

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**  
**THE CENTENNIAL YEAR**  
**EPIPHANY OF THE LORD**  
**“JOURNEY TO THE LIGHT: THE NEXT 100 YEARS”**  
**REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON**  
**JANUARY 2, 2011**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**  
**ALL SERVICES**

Many things confound us. Riddles, puzzles, and magic tricks cause us to scratch our heads and strain our brains! A genuine mystery, however, cannot be solved or figured out. Mystery fills us with wonder and expands our horizons, partly because it remains a mystery. The magi followed the mysterious star, and it changed their lives forever. Dr. Carlton Babbs followed his convictions and it changed his life and the history of this church that is now about to celebrate its centennial.

Sometimes we become presumptuous in our praying. We ask God to do something for us that God may want us to do for ourselves. Perhaps we should pray for the strength to accomplish what is needed, or for the wisdom to know what is the right thing to do. That is the history of this church!

According to Genesis, God’s first words were, *“Let there be light.”* How appropriate! The biblical narrative tells the story of redemption largely in terms of the contrast between darkness and light. An epiphany involves the light of revelation or manifestation. The Epiphany of the Lord celebrates the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the Gentile world, represented by the Magi from the East. Their journey is instructive to all who begin in the darkness of sin and need, and follow God’s guiding star to discover the One who is the Light of the World. Our next 100 years will be a journey to follow God’s guiding star into a future as bright as God’s promises.

As children, most of us go through periods when we are afraid of the dark. Like many fears, it is largely irrational, but try explaining this to a child! Parental reassurances are helpful, as are night-lights, but only time will provide a permanent solution. The normal process of human growth helps most of us overcome our fear

of the dark and even makes us comfortable with darkness. But life is full of other kinds of darkness, some that require more light than we ourselves can provide. That is why many of the members who started out here at Park Hill could not stay the journey. They were afraid!

The Magi, or wise men, in the mysterious East searched the nighttime sky, probably involving a form of astrology. What they were seeking, we do not know, but they found something that sent them on a journey that would change their lives. We do not know what kind of knowledge they possessed, but they obviously wanted to learn more about their world and, perhaps, about themselves. We have to admire their intellectual curiosity, which kept them searching for light, for truth, for better answers to their many questions. Ultimately, they were rewarded for their diligence and perseverance. Look around you today and witness the gift of diversity that God had brought into our midst. And our journey is not over.

The human mind is endlessly inquisitive, and the human heart longs for spiritual fulfillment. All truth is God's truth, and we need not fear honest doubt. Our doubts may be the growing edge of our faith. Integrating a white church in Park Hill in the 1960s? Often it is God's own spirit that prompts us to seek better answers and more adequate understanding.

The prophet Isaiah envisioned something utterly radical and revolutionary to his own people. He imagines, not just the return of the exiled Jews to Jerusalem, but the nations of the world in grand procession toward Zion. This was shocking because the people of Israel had long considered themselves to be the sole object of God's love and care. They were the "*chosen*" people, the people of the covenant originally made with Abraham, the covenant that had been ratified repeatedly in their history. Gentiles were largely dismissed as godless and outside of God's concern. That magi from the East would come looking for the Messiah was unthinkable!

The Gospel writers were significantly more enlightened theologically than we give them credit for being. They reflect the perspective of an established and growing church toward the latter part of the first century. They understood that God's love was not restricted to Jews. For any who might still believe that Gentiles must become Jews before becoming Christians, they stage their narratives in a universal setting, or, as in John, a cosmic setting.

It is of monumental importance that the wise men were Gentile sages from the East, and not Jewish prophets or priests. "*Where is he who is born king of the*

*Jews? We have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him.”* This is the Gentile world making its journey to the Light of the world. Philosophers of every age have acknowledged that we can only apprehend a universal truth in a particular or specific form. Neighborliness is a universal quality in the human realm, but it can only be experienced with a given, specific neighbor. Christ is a cosmic and universal reality, the eternal Word of God. But when the Word became flesh, it was as a Jewish man, born to a Jewish mother, raised in the Jewish tradition. This particularity of Jesus, however, in no way diminishes his universal and eternal reality. Jesus came into the world as the Messiah of Jewish expectation, but also as the Light of the world, revealing God in human form to all people everywhere. Yes, this was a white church in the beginning, but God called us to a broader vision and a more universal witness.

The Magi, when they had found Jesus, returned to their home by a different route, so as to avoid encountering Herod. Matthew says they returned home *“a different way.”* Once we have encountered the living Christ, we, too, are to go about things differently. Thank God for Park Hill. Boris Pasternak had Dr. Zhivago say, **“We are born to live, not to prepare for life.”** We truly live, not when we follow our own whims and desires, but when we follow Jesus Christ. He not only reveals God to us, he reveals God’s will to us. Part of the light we are provided in Christ is the knowledge of God’s will. This has nothing to do with paranormal gifts or insights, and is not about knowing what cannot be known. In Christ we see that God’s will is that we live rightly related to God and rightly related to our neighbor. Thank God for Park Hill. At least God has one church that takes God’s call seriously. God’s will is that we live in self-giving love, and we have the perfect model of this in Jesus Christ.

Faith is a journey to the light. Here at Park Hill we are growing and moving toward the light of God’s love and purpose. It is the only way to live, and the only way to die. In the Broadway play *Shadowbox*, all the characters have incurable diseases. They are all taken to the Pocono Mountains to die. Brian, one of the group who knows he is about to die, says: **“The universe is not a syllogism. It is a miracle. The universe is a miracle. If you can believe a part of it, it is cause for dancing.”**

A sense of mystery enriches life. How sad when the **“sweet mystery”** of love has waned. How tragic when any person thinks there is nothing left to learn. How impoverished is the family that has no happy secrets and no surprises. How lifeless is the congregation that has lost a vital sense of mystery in worship. The

life for which we were created is revealed around us and within us. The light of God's will awaits our willingness to see.

Come, grow your spirit with us. Don't miss a single Sunday this entire year. We are on a journey; a journey to the light, to the next 100 years. The journey that drew shepherds to the manger also led magi from the East to Bethlehem. They sought answers to their questions in the stars of the heavens, but they found their destiny in the child Jesus. If you want to see and experience the light that shines all about us, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this centennial congregation to be your church.