

“Overwhelmed with Joy”
Matthew 2:1-12
2nd Sunday after Christmas Day

January 2, 2022
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Show of hands, now that we’re a week past Christmas, how many of you have taken down the tree, the decorations, the lights on your houses?

The tree at our house will be taken down today. But I asked my wife NOT to take down yet the lights that are outside house quite yet.

There’s a bit of history here.
They line the sidewalk in front of our house.

You see, my wife grew up with lights on her house, and for many years of our marriage, she wanted me to put lights on our house, on the roof, in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

I used to give her a theological argument: don’t want to celebrate Christmas too early, don’t need lights on our house before Christmas arrives.

That was hogwash. I was just too lazy to do it.

So after a while, she just gave up on me and decided to put lights AROUND the front of our house...and we’ve had lights lining the sidewalk in front of our house every year since we moved here.

This year, I asked her if we could keep them up a bit longer.
Why haven’t I taken those down yet?
Truth be told, I like the lights.

I like the lights around our house, I like the lights on neighbors' houses when it gets dark at 5:30pm this time of year, and I'm walking the dog and you see the lights shining in the darkness...

In a small way, an almost unconscious way, it gives me something to look forward to.

Seeing those lights in the dark...

Which is something we all need, right?
We all need something to look forward to...

Never mind Christmas lights.
It's a new year, the second day of 2022.

Do you have anything you're looking forward to this year?
Anything you're a bit fearful about in the coming year?

Any journeys—not just physical journeys, but emotional journeys, spiritual journeys, that you know you need to go on this year, and you're a bit nervous, because you don't know how those journeys are going to go?

I ask not just because the calendar has turned a page.
I ask because of our text.

Our text for today is about a journey.

The journey of the wise men, searching for “the child who has been born king of the Jews...”

And Matthew writes:

“...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.”

Clearly, this is what those wise men were looking forward to.
But why?

What is it that brings these mysterious foreigners such joy?

When they set out on their journey, what was it that the wise men were looking forward to?

When you stop and think about it, it's a curious thing that they made this trip in the first place.

As Esau McCaulley recently wrote, "...they were not Jews or worshipers of the God of Israel. They seemingly had no business anywhere near the holy child.

"The story of the Magi is religiously odd....
But the oddness appears to be the point.

"The birth of Jesus was not an event that celebrated the insiders, [the religious establishment], the people who had it all together...the birth of Jesus [was a] gathering of...the lower class (Mary and Joseph), the common workers (the shepherds) and the religious outsiders [i.e., the] (Magi)."¹

Maybe that's the source of their joy.

Perhaps they got a sense of God's enormous majesty and mystery, just before they entered the house.

¹ Esau McCaulley, "Christmas Is Weird," The New York Times, December 23, 2021, at [Opinion | Christmas Is Weird - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/23/opinion/christmas-is-weird.html).

That God was using them in a way that was greater than their power to know or comprehend...that their lives had purpose and value and meaning that they never anticipated their lives would have.

I like that interpretation of the joy, not just because it's true for the wise men. But because I also think it's true for you.

Pause for a moment...on the wise men.

Did you know that God has been using you, in ways that are greater than YOUR ability to know or comprehend, throughout the past two years?

The fact that your generosity in 2020 allowed us to make a \$150,000 gift to Soteria, so that women who used to be incarcerated will now have a home as they transition back into society?

That's God at work in you!

The ways that you've supported one another, reached out to other WPC members when they were sick or mourning the death of a loved one...the way you've reached out to neighbors...by renovating Camp Thornwell, by participating in IHN this fall, by volunteering to teach Sunday School, by serving as faithful elders on the Session?

All of this is God at work in you, and a source of great joy for me.

And I don't mean to gloss over the difficulties.
I know that the past couple of years have been hard.

Feeling disconnected at times from church?
Mourning losses, of people, of traditions, of what you were looking forward to in January of 2020...

We need to be honest about the challenges and losses we have faced.

But if there's anything you're teaching me, reinforcing for me in my ministry here, it's this: just because something is hard—it does not stop God from working through you!

It does NOT mean that God has stopped giving the gift of joy. We'll get back to the wise men in a minute.

But I want to stay with this topic of joy...
 how we experience it, were we find it,
 since I imagine that joy is one of the things
 you're hoping to experience in 2022...

Let me get at it this way.

Back in 2015, Disney Pixar created what I would describe as one of the wisest and most memorable animated films ever: "Inside Out."

Did anyone else see this movie?

On the surface, it's a story of an 11-year-old girl and all the different emotions she experiences when her family moves from Minnesota to San Francisco.

The emotions are represented by different voices, different characters in the girl's own head.

There's Joy, Sadness, Disgust, Fear, and Anger.

Each of these emotional characters is also represented by a color—for example, the character for Sadness is BLUE...the Character for Anger is RED...and so forth.

So the film tells the story of how this 11-year-old girl and her parents deal with the ups and downs of moving to a new city, all while they listen to the voices inside their heads.

But what the film is REALLY about is not one family's move across the country, but the girl's realization that SADNESS is an essential part of life.

After all, she misses her friends back in Minnesota.

And she feels conflicted as she moves from childhood to adolescence.

What does she do with all that?

Throughout the movie, the character of Joy thinks she knows what to do with all that. Joy is always trying to keep Sadness from touching things, from driving the ship in the girl's head. The climax of the movie comes when Riley—that's the girl—is trying to run away from her new home in San Francisco. Joy knows that Riley will not become happy by running away, but she can't do anything to stop Riley from running away, even though she desperately wants to....so who is it in Riley's head who saves the day?

It's Sadness.

Inside her head, Sadness touches Riley's memories of Minnesota, which bring about feelings of grief—but also serve as a reminder of who was there for her in her times of grief. How her parents supported her, loved her, were there for her no matter what she was feeling in Minnesota.

Riley realizes that running away from sadness will never work, and she gets off the bus and finds her way back home.

It's a delightful movie, and one of the brilliant strokes in the film is how the creators drew Joy. They didn't make her one solid color like anger—RED... or disgust—GREEN.

Joy is bright, she's shiny—but throughout the ENTIRE movie, her hair is blue. The same color as Sadness. In other words, Joy has always been tied to sadness—she just didn't know it, until Sadness saved the day.

Why do I mention that movie this morning, as we talk about the wise men and what we're looking forward to in 2022?

Because it's similar to the message that we received from the magi.

Upon entering the house of Mary and Joseph, the magi offer three gifts.

You remember the gifts:
Gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Gold and frankincense make sense—they represent the JOY of the new child who has been born.

But myrrh?
That's an unusual gift.

Myrrh was used to embalm dead bodies.
It's not something that would show up at a baby shower!
It's something that you would use for a funeral.

Do you see what the wise men did?
On this joyful occasion, they brought myrrh.

The wise men did not try to separate the gold
and the frankincense
from the myrrh.

They saw that hardship and loss in life go hand in hand with the
joy that propels and transcends and offers hope in life.

They held them both together.
They brought them both as a gift.

Which is Matthew's way of foreshadowing of how Jesus would
live his life.

Jesus didn't strive for a life that was ALL JOY, simply filled with
gold and frankincense, if I can put it like that.

I believe Jesus took great joy in life.
But he never forgot about the myrrh.

Jesus never forgot about those who were on the margins, those
who experienced loss after loss, those who were excluded, those who
were grieving and those whose voices were never heard.

In fact, Jesus set out in his journey to find those people.
To minister to those people.
To bring peace to those people.

Not by eliminating the myrrh, so to speak...but by helping them
see that God shows up in the midst of the myrrh, as a light shining in
darkness...

Do you know who Henry van Dyke was?

Henry van Dyke was a Presbyterian minister and professor in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

If I mention the hymn, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,” do you know that hymn? Sure you do.

The music is Beethoven.

Henry van Dyke wrote the words to that hymn.

He also wrote other things, including a very short novella entitled, *The Story of the Other Wise Man*.

It’s a fictional account of a fourth wise man, named Artaban.

Artaban also sees the star at its rising, but he’s not with the other wise men who will journey to find the King of the Jews, so he sets out to meet his three companions, hoping that he can travel with them.

Artaban takes three precious stones: a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl.

But before he gets to the place where the other wise men are waiting for him, he comes across a man who is lying in the road, sick and almost dead. Artaban stops to help the man, but his delay means that he misses his companions, who set off on their journey without him.

So Artaban must go it alone.

He sells his first jewel, the sapphire, to buy camels and provisions for his journey across the dessert. And when he arrives in Bethlehem, he approaches a house and meets a mother hushing her baby to rest. From this mother, Artaban learns that he has just missed the other wise men, as well as Joseph’s family, of whom it was whispered that they were fleeing to Egypt.

He did arrive in time, however, to meet the Roman soldiers, who were hunting for all the baby boys two years of age and younger.

Artaban stands in the doorway of the young mother's home while she hides with her son inside, and tells the captain:

“There is no one in this place but me, and I am waiting to give this jewel [he pulls out the ruby] to the prudent captain who will leave me in peace.”

The captain takes the ruby from Artaban and leaves with his soldiers. Artaban has saved the life of the young boy.

So Artaban journeys on to Egypt, but he cannot find Joseph's family. He does speak with a rabbi, who tells him:

“...the King whom you are seeking is not to be found in a palace, nor among the rich and powerful...Those who seek him will do well to look among the poor and the lowly, the sorrowful and the oppressed.”

So this is what Artaban does.
And he does it for over 30 years.

- *He passed through countries where famine lay heavy upon the land...*
- *He visited the oppressed and the afflicted in the gloom of subterranean prisons...*

And he performs countless acts of generosity and compassion and mercy along the way.

At the end of his life, Artaban finds himself in Jerusalem and he hears about a man named Jesus who is going to be crucified, for being called “The King of the Jews.”

Could it be the king whom he has searched for these past 30+ years?

Artaban is hopeful that he can exchange his final stone, the pearl, as a ransom for this man's life, and maybe save the one whom he has searched for his entire life!

But just then he encounters a young girl who is about to be sold into slavery. She begs him to help save her, and Artaban decides to give the pearl in exchange for the girl's freedom.

Artaban believes that he has failed in his quest, this journey searching for the true King, the light of all people, when—shortly before he dies, he hears the words:

*“Verily I say unto thee, inasmuch as thou has done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, thou hast done it unto me.”*²

And Artaban is surprised, and overwhelmed with joy!

What am I looking forward to this year?
I'm looking forward to going on a journey with you.

And I'm looking forward to asking some important questions, with you and our excellent staff, along the way.

Who are we, here at Westminster, now that we've spent the better part of two years walking through the greatest tsunami to hit American Protestantism in the past 100 years?

Who are we, and who is God calling us to be?

² Henry van Dyke, “The Story of the Other Wise Man,” first published by Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, 1895, now in the public domain.

How is Westminster called to love one another and to love our neighbors in a world that looks very different than the world looked just two short years ago?

You know, I think I'm ready to take those Christmas lights down from in front of our house. Because even if I don't have neighborhood lights to guide my walks around the block, I've got you.

We have one another, and we need EVERY voice when it comes to answering the questions that I've just posed.

You see, what I'm looking forward to this year,
more than anything,
is watching the light and joy of God be at work
in all of you.

Amen.