

**Micah 5:2-5a**

**Matthew 2:1-23**

**January 4, 2015**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **GO TOWARD THE LIGHT**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Nancy and I went to the movies on Friday afternoon at Mayfaire Town Center. As we sat through the endless previews of coming attractions, we saw a trailer for “The Sponge Bob Movie: Sponge Out of Water, 3D,” coming out later this year. In the movie, Sponge Bob SquarePants and his friends come ashore to retrieve the “krabby patty” secret formula from the evil pirate “Burger-Beard” and, in the process, save their underwater city of Bikini Bottom.

In one scene, Sponge Bob and his best friend and sidekick, Patrick Star, are being bombarded by Burger-Beard’s meatballs, which are being shot out of his pirate ship cannons. Struck down by a meatball, Sponge Bob lies in the middle of the street, with his buddy Patrick anxiously standing over him. Their dialogue goes like this:

Patrick: SpongeBob!

SpongeBob: Patrick.

Patrick: Talk to me, buddy.

SpongeBob: I see a bright light.

Patrick (covering the sunlight with his head): Is this better?

SpongeBob: Much. Thank you.

OK, so it’s a groaner! But the idea of seeing a “bright light” and traveling toward the light at the time of death is a phenomenon that receives much attention. People who say they have had “near death experiences” report common sensations, including a sense of peace and traveling down a tunnel toward a bright light.

Some scientists have looked into these sensations in an attempt to explain them with physiological reasons. They haven’t been so much concerned with trying to prove or disprove the afterlife through scientific experiments (how could you?), but with investigating any physical changes at the time of death that might account for such reports. Scientists have induced cardiac arrest in lab rats and measured their brain and heart waves. The evidence is not conclusive, but suggests that “tunnel vision” can occur when blood and oxygen flow is depleted to the eye, which happens often at the time of dying.<sup>1</sup> “Go toward the light” seems to be a common “near death experience.”

Today, on this Sunday before the Day of Epiphany on January 6 (Old Christmas/ The Twelfth Day of Christmas), “Go Toward the Light” takes on a different meaning. When someone has an “epiphany,” we often say something like, “She has finally seen the light!” In the Christian faith, “epiphany” refers to the realization that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Traditionally, the Day of Epiphany has been celebrated on January 6 and linked with the visit of the Wise Men from the East who went toward the light of

the star. So, there's a double meaning at work here when we talk about "seeing the light" and "going toward the light."

Over the years, people have tried to account for the star that the Wise Men saw "at its rising." It has been described as Halley's Comet, a supernova, an alignment of planets, or the conjunction of a planet and a bright star. One biblical commentator has said, "A major role in the story is played by the star, but its significance is far from clear." He says that all scientific explanations of the light from the star are futile: "Matthew intends to report not a natural but a supernatural phenomenon. . . 'A star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.' (Numbers 24:17) . . . The Christmas star identifies Mary's baby as the long-awaited Messiah."<sup>2</sup>

So, on this Sunday before the Day of Epiphany, as we hear about Wise Men coming to worship the Son of God, let's think about what it means for us to "go toward the light."

On Christmas Eve, we heard Garrett read from John 1, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it . . . The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." Then we lit our candles from the Christ candle, held them high, and watched the light throw off the darkness.

1 John 1:6-7 say, "If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

The apostle Paul writes, "For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:5-6)

And Jesus himself said, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14-16)

As we drove home from Wilmington late Friday afternoon and came into Wallace, Nancy said, "Well, the days are starting to get a little longer now and there's more light. You can't really tell it yet, but it's happening." That's a pretty good comment on the meaning of Matthew's Christmas story for our Christian lives as we begin this new year. Our world tells us that darkness will overshadow everything. Even in the midst of our Christmas celebrations, we continued to hear about tragedies in our world: airline crashes, international tensions and threats, shootings, innocent suffering.

But our faith tells us that the true light has entered into the world and the darkness did not overcome it. That's what we celebrate this day and that is our calling as Christians — "Go toward the light" — not just when we die, but especially as we live and especially in the dark times.

The Wise Men went toward the light “until it stopped over the place where the child was.”

Let us go toward the light where Christ is, for Christ **is** the light.

In her book of Advent and Christmas poems called *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, Ann Weems writes that “The World Still Knows.”

The night is still dark  
and a procession of Herods still terrorize the earth,  
killing the children to stay in power.  
The world still knows its Herods,  
but it also knows men and women  
who pack their dreams safely in their hearts  
and set off toward Bethlehem,  
faithful against all odds,  
undeterred by fatigue or rejection,  
to kneel to a child.

And the world still knows those persons  
wise enough  
to follow a star,  
those who do not consider themselves too intelligent  
too powerful  
too wealthy  
to kneel to a child.

And the world still knows those hearts so humble  
that they're ready  
to hear the word of a song  
and to leave what they have, to go  
to kneel to a child.

The night is still dark,  
but by the light of the star,  
even today  
we can still see  
to kneel to a child.<sup>3</sup>

***Let us pray: Lord Jesus, today we remember kings who came and bowed before you, offering precious gifts. We remember you – Almighty King – who came and humbly gave yourself, even to death on a cross. May we come and lay our lives at your feet. May we commit again to love you with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves, and even as we have been loved by you. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Charles Q. Choi, “Peace of Mind: Near-Death Experiences Now Found to Have Scientific Explanations,” *Scientific American*, September 12, 2011 at [www.scientificamerican.com](http://www.scientificamerican.com).

<sup>2</sup>Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup>Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), p. 55.