

*Wondrous Light*  
*An Epiphany Sermon*  
Matthew 2:1-12  
Sunday, January 6, 2008  
by Dr. Frank Trotter

Howard Underwood stuck his head in my office last Wednesday morning and asked with a big grin on his face, “When are you going to take that thing down?”

He was referring to the Moravian Star which has been hanging here in the Sanctuary since December 23. Several months ago, I had asked the Worship Committee what they would think about hanging a star like this one at First Church. Every minister has zillions of ideas when he or she comes to a new church and I thought it might take a while for them to agree. But to my surprise, they all nodded their heads and said, “Go for it!” Then I asked, “Well, who can help me hang the star when it arrives?” And they all nodded their heads and said, “Howard!” And when the star arrived unassembled, Howard and Les Atkinson put it together – complete with 350 tiny screws.

But his question this past Wednesday was the inevitable one – “When does it come down?” Since childhood, I’ve always dreaded questions like that. It seems like we just got the trees up and the smell of the fir had just begin to waft through the house (or through the church) – and suddenly, we’re at the twelfth day of Christmas (today, January 6) and it’s time to take everything down.

There was a part of me as a child that always asked, “Well, what comes next?” And there’s a part of me that asks that today, too, for we’re entering into that strange season that seems caught halfway between the light and the dark. Some ancient tales called it Midwinter and in Christian liturgy we call it Epiphany, light coming in the midst of darkness.

Jane Kenyon, an acclaimed 20<sup>th</sup> century poet, talks about it in her poem, “Taking Down the Tree”<sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Kenyon, “Taking Down the Trees,” from *Collected Poems* (Graywolf Press, 2007), quoted at “The Writer’s Almanac with Garrison Keillor,” Thursday, 03 January, 2008, [http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message\\_view.html?mid=362947&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=c789941005](http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message_view.html?mid=362947&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=c789941005). Ms. Kenyon, before her death, was Poet Laureate of New Hampshire.

“Give me some light!” cries Hamlet’s  
uncle midway through the murder  
of Gonzago. “Light! Light!” cry scattering  
courtesans. Here, as in Denmark,  
it’s dark at four, and even the moon  
shines with only half a heart.

The ornaments go down into the box:  
the silver spaniel, My Darling  
on its collar, from Mother’s childhood  
in Illinois; the balsa jumping jack  
my brother and I fought over,  
pulling limb from limb. Mother  
drew it together again with thread  
while I watched, feeling deprived  
at the age of ten.

With something more than caution  
I handle them, and the lights, with their  
tin star-shaped reflectors, brought along  
from house to house, their pasteboard  
toy suitcases increasingly flimsy.  
Tick, tick, the desiccated needles drop.

By supertime all that remains is the scent  
of balsam fir. If it’s darkness  
we’re having, let it be extravagant.

I love Jane Kenyon’s last line: “If it’s darkness we’re having, let it be  
extravagant.” She wrote a lot about darkness and light in her brief life (she  
only lived to the age of 48). In another of her poems, entitled “Let Evening  
Come”<sup>2</sup>, she describes the time of day – twilight – when the light *seems* to  
ebb away. This poem ends with a wonderful reassurance:

Let [evening] come, as it will, and don’t  
be afraid. God does not leave us  
comfortless, so let evening come.

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Kenyon, “Let Evening Come,” from *Otherwise: New & Selected Poems* (Graywolf Press, 1996),  
quoted at poets.org (from the Academy of American Poets) –  
<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16019>.

Don't be afraid, for God does not leave us comfortless. Another wonderful final line for a poem, don't you think?

Christian tradition says that Magi arrived in Bethlehem on this day – January 6, the twelfth day of Christmas. Once they honor the child, there's no mention of the star again – it's gone, put away in God's great drawer of ornaments. "What's next?" they might have wondered. In my biblical imagination, I've always sensed that those strange, wise travelers were never, ever the same again even if they had to get home in the dark.

Biblical scholars tell us that it is no mistake that Matthew, the author of this gospel, has a scene at the very beginning of the life of Jesus where strangers from other lands come to give homage. Dr. Eugene Boring says, "The traditional use of this text as a reading for the Epiphany of the Lord underscores the truth that Jesus is God's revelation to the world. The magi are Gentiles in the extreme, characters who could not be more remove from the Jewish citizens of Jerusalem in heritage and worldview. Even at the very beginning of Jesus' life, then, we see the dividing walls between races and cultures breaking down. Even here, at the beginning of the Gospel, the mission to all nations, which will close the Gospel (28:19), is anticipated."<sup>3</sup>

Some scholars make a more explicit connection by suggesting that the magi were ancient Persians, the descendants of Father Abraham's son, Ishmael, the ancestor of Mohammed, born in the sixth century and father of Islam. Is it possible that there is an inclusiveness in our ancient biblical stories that has been lost over the centuries?

John Wesley, the father of the Methodist tradition, embarked upon a journey of his own which may have seemed no less daunting. On October 14, 1735 he boarded the good ship *Simmonds* and began a four-month voyage across the Atlantic to Savannah, Georgia to preach the Gospel to the American colonies. While aboard ship, Wesley met a group of 21 German Moravians who had a profound effect on his life.

In January of 1736, three months into the journey, the weather deteriorated rapidly. On January 17 a storm struck the ship with such fury that Wesley

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<sup>3</sup> M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 145. Dr. Boring is Professor of New Testament at the Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University in Forth Worth, Texas.

doubted he would survive. A week later, the ship was struck by a second great storm. Wesley wrote in his journal: “I could not but say to myself, ‘How is it that thou hast no faith?’ being still unwilling to die.”<sup>4</sup> In the midst of the storm, the English passengers began to panic and cry out in fear for their lives while the Moravians remained calm by singing hymns. Once the storm was over, “Wesley rejoiced to be in the presence of such complete Christians. [He later wrote in his *Journal*:] ‘This was the most glorious day which I have ever hitherto seen.’”<sup>5</sup>

His friendship with these German Christians had some effects on the Methodist tradition that John Wesley and his brother, Charles, were beginning to spread. One was that Wesley became convinced the Moravians were correct in emphasizing that “a personal relationship with God marked the true path to salvation.”<sup>6</sup> Another was that the Moravians “convinced him, by example, of the importance of incorporating hymns into the Sunday service... Thus the Methodist tradition of hymn singing was born.”<sup>7</sup>

And through the closeness of the Methodist-Moravian friendship over the years, my aunt who was raised a Methodist is now a Moravian and is the author of a best-selling book in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania entitled *Christmas in Bethlehem*. In it she describes the history of this most beautiful of Christmas stars and writes: “A star as a symbol of Christ’s birth is as old as the event itself. While there is nothing unique in the use of the star as a Christmas decoration, one particular form of star has become associated with the way the Moravian Church celebrates Christmas... The star is hung in Moravian churches on the first Sunday of Advent and precedes all other Christmas decorations. For that reason, it is also called the Advent Star. Still another name for it is the Herrnhut Star because for many years, it was manufactured exclusively in Herrnhut, Germany, the town established by early Moravians on Count Zinzendorf’s estate.”<sup>8</sup>

Aunt Vangie tells me that the star was originally created at a boy’s school in Niesky, Germany, around 1850 and began as an experiment in geometry. Around 1900 the star began to be produced by Pieter Verbeeck out of his

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<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, quoted in *The Life of John Wesley: A Brand from the Burning* by Roy Hattersley (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 104.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>8</sup> Vangie Roby Sweitzer, *Christmas in Bethlehem: A Moravian Heritage* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Central Moravian Church, 73 West Church Street, 2000), 13.

home and has since spread in popularity around the world. Aunt Vangie writes, “Many interpret the multiple points of the star as a reminder that we should follow Christ’s command, going into all corners of the world, spreading the Gospel and baptizing in His name.”<sup>9</sup>

I would close on this good day of Epiphany, with a poem by William Reichard entitled, “An Open Door”<sup>10</sup>:

Across the sanctuary of a community church  
a door stands ajar; stained glass windows  
allow only some of the sun to enter; filtered  
yellow, red, opalescent green drench the pews.  
On the altar converted to stage, a circle of  
students contemplates a question of vocation.  
Through the open door, only light, daytime  
invading the intimate dim familiar in churches,  
the hazy quality of the house of god.  
When a child, I wanted to be a vampire.  
Or a scientist. Or an actor. The world  
seemed open to me in a way it does not  
seem open now. What is your passion,  
the facilitator asks and students giggle.  
What drives you? I try to focus  
on the question at hand, but lose myself  
in the sunlight streaming in through  
the open door. In this, a sanctuary,  
I don’t feel safe. What do you want  
to be when you grow up? Not a teacher,  
certainly; not a soldier; not a poet.  
Who lives in the gray corners of a church  
besides mice? What is that face in  
the stained glass? When in college,  
I wanted to be an archaeologist, wanted  
to dig into the storied dirt of time and  
come up with some history. In this room  
I want to be a priest. It could be comforting,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>10</sup> William Reichard, “An Open Door” from *This Brightness* (Mid-List Press, 2007), quoted at “The Writer’s Almanac with Garrison Keillor,” Sunday, 30 December, 2007, [http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message\\_view.html?mid=361201&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=c789941005](http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message_view.html?mid=361201&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=c789941005).

living in the dark spaces of a church,  
just me and the mice. What is your  
vocation, the facilitator asks and  
at this moment, I'd say, I am  
a bringer of light; a man who stands  
in a doorway flooded by sun;  
I am a bird; someone who learns,  
in shadow, the real shape of brightness.

That's the journey for all of us, isn't it? While we may take the star down  
and put it away for another year, our task is to be bringers of the wondrous  
light of Jesus Christ to all the world.

That's the good work that lies before us in this good year of 2008.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.