

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
EPIPHANY SUNDAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“THE WORLD COMES TO SEE JESUS”
Matthew 2:1-12
January 8, 2012
9:00 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

In the early days of human history, primitive religions worshiped the sun. They were impressed with its awesome radiance and its energizing and creative power. Light has been a universal symbol for as long as humans have been on the earth. All the world religions use light as a symbol for the divine. Christianity is unique in claiming that light has come into the world as a human person.

The Gospel of Matthew tells of wise men from the East who discovered the star that led them all the way to Bethlehem and to the Christ child. This epiphany was a dramatic sign that the Incarnation is for all peoples and religions of the world. The gospel, like a light in the darkness, is for all.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea the world came to pay homage. Millions of people came to Bethlehem? There were no rooms available for Mary and Joseph! And Bethlehem was a **“little town”**! It is nonetheless true that the world came to see Jesus. The three wise men from a foreign land in the East represented the distant world coming to see Jesus. Epiphany Sunday celebrates the coming of Christ as the light of the world.

Christmas cards, for all their loveliness and inspiration, actually distort the first Christmas a bit. The New Testament tells us so little about the event that artists and musicians, as well as ordinary people retelling the story, have had to use their imaginations. We have welcomed these enhancements with such enthusiasm that we have canonized scenes and images that are not actually in Scripture. Take the relatively commodious stable, for example. It is as clean and well-lighted as if someone knew what would happen there. Look at Mary, so lovely and serene, she reflects no physical distress and is dressed in what can hardly have been travel clothes. These are all idealized renderings that can hardly have been the way it

was. As people of faith and devoted followers, I would argue that we should be permitted some artistic license where Christmas is concerned.

However, it seems unlikely that the wise men were part of the manger scene, which would require them to have arrived at the exact time and place of Jesus' birth. They were from some distance in the East. We don't know when they saw the star, but they apparently arrived in Palestine shortly after the birth of Jesus. Herod met with the wise men and attempted to use their calculations to find the newborn rival for his throne. That the wise men found Jesus some time after his time in the stable is suggested by verse 11: ***“and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother.”*** What the reference means we do not know, except that a house is not a stable, and the Holy Family are in better accommodations. In a number of ways the wise men represent honorable and noble world citizens, perhaps the world at its best. They were enlightened, sensitive, serious, and kind. When a choice had to be made between King Herod and ***“King”*** Jesus, they did not hesitate to protect Jesus and his family. The wise men will always be men of mystery to us, but in them the world first came to Jesus.

Has the world seen Jesus? He came as the Savior of the world, and he has worldwide name recognition, but what is his reputation in the world? Why are there so many who are not drawn to him, who do not become his followers? It is clear to us that no one compares to Jesus, that for godliness and goodness he has no rivals; that he alone is without guile, without pretense, without sin. The simple yet extraordinary quality of his life is unique. He himself said, ***“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” (Jn 12:32)*** We have experienced his drawing power and have found in him a transformative love, a freedom and peace, a way to live that we have found in no other. Why have so many, past and present, not been drawn to him? He leaves us no doubts about himself. Why doesn't every person on earth turn to him in joy and undying devotion?

One possibility, perhaps the most obvious one, is that the world cannot genuinely see Jesus because we get in the way. The world says to us, ***“Your actions speak so loudly that we cannot hear your words.”*** We point the world to Jesus Christ, but the world only sees us and our failures to live and love as Jesus did. Another possibility is that some people use their freedom to turn away from what is good, beautiful, and true. Some people do not see Jesus because they do not wish to see him. God honors our freedom and will allow us to say No as well as Yes. It is tragic when the world rejects Jesus because he has been

misrepresented, but it is more tragic when someone perceives Jesus as he truly is and still chooses the darkness.

Courts of law rely heavily on the testimony of witnesses. It is not a perfect system, mainly because trustworthiness is such a slippery commodity and duplicity is so at home in our hearts. Finite judges and juries must decide which witnesses are being untruthful and which are telling the truth. For better or worse, a witness can put a defendant in good light or bad. The same is true of Jesus Christ and his witnesses.

The church as an institutional entity is simply not the most effective witness to Jesus Christ. Our culture of quantitative values and commercial goals pressures institutions to place their own success above all other concerns. In ecclesiastical circles it is never admitted, and is often not even recognized, but the unspoken rule is that a congregation must grow or die. Therefore, as American churches, we have turned the witness to the gospel into a campaign for recruits, with growth as the goal. Someone will say, **“Yes, but this is the growth of the kingdom of God.”** Is it? When did the institutional church become synonymous with the kingdom of God? When the institutional church understands growth as power, and understands power in the worldly terms of **“how many”** and **“how much,”** it loses its spiritual power and forfeits its witness to Jesus Christ.

The church’s only task is to lift up Christ. The church did this when it had no buildings or budgets, but met in homes and catacombs. Lifting up an institution is more difficult by far. Christ has his own drawing power. We must decrease, that he may increase. Trusting in Christ’s drawing power is the calling of Christ’s church in all times and places.

Our world is cold and dark for so many of its inhabitants. People everywhere long for light of one kind or another. We profess Christ as the Light of the world, but do not always acknowledge our responsibility to share him with the world. As the church, the people of God, we are not to selfishly keep the light, but to help the nations in darkness to walk in the light of the Lord.

Consider this irony. All things in nature seek the light. Even plants have the intelligence to turn toward the light to draw on its life-giving energy. How strange, then, that the most intelligent creatures on the face of the earth hide from the light. We know that the light will reveal things we want to keep hidden, and will expose us for what we are. But to hide from the light is to deny the truth. We find truth and life by turning to the Light.

For those who are willing to come out of the darkness of yesterday into the light of this New Year, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.