishness: His own people did not accept Jesus.

It was the season of Light: shepherds and kings, drawn by glorious songs from the heavens and the brightness of a new star, bowed before Jesus.

It was the season of Darkness: due to Herod's dangerous jealousy, Jesus, Mary and Joseph were forced to flee to Egypt.

And yet, the true Light could not be overcome.

That is the good news, and that is why we celebrate Epiphany. The Light came into the world, and in spite of the world's foolishness, darkness, and despair, the light of Christ continued to shine.

In the best of times, and in the worst of times, is Jesus your true Light?

Several years ago, Tom Ferkingstad's son, Eric, was diagnosed with cancer. Eric was newly married, he had just bought his first home, and then, unexpectedly, the worst of times descended upon him. Shortly before his death, Eric wrote the poem that is on the front of our bulletin.

THE STAR WITHIN

brightly shining
beckoning and guiding
the light I follow is true
deepest night
inky black and hungry
cautiously I travel on through

searching for emotion
not for love or even devotion
not from a pill or a potion
but somewhere
somewhere within

this is the way to the light
through this impenetrable dark night
ease of heart and peace of mind
rewards for looking inside

twinkling and gleaming
radiantly beaming
the light I follow is true
deep inside where it resides
fueling my heart, spirit, and mind
at long last
granting me peace of mind
~Eric Ferkingstad

This is a poem written by a modern day wise man. On his life's journey, Eric found a star within himself. Through the impenetrable dark night of cancer, Eric found an ease of heart and a peace of mind in the light he knew was true.

As we consider Eric's words, let's return to Bethlehem one more time. This last installment of the Christmas story has much to teach us about our own journeys in life. While we "cautiously travel through" the coming days -- as individuals and as a worshipping community -- may we remember Mary and Joseph and the wise men. Through all their travels, they were ready to follow God's call and trust in the true light. Can we do the same?

Joseph and Mary traveled by faith during Mary's last month of pregnancy. In his book, The Journey, Adam Hamilton notes that there were two logical routes from Nazareth to Bethlehem: the first and easiest route was along the Jordan River, but it added an extra two days to the journey. The second route went through the heart of Samaria, and although it was shorter, the road was more dangerous because it twisted back and forth through hills and mountains.

On either route, Joseph and Mary had to trust in God with every step. After 10-12 days of walking, how they must have longed for an end to their journey! I have to believe that the light Christ, deep within both of them, gave Mary and Joseph the strength to continue their journey.

Then, after Jesus was born and as Mary and Joseph made plans to return to Nazareth, an angel warned Joseph of Herod's terrible anger. Once again

Joseph had to trust the words of an angel, set off into the huge and barren desert, and place his young family's life into the hands of God. How did Joseph and Mary go forward into a foreign land and an unknown future? Only by faith. Only by following a light that they knew was true.

Then think of those wise men who came from the East, following the light of a star. Who would ever think of following a star? Did any of you even bother to get up for the meteor shower that filled the skies last week? Consider the open-mindedness of those stargazing travelers! After crossing a continent of people and places, and after seeing Herod's splendid palace, were those learned and sophisticated men startled when their star brought them to the home of a poor and needy couple? No. And, when did the wise men realize that despite all the contradictions before them, despite all their preconceived notions of kingship, the light they followed was true?

We may be surprised when we let God travel with us and lead us. Our plans for the future may be rerouted in new directions when we trust in God.

As Pastor Erika noted last week in her sermon, ever since we learned that Pastor Darrell plans to move on to a new ministry in Aitkin, both of us have been immersed in a book called Grace for the Journey. As the authors of that book note, whenever a church is in the midst of transition, its members begin a new journey. Many of us at Lord of Life will worry about the journey ahead of us. Like all travelers, we know road will have twists and turns, uphill grades and downhill plunges. Like the wise men, we may have to take new roads, roads which we had never planned on trying. There will be many times when we will wish for a speedy an end to our uncertainty. Are up for such a journey. Will you be open to the surprises it brings? Just think: like the wise men, we may be overwhelmed by joy when we arrive at our destination!

Take time to look at the labyrinth which is printed on your bulletin insert. Walking the labyrinth is an ancient prayer practice. Even if you never have a chance to walk a labyrinth, I hope you will use the image of the labyrinth remind yourself of the significance of your own faith journey and the journey that our congregation has now begun. In the coming weeks and months we will experience twists and turns together. But keep repeating to yourself, "The light I follow is true." Prayerfully, we will journey together towards our center, our light, Jesus. And there, we can reflect on the joy that God has in store for us. As the authors of Grace for the Journey remind us, in this time of transition, "our responsibility is to begin the walk, focusing not on how to get out but on how to become more aware of God's presence along the way." (p. 20)

Dear Friends in Christ, as Epiphany begins, as a new year begins, as we move into the labyrinth, we have a light to guide us on the way. That light is Jesus. The light we follow is true.