

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 Matthew 2: 1-12; January 7, 2018 – Epiphany B
 Overwhelming Joy
 Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Rise and shine! And give God the glory! If you ever went to church camp chances are you know this song – at Silver Lake where I went for many years there was a monstrous stereo in the dining hall and for those of us in Cabin Row right outside the dining hall, that song got us up and moving, like it or not. And we started our days at VBS with the same song. It's a great song to start the day.

I suspect, though, that even that song wouldn't help us get out of bed happily these past few terribly cold mornings – even my cat complains when I move her off my toasty warm bathrobe when I get up!

Rise and shine! There's another meaning to that expression too - not the bad news that it's time to get up and face the day from your nice cozy bed. But the good news - good news that can fill your heart with joy. The rise and shine that is meant for the whole people of God: today we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord – Epiphany literally means “to shine upon” – and that's the promise of ancient Israel's blessing: the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you, to shine upon your life.

We've heard today the story of the “wise men” who came and brought gifts to the infant Jesus. The thing is - the gifts they brought to him tell us about the gifts Christ continues to give to us. Three priceless gifts. The real gifts of Christmas - gifts that last forever.

The gift of gold represents security.

In a world like ours, wouldn't it be a wonderful thing to feel secure? So many people's lives are affected by concerns over job security, economic security, medical security, social security, our country's security. Increasingly we worry about threats of war, how will we keep our health insurance, how will we deal with long term care needs – for us or for a family member – all of these increase our stress and anxiety, don't they.

And there's emotional security. The kind of security that makes a child feel safe. We know that when a child grows up with a strong sense of being loved and cared for, that child is much more able to cope with the stress and anxiety of life. Don't we all want to feel safe? And to have our children feel safe?

In the ancient world, gold was a gift for a king – Christ: Son of King David, King of the Jews and King of Kings and Lord of Lords. As our King, Christ gives his people, us, security. He is able to care for his subjects and when he is ruler in our lives we have the security of knowing that his love is forever. As children of God, doesn't that enable us to be much more able to cope with the stresses of living and even the stresses of dying because we know that we are loved – forever! I believe so.

The gift of frankincense represents hope.

Frankincense was the sweet smelling incense used in the temple used by the priest. When it was given to the Christ Child, it represented the idea that Jesus would one day be our priest. He would represent us before God.

Our hope is this: Christ gives us the gift of the possibility of a closer relationship with God – we know God through Christ – fully human, fully divine. That is a gift Christ as our high priest can and does give to us. All we have to do is accept it.

The gift of myrrh represents mercy.

Myrrh, a burial spice used for embalming in ancient times, is the gift which points to the fact that this child was born to give his life for us. God chose to give, so you and I can live. Jesus came to give his life so we could know God's mercy.

Security. Hope. Mercy. What wonderful gifts are offered to us by the One whose birthday we celebrate. What wonderful gifts to embrace more fully as we enter a new year. Gifts that are priceless.

And there's yet another gift - the visit of the magi from the East was a fulfillment of the ancient prophecy that when the light shined, it would shine for the whole world. The whole world - for all peoples everywhere, even for those who had never heard of temple or Torah, who never darkened the door of a synagogue, or read a page of scripture.

Another meaning of epiphany is "to give light" or "to appear." Epiphany calls all of us to the light, and reminds us that light shines indiscriminately on those in the cold, dark shadows of a lightless and chaotic world. Jesus came to bring security, hope, mercy to all peoples - to all peoples. To us. To you. To me. And to whoever we think of as "them". To whoever we think of as "other." It's good news to all people.

A contemporary expression might be to say epiphany is when God shows up or appears to us. The reality is, though, God always shows up – but an epiphany happens when we realize it in a new, exciting way.

Let's think about that for a moment: can you remember ever having an epiphany? What would it mean if God showed up for you today, if you recognized your epiphany? What would change? What would happen? How would you feel?

What does the Bible tell us about how the magi felt when they found the child after their long, dangerous journey following the star? When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy!

Overwhelmed with joy. This got me thinking....

When is the last time you felt overwhelmed with joy?

Frederick Buechner says, "We need to be reminded that joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is human-made – a happy home, a happy marriage, a happy relationship with our friends and within our jobs. We work for these things and if we are careful and wise and lucky, we can usually achieve them. Happiness is one of the highest achievements of which we are capable and when it is ours, we take credit for it and properly so.

"But we can never take credit for our moments of joy because we know that they are not human-made. They come when they come. They are always sudden and quick and unrepeatable. The unspeakable joy sometimes of just being alive. The joy of release, of knowing we're forgiven when before we were ashamed and afraid, of finding ourselves loved when we were lost and alone.

He continues, "Joy is always all-encompassing; joy is where the whole being is pointed in one direction, and it is something that by its nature, we never hoard but always want to share. The second thing is that joy is a mystery because it can happen anywhere, anytime, even under the most unpromising circumstances, even in the midst of suffering,

with tears in its eyes. Even nailed to a tree.” Yes, joy can come even in the midst of sorrow.

Late yesterday afternoon I learned of the death of 93 year old Horace Ashenfelter – some of you may recognize his name as the winner of the Steeplechase 3,000 meter race in the 1952 Olympics – the only American who has ever done that and took a leave of absence from his job as an FBI agent to compete! I’ve never met a more gentle, humble, faithful, finer man than Horace – I have fond memories of his running by my house – he was doing that well into his 80s – and being the beneficiary of his wonderful gardening advice. In recent years he suffered from dementia – hard for him and for all of us to watch.

I was feeling quite sad yesterday but then I remembered the last time I served him communion at the Glen Ridge church. He came down the aisle, supported by his son, and looked at the plate of bread and the chalice I held – he smiled, looked me right in the eye and said, “I take and eat this, right?” I responded, “That’s right – the bread and the cup are for you.” One of the most sacred experiences I’ve ever had as we smiled at each other and shared the Sacrament of Communion. Security – hope – mercy – and joy, all in those moments. This was a moment of epiphany - Jesus was present in that bread and cup and we both knew it and savored it.

Maybe that’s a lesson for all of us: to be in the now, to savor these moments, to allow ourselves to be overcome by the great mystery of God’s presence every moment, of overwhelming joy.

I ask you again, when was the last time you were overwhelmed by joy? When is the last time we as church were overwhelmed by joy? Shared that joy?

Tom Clough is the Eastern Regional Minister for the Connecticut Conference, UCC. He writes, “Though I am in my fourth decade of serving UCC churches in New England, I have yet to experience a congregation being so overwhelmed with joy that they displayed it in public. I’m not saying, he says, that overwhelming joy doesn’t ever happen....just that we may not pay enough attention to it when it does.”

He says, “Maybe the epiphany story of the Magi’s journey should give us some help here – like them, we first need to pay close attention to what is going on in our world and respond to those events which seem to be extraordinary.”

Stop and pay attention. Stop and pay attention to the little things and the not so little things.

Let’s stop and pay attention. Stop and feel that joy welling up inside of you. Stop and say thank you, God. Just stop. Experience the joy of the moment. And then share that joy!

What would our church look like if we were overwhelmed by joy and then were moved to share it?

Tom Clough asks another question, “How do we get us some more of that overwhelming joy in 2018? I don’t pretend to know today what challenges 2018 may hold for us as individuals, congregations, or for the United Church of Christ. But I do believe that the risen Christ will be with us in our struggles, and that in Christ’s presence we shall indeed find overwhelming joy.”

Just like those unlikely astrologers did – those who traveled far to come to see him and worship him. In Christ’s presence they found overwhelming, lasting joy. And so can we.

God's revealed love is for all people - at all times - in all places. The church, this church, is here because we believe that - we've experienced God's love and the joy that comes with that in our lives. And we are here because we know we are called to bring that good news to all people - to do our part in making God's realm a reality. We are here because we believe that a realm in which good always conquers evil, a realm where peace and justice prevail is possible. We have a vision of that promise and that vision calls us forward. We know that our lives are changed, that our lives are being changed, by the truth and power and joy of that vision.

And we are here because we know that as the vision is changing us, we who are being changed, we who are growing in God's grace, are, through God's grace, changing the world.

Friends - there's our challenge and our hope for this new year. How will we, through God's grace, change the world? With God's help, together we can do this! We must do this! Let's share the joy!

Rise and shine and give God the glory!

Arise, shine, for your light has come!

And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Your heart shall thrill and rejoice.

The glory of God shall be our strength and our hope!

Amen.