

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Epiphany / Star Sunday

“The Light of a Star”

Sunday, January 3, 2021

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Welcome and Announcements

Good morning! Welcome to worship on this first Sunday of a new year. We're grateful to God for getting us through to this new year. It is our prayer that as we worship together today that God will meet us where we are and draw us nearer to Him.

I'm very grateful this morning to be leading worship along with Ashley Ashley, our Associate Pastor, as well as with the musical talent of our Chancel Choir and the Smith Family Singers. (Our music has been recorded previously.)

I'm grateful to Susan Underhill for blending both the new and older, pre-recorded music elements of this service together. I'm grateful, too, that we, today, can be celebrating Epiphany Sunday. That Sunday, which is the last Sunday in our celebration of Christmas, is the Sunday when we remember the wise men who followed the light of a star that broke through their darkness leading them to the birth of Christ.

Today we believe that God continues to break through our darkness--both the darkness in our world and the darkness in our lives. Recognizing this fact, that God desires to break through our darkness, we are handing out to all our listeners and to people who have joined us live in our parking lot service on this Sunday, star words. I will be sharing with you a little bit later in our service how you, too, can get one of these stars to be a light for you throughout this coming year.

Friends, today is also the first Sunday of the month, which means we also, as a family of faith, celebrate communion together. So I would ask at this time that you would take a minute or two and pause the video and collect whatever communion elements you have at home that you can partake in this communion celebration together. Whether you have bread and juice, cracker, wine, whatever you have will work, and together we will draw nearer to God through this ancient sacrament.

[Pause to collect communion elements]

Now let us all prepare our hearts for worship as we sit back and listen to our Chancel Choir sing for us a song about the wise men, entitled “The Three Kings.”

Chancel Choir Sings “The Three Kings”

Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor – Opening Prayer

Let us pray. Eternal God, you are the light in the darkness, the hope of the world. By a star you led Magi to the worship of your Son. We have seen the star of your glory rising. With joy let us pray to our Savior, the Son of God, the light of the world. May his radiance pierce the night that covers the earth and signal the dawn of justice and peace.

May His brightness illuminate our lives and beckon us to walk as one in your way. Guide the nations of the earth by your light that the whole world may see your glory. Awaken us this hour to the power of your presence in our midst, that we would be filled with your Spirit. All this we pray in the name of your son, the Word made flesh for all people, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Today's Worship Service Theme

Friends, in the choir's opening anthem we were reminded of the journey of the Wise Men who followed the star to Bethlehem. As a reminder of *their* faith and of the faith which God wishes to instill within us today, we have stars available for you. Now, if you're watching this online today, you can get a star by driving to the church. Outside the church's parking lot doors, there's a mailbox that's available to you at all times. In the mailbox there is an envelope with stars. You just simply pick a star out of the envelope. You can have one for you and one for each of your family members. They are available from Monday, January 4th through Monday, January 11. In addition to this, if you're watching this online but are unable to travel to our church to get a star, you could also indicate you wish a star to be mailed to you by signing your name in the online friendship pad located just under where you clicked to watch this service. If you indicate your name and address there and that you wish a star, we would be more than happy to send one to you.

If you're wondering what these stars are all about, let me tell you. Each year we hand out stars to the members of our church. Each star has one single word written on it that comes straight out of scripture, that describes something to do with the life of faith. Now this word is not in any way an omen or a fortune about what will happen in the future. It's simply a word from God to help us focus on God in a new way. Now we hope that, once you receive this star, you will put it somewhere in your home where you will see it often, even on a daily basis. If you have received stars in the past, I suggest grouping all of your stars together somewhere where you can see them so that they may serve as a constellation of God's faithfulness in your life. We have all received these stars, also, as a recognition that although so much in our lives change and so much in our world changes, the Bible is very clear about the fact that although the grass withers and the flowers fade, the word of the Lord stands.

It is our prayer as a church that these star words would serve as a source of inspiration and challenge, that they will both comfort and confront you at times. We pray that you will take the effort to prayerfully explore where God is leading you through this word in the year ahead. Now if you receive a word and you have no idea what it has to do with any application to your life, please do not worry. You have an entire year to figure this out! I do want to say a word of thanks to Sarah Campbell who has cut out and lettered these 500 stars for many years now. We're very grateful for her effort to do this. Please know these words have been prayed over, that the right person, at the right time, would receive the right word.

Now let us listen to the guidance that a star brought to the Wise Men, as Ashley reads for us our first scripture lesson.

Scripture Readings

Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor — Matthew 2:1-12

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men¹ from the east came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Psalm 19, A Psalm of David

¹ The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

² Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

⁴ yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.

7 The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
8 the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
9 the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
10 More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.

11 Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
12 But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
13 Keep back your servant also from the insolent,
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.

14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Sermon

Friends, as we move into our sermon today we're going to use the very last verse of Psalm 19 as our prayer for illumination. Would you all please pray with me. Gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Friends, this year I am seriously considering not taking down our Christmas tree until Covid is over! I long for life to return to some sense of normality, and in my head this small, yet significant, act of defiance of leaving our Christmas tree up is my own personal way of pushing back the darkness of these days. Now the only problem with this proposed plan of mine is not everyone in my family is on board with it! One particular family member, who for the time being shall remain nameless, had the gall to actually suggest that the Bible says nothing about us pushing back the darkness of our times with the light of a Christmas tree, but the Bible does, in fact, say quite a bit about letting the light of Christ shine in us and through us. Now, clearly, you can see it is not always easy to be married to a minister, especially when that minister happens to be right about this particular issue!

Now over the past nine months, for the length of this pandemic that we have been journeying through, all of us have had to find ways to cope with the darkness around us. Savoring the light of the Christmas tree or even savoring candlelight may work for us for a time, but you and I both recognize that this is not a long-term source of comfort. This is only temporary. Most of us find ourselves longing, still, for a deeper sense of peace and comfort.

I was reminded of our deep need for peace and comfort at this time through a Christmas card I received this year. This Christmas card was sent to us from our daughter's college. When I first looked at the card, which is full of words all over the front of it, my initial thought was, this has got to be one of the most depressing Christmas cards I have ever seen. I thought that because if you were to look more closely at the words found on the front of the card, each of these words relates to our experience of 2020. You can read words on the front of the card like "quarantine" and "racial tension," "furloughs," "layoffs" "pandemic," "unemployment" and "stress." The national election is on the list as well as "climate crisis," and "virtual learning," as well as many descriptive words, including "chaos," "grief," "loneliness," "sadness," "disappointment." Even "murder hornets" made this list.

Now I have to tell you, my initial thought was, I am just going to throw this depressing reminder of 2020 away. Thankfully, before I did that, I did open the card, and in it I found a piece of red film. It took me only a minute to realize what I was supposed to do. Once I recognized that I was actually supposed to put the film over the front of the card, I found out that these crowded words of despair suddenly went away. When the light passed through the red film, I discovered an entirely different message which stood over and above the words on the card's cover. That message says clearly, "They shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us," and is from Matthew chapter 1, verse 23.

This card, which had been among my least favorite Christmas cards, quickly became one of my absolute favorites! I loved its message that God stands with us in the darkness and chaos of our times. We are never alone, and we are never without hope. All of us clearly lose sight of this message at times. Like this card, we, too, at times require a different type of lens to see God's faithfulness and holy presence at work *now* in our lives and in the world.

Matthew chapter 2, tells us that the wise men of old used the heavens as their lens to understand God's presence in the world. British biblical scholar Tom Wright writes in his commentary on Matthew that many people, particularly coming from the countries east of Palestine, had developed a study of the stars and planets that had made that study a fine art. They believed that everything was interconnected, so that when something really important was happening on earth you could expect to see it reflected in the heavens, The reverse was also true. If something really spectacular was happening among the stars and the planets, then this remarkable event would also be reflected on earth.

Now the sudden appearance of this very bright star, the star we know as the star of Bethlehem, or the Christmas star, described in Matthew chapter 2, was the lens that pushed the Wise Men out on a quest to see what significant event had taken place in the world.

Now if you were following the news closely this past December, you may be aware that scientists speculate that the original Christmas star was actually this bright light in the sky that happens with the conjuncture of Saturn and Jupiter, the planets coming closer

together as they orbit the sun. That was in the news recently because that same phenomenon happened this past December where the planet Jupiter and the planet Saturn aligned in their orbits, an event that hadn't happened in 800 years and it happened this year on December 21st, the longest night of the year in 2020.

Now Interestingly enough, that original Christmas star--when that event first happened, people tried to time-date that event. There is scientific research from Johannes Kepler that event occurred in 7 BC which was very near the time of Christ's birth. We find it interesting today that, out of all the days and years that this conjunction could take place, it came on the day in this past year that had the most darkness of the entire year that will be long remembered for darkness and loss brought about by this pandemic. You have to ask yourself, was this a coincidence? I think not! Maybe what we should ask ourselves is what message was God trying to convey to us from the sky at this time. I have to believe the message is something along the lines of the message found on the Christmas card I received.

A message that rings out both bold and true, the message says, "Although you cannot always see me, I am here. I have always been here. I will always be here. I bring hope and light, peace and deliverance, to your lives and to this world. We should not be surprised that the stars speak to us of God's presence in the world and in our lives today.

Psalm 19 declared that this has always been the case. The Psalm begins,

- ¹ The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
- ² Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
- ³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
- ⁴ yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

The same Psalm also tells us that where stars or signs fail to direct us, God's word provides us with the guidance we need. At verse 7, Psalm 19 says:

- ⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
- ⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;

The Wise Men knew the truth of both of these realities. The star initially led them as far as Jerusalem. And when the star was no longer visible to them, God's Word spoke to them through the words of the Prophet Micah, who, 700 years earlier, had written the words, "Out of Bethlehem would come a ruler who would shepherd God's people, Israel." Those words are recorded for us in Matthew chapter 2.

The Wise Men followed this scripture as they left Jerusalem for Bethlehem. On their route a star reappeared over the place where the child was, so they knew exactly where to go. These Magi were truly wise men because they followed the promptings of God, as God's promptings came to them in different ways--through a star, through scripture, and even through a dream, that was told at the end of Matthew chapter 2. They had a dream telling them to go home by a different route, avoiding Herod, and they followed God's guidance in that dream.

Today we would be wise to listen to God speaking to us, as well. Our journey through darkness and hardship may be long and arduous, but like the wise men of old, we keep moving forward in faith, open to the many promptings of God.

It is interesting, friends, that Matthew is the only gospel writer to mention these *wise men* and their journey of faith. I think he did this to highlight the role that God's presence in the world played, not just for the Jewish people but for people beyond that setting, even Gentiles, as far east as those wise men. The whole of Matthew's gospel conveys this openness of God, this calling of God, not just upon his chosen people, but upon *all* people.

Today we take up that call as we follow the steps of the Wise Men, the steps that led all the way through to the end of Matthew's gospel, to the Great Commission. We are among those who are called to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the way of Christ.

Friends, those wise men who first came recognized Jesus Christ for what he was before anyone else did. Their eyes were open to see this was not a baby like any other but this was a king, this was a great high priest, this was our Savior! Their three gifts represented those unique roles that Christ plays. Christ plays those roles in our lives, and again, like those wise men called from far away to follow Christ, we are called today to draw near in worship, to continually follow the promptings of God as we live out our faith and shine now as stars against the dark sky, sharing the light of Christ with others.

May God help us as we seek to shine his light in this world. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Sacrament of Communion

Friends, come to this table today if you love God a little and wish to love God more. Come and share together in these gifts of God's love and grace.

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, we thank you for the love that unites us as one family around this table. We thank you, for you are the light of the world, the light that shines in our darkness, the light that shines in the darkness of our hearts. Lord, help us not only to claim your light, but to shine your light and share it with others.

We pray today for all who are in need of a reminder of your light and grace at work in their lives. We pray today for all who are sick and for all who care for the sick. Bring healing, help and strength to them. We pray for those who are mourning loved ones as they begin a new year. Lord, bring comfort and eternal hope in your resurrection promises. Please bring needed guidance and help to those without work and to anyone who struggles financially. For all who are uncertain about their future, Lord, please provide guidance and peace. Bring an end, we pray, to this pandemic. Help us, dear God, to place our trust in you in every experience and journey of life.

We praise you, dear God, today for the gifts of this bread and cup. We ask that the bread that we break and the cup that we bless would make us one with each other and one with Christ, by the power of your Spirit. We thank you that we can share this meal today, not only with others gathered online through this service, but with so many other people throughout the world and with the whole company of heaven as we celebrate Epiphany. Together we sing your praises; one family of faith even as we pray together the prayer first given to us by your Son, who said,

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

Friends, on the night of His arrest our Lord Jesus Christ took bread and after he gave thanks to God, his Father, he broke it saying, "This is my body that has been broken for you. Do this in memory of me." In the same way, after supper Jesus took the cup saying, "This cup is the new covenant, sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink from it, do so remembering me, for as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again." These are the gifts of God given to the people of God. Let us share this communion meal together at this time.

Smith Family Singers sing "Shine On Us"

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Closing Prayer and Benediction

To close this time of communion, would you all please pray with me. Lord, you make all things new, including us. You revive hope in our hearts and within our spirits. Thank you for feeding us on the bread of life. We thank you for these signs of your abiding love and grace. As we journey into this new year, please strengthen us and guide us so that our lives may forever reflect the light of your presence at work in the world. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

And now, dear friends, as we go from here today, may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May the Lord lift up the light of his countenance and give you peace. And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest upon you and upon all those whom you love, this day and forever more. Amen.