



Dr. James C. Howell
Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12
January 3, 2010

The first Sunday of January, every year we do this story about the Magi. The Wise Men – I should be more pious when I hear the Bible – it always makes me giggle a little bit because I associate things that I've seen. You've probably seen the Christmas pageant where three of the dads have been pressed into duty to be Wise Men. They're doing their best to look as wise and regal as possible but they are dressed in bathrobes and Burger King crowns. It's hard. I think about the hilarious moment in John Irving's novel, *A Prayer For Owen Meany*, where they're sitting in the Episcopal Church and they're singing "We Three Kings" and they get to the fourth stanza which speaks of gathering gloom, sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying. Owen leans over to his friend and says, "That doesn't sound very Christmas-y to me" ... I think about the time here; we're having our little pageant and Rev. Steve James was reading on Christmas Eve and the star comes up and Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and then the Wise Men got to the steps here, and just as Steve read "And they fell down and worshiped him," a little boy fell down. And you guys were more polite than I was. I laughed out loud. It was funny. And the great moments in the very irreverent Monte Python movie, *The Life of Brian* where they put their finger on what's really a problem, isn't it, is that how do you tell which house has a star is actually shining over? It's way up in the sky – and they come to the wrong house, and all these comical things happen as a result.

When Matthew writes the story about these astrologers coming from the East to bring gifts to the Christ Child, he has the scrolls of the Old Testament at his fingertips or perhaps committed to memory, and as he thinks about their arrival and the spread of the Gospel to all peoples, his mind latches onto Isaiah, Chapter 60, which rather eloquently says: *Arise, shine, for your light has come. The Glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Arise and shine, for your light has come. The Glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

I can't hear the word glory without thinking about the great sermon that C. S. Lewis preached in 1943 at Christmas at Oxford called "The Weight of Glory." In it, he says, "Sometimes we get confused about Christianity. We think that the church is that we're sort of the anti-desire people. Your desires are too strong and we've got a cold hose and we're spraying them down. Don't desire so much." He said, "This is wrong." He said, "Our problem is not that our desires are too strong. Our problem is that our desires are too weak. We'd settle for far less than what God wants to give us." And the way he goes to explain it is that "What God has in store for us is called Glory, that we will know and see clearly the Glory of God, and we will not only know the Glory of God but we will actually mirror the Glory of God. We will be glorious as God is glorious." It's a grand destiny, indeed.

I love it that Isaiah says *Arise and shine for your light has come*. Sometimes we just want the light to come. On Christmas Eve, I get the best vantage point of anybody when we have the services in here and at the end we sing "Silent Night" and we light the little candles. At the end, we're like groupies at a rock concert; we raise our candles in the air and it's the most beautiful moment of the year. God's light has come. We like that, but then we forget what's

next. You know, last Sunday the Howells were expected to be out of town, but we were in town, so I just came to church like a normal person. I came to this service, just like you've done today. It was cool, it was lovely, I never get to do that, and I heard a great sermon by Rev. Shane Page. If you were here, you heard it. In this sermon, he referenced the movie "Talladega Nights", and I thought about this, and I thought, "I bet in the entire history of Christendom that no one in a sermon has mentioned *Talladega Nights*. So it was a first; we were special. Shane mentioned that the Will Farrell character, Shane epitomized it better than I could, he just loves the Baby Jesus, always when he prays he prays to the Baby Jesus. Somebody said "Jesus grew up." The character said, "No, no, no, I prefer the Baby Jesus." Shane said, rightly, in his sermon, that many of us prefer the Baby Jesus. We love the Baby Jesus. He's quiet, he doesn't say anything, he doesn't go anywhere. He stays very calm and quiet, no crying he makes, the Little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay. And Shane pointed out in his sermon that Jesus didn't stay in the manger. He grew up and when he grew up, he started talking, and when he talks, he says things that make us a little bit uncomfortable, that kind of push us out of our comfort zone. He says things that challenge us, that turn our universe inside out. Jesus gets out of the manger and walks around and goes places and says "Follow me" – not "see you later" but "follow me." And he does not go to the places like, you know, resorts where we sit back in comfort and enjoy ourselves. No, Jesus goes to the difficult places. Jesus goes among the poorest of the poor and says "Follow me, come with me." Isaiah says *Arise and shine for your light has come.*" Not just "your light has come. I hope you enjoy the light," but *Arise and shine.* You've got to shine.

Epiphany, that's the season that begins today in the Christian calendar. This is a missionary season, or at least it used to be. Once upon a time, Methodists were missionary people. We've lost that somewhere, haven't we? We were a missionary people. We've become very polite, we've become very reserved. We've learned to respect people who are different, and that's a good thing. We need to know how to respect people who are different, but at the same time, the Gospel says *Arise and shine for your light has come.* How do we learn how again to bear witness to our faith? We rightly know that there are bad ways to do this. It's not helpful to get in somebody's face and holler at them and tell them what to do. There used to be a guy who would come to Duke University when I was a student there every year in the spring, I guess during Lent, and he would stay out on the sidewalk and he would preach, and if you got near him, he'd yell "Repent." He would do this, and I got a group of divinity students and we went to him one day and we said, "Man, this ain't working here. Go to Chapel Hill." I think he did. We know that that doesn't work, but that doesn't mean that we can't learn to do what's really needed out there. Have you thought about this, how hollow the world is out there, how vapid people's lives are? They may show up at parties and drink and be cool, and they've got a lot of neat stuff, but inside they're hurting; they're hollow; their lives are broken. They don't need somebody to holler at them "Repent" but they do need somebody who knows how to say "You know, without God I don't think I would have made it. I don't know everything I need to know about God, but I believe and it really helps me. I don't know what I'd do without my church family." Can we learn how to just say "Would you come to church with me? I'll meet you there. Would you come? I want to invite you." You know why I'm here? I'm here because somebody said "James, will you come to church?" And I responded by saying "Not in a million years." And they invited me again, and they invited me again, and they did this for two years and finally, just annoyed and tired of them asking me, I said "I'll come." And here I am. How do we learn to witness?

It's an amazing thing that's going on in Christianity right now that you may not be aware of. Christianity is shrinking in numbers and influence in North America, and it's doing it in Charlotte. And we're shrinking in numbers and influence over in Europe. But worldwide, Christianity is growing like it's never grown in its history, in the Southern Hemisphere, in Africa, in Asia, Christianity is spreading like wildfire. It's coming to people and they're hearing the story of the Gospel, and it's changing everything for them. It's incredible what's going on, and we can celebrate this.

I read a book about this recently, and it's written by a sociologist and the guy, he's not trying to do theology, he's not preaching, he's just factually describing what's going on in the world. And when I got to the last page, I read something, and I thought "I'm going to read this to my people on January 3." It's a little bit long, and I know you hate it when I read something long to you. But this is so good. You've just got to get in on this. Mark Noll, thinking about the spread of Christianity in the unlikeliest of places on this globe, says this: "In light of its recent history, Christianity appears more and more to be an essentially cross-cultural faith. It appeared first in Asia and then moved to Africa and Europe. Immediately, those who turned to Christ in these new regions were at home in the faith. When they became believers, Christianity itself became Asian, European, African. Once Christianity is rooted in some place, the faith itself also takes on something from that new place. You do not have to stop being American or Japanese or German or...in order to become a Christian. The Gospel comes to each person and to all peoples exactly where they are. All find rich resources in Christianity that are perfectly fitted for their own cultural situations." And then here's the best sentence of all: "Christianity is by its nature a religion of nearly infinite flexibility because it has been revealed in a person of absolutely infinite love." I read that and I wrote "Wow" in the margin. Did you get that sentence? "Christianity is by its nature a religion of nearly infinite flexibility because it has been revealed in a person, Jesus, of absolutely infinite love." How beautiful. You don't have to look like us to be a Christian. God came for you and for you and for you guys in the balcony and for people that don't look like you and live in a different part of town or live in a different part of this world. They do not speak your language, you don't get their music, but Christianity is flexible. It's not about becoming like us. It's about the one of infinite love. And that brings me back to the star, the ability of a star to shine over more than just one house. It must have been hard for those Wise Men to find which house it was shining over. Stars are that way.

Years ago we had a babysitter for our family. Her last name was Rigel and she was taking a semester abroad; she was going to Europe. I had gotten to know her mother who lived in Texas and her mother called me and said, "I'm so worried about Rebecca. She's going to Europe and no one will be there to protect her." She was just so anxious as a mother. I have absurdly irrelevant facts in my head at all times, and I had one that came in handy then. I said, "Mrs. Rigel, there's a constellation in the sky and you may know it, it's called Orion, and the bottom right-hand star in Orion, that star is called Rigel, and what I promise you is that the entire time Rebecca is in Europe, when I go out at night, I'll look up and when I see Orion, I'm going to pray for Rebecca, and you in Texas, you'll see that same constellation, and you'll see that same star, and you'll know I'm praying for Rebecca and you can, too, and she'll see the same star." That's something, isn't it? A star shines in North Carolina and it shines on somebody in Texas, and it's been shining on somebody in Europe. I think that what that means is that the star of God

coming into the world, it's not just for me and Kevin (Wright), we're the super Holy Clergy up here, man. It's not just for us and it's not for these Angelic choir singers or maybe who just taught your Sunday School class, and it's not for the person you know who may seem to be a really pious person. The star shines over your house, over your house.

We set as a goal for our church this year Growth in Faith. Growth in Faith. There may be somebody here, you think you've got God all figured out and your faith can't possibly grow, and so, please report to me right after the service so I can disabuse you of this notion. It's God, it's the wonder and the love of God and the greatest delight that God offers us is not just that we know God but we can grow, we can learn more about God. We can plumb the depths of God's mind and heart. We can become holier. We can become more generous. We can become more diligent in our service. We grow in our faith. We're about to sing a new carol that I love. It's called "Star Child" and to me the best line of it is, "This year, this year let the day arrive when Christmas comes for everyone, everyone this year." I bet there are many of you who thought "One of these days I want to become a better Christian. One of these days I want to read my Bible. One of these days I want to volunteer. One of these days I want to get my life in order and become a little bit holier. One of these days." And I would say "It's this year, this year. The star shining over your house. The light has come." As Isaiah says to each one of us *Arise, shine, your light has come. The Glory of the Lord is upon you.* This year, this year...

Amen.