

Shine: 3. Everywhere I Go
Matthew 2:1-12
December 17, 2017
Pastor Steve Richards

“This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine...” I remember first singing this song when I was a child. “Everywhere I go, I’m gonna let it shine...” In those days everywhere was the sidewalk I took from church to home to school – just three blocks total. But even that was hard. Somehow that seemed too far. The everywhere we sang about, I think, was our little church, and if anyone came into our church we were going to let it shine. But taking that light beyond the walls? I’m not sure I even thought that was possible or even necessary.

A few nights ago, I was driving in Medina on a road I don’t travel very often, and with the headlights on I could see just a short distance in front of me. Then I turned on the high beam and the light went about twice as far – in front and to the sides. The light went far enough to drive safely, but still not that far really. I began to wonder just how far does light go – this little light of mine. How far? Sometimes when we look at the darkness of the world, the light doesn’t seem to shine very far. There are limits to what one beam of light can do. I like the idea of letting my light shine but much of the time we suffer from a limitation theology. How often do you find yourself saying – “I can’t do that; I don’t even want to do that. I don’t care what the song says, letting my light shine or going everywhere to let my light shine, it’s just a song. It’s not talking to me.” And the light doesn’t shine.

Or we don’t have to look very far to see people not like us. People who don’t act like us, talk like us, think like us, vote like us. Does God really want God’s light to shine everywhere? Really? We like the people like us and we can let the light shine among us and shine on others who want to be like us. But everywhere – literally, everywhere. Light doesn’t shine that far, does it? 2000 years ago was God only sending light to one corner of the world – to one tiny back road village or was God planning something greater than that? What if God was expecting the light of God’s love to shine in every person everywhere – and not just the people who showed up to honor his birth, not just the people of Bethlehem or Judea or the Roman Empire, not just the people of the first half of the first century AD, but each and every person who had ever and will ever live. What if God wants every single person to see and share the life this child of Bethlehem brought into our world?

I think God wants a relationship, a life-transforming relationship with everyone. In 2 Peter 3, verses 8-9, we read this: **With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.** God’s sense of time is not like ours. God’s time is eternity. We look around and wonder why God hasn’t fixed the broken places, but maybe God is working – maybe God’s plan is already progressing – maybe God is waiting for you and me. **Instead God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.** God does not give up on anyone. Those who survey religious preferences of Americans tell us the fastest growing group in America are people who want nothing to do with religion. But Jesus wants everything to do with them. God knows there is something deep inside that cannot be filled by anything or anyone but a relationship with God. And sometimes, God even uses the people we think are beyond God’s beam of light to show us what God is up to.

That’s Matthew, chapter two. It is the story of a group of outsiders who come to Emmanuel. **After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the**

Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” Magi from the East, probably Persia, 1200 miles to the east. They studied the stars. They believed the whole world was interconnected and when something happened on earth it was reflected in the sky and when something happened in the heavens, it meant some event would take place here on earth. The stars meant something to them, and we don't know exactly what they saw whether some star or a comet or an alignment of planets but from what they saw they believed that a new king of Jews had been born. But why should they care whether there's a new king of the Jews? They are not Jews; they live 1200 miles to the east. Why would these outsiders be the ones to validate this child as the Messiah? It's like inviting someone who knows nothing about Christmas to go home with you to certify what you are doing is actually Christmas. Why doesn't God use the high priest from the Temple or a Pharisee from down the street in Bethlehem?

God chooses outsiders. And something is awakened in them, something inside that won't leave them alone. And they travel, by foot – though we will have camel here tonight, the Bible doesn't mention a camel. They walk 1200 miles, a 60 day journey – only to reach Jerusalem which is not where the child is. They've taken a wrong turn. Have you ever been looking for something, seeking something of meaning and value, a purpose for living only to find yourself on the wrong path? The Magi come to Herod. **When Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him.** (Matthew 2:3) As I described last week, Herod is a paranoid king. When Herod is disturbed, everyone in Jerusalem knows that means trouble and in Herod's unpredictable rage, there's no telling who he will kill. For Herod, it doesn't matter that this new king is a baby – it's competition and his response is to wipe out any real or imagine threat to his authority. Herod is and his descendants would be the king of the Jews. He would see to that. Those who knew the scripture knew if the Messiah was born, he would be born in the birthplace of King David – and that was Bethlehem.

So, the Magi walk another 6 miles to Bethlehem and find the place where the child was. They enter the home. Though we tend to condense the story, this is now weeks after Jesus' birth. No longer in the stable or cave, but a home, and the Magi offer gifts for a king – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – gifts that will also provide for them as they escape to Egypt. The Bible does not describe their encounter with Jesus, but there must have been something in this child that touched them deeply. Something in their holding him and hearing from Mary and Joseph that they realized this is a child unlike any child they've ever met. This is not just a child who will grow up to be a king. This is Emmanuel – God with us. They have come face-to-face with the light of the world. Matthew says: They bowed down and worshiped him.

They see Jesus, and they are changed. We know this because of what happens next. **Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.** (Matthew 2:12) They will not be used by Herod. They are filled with God's light. So I ask again: How far does the light shine? Deep inside the people we least expect. And how does God shine God's light? Through you! “Everywhere I go...”

Sometimes our limitations lead us to think God could not actually use me. Or we feel powerless – either because of the stuff in our lives that we have not yet worked out or we feel powerless in the face of circumstances beyond our control. But just like the Magi, if we will let the light shine in us, we receive the power that will enable the light to shine through us. A few weeks ago, a hall light in our home stopped working, so I changed the light bulb but it still didn't work. I checked the electrical panel to see if the power was off but it wasn't. The problem was the switch which needed to be replaced. No power; no light. Here's what Paul says in Ephesians 1:13 **When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.** If you believe, you already have the power. The Magi were smart people. They weren't afraid to

travel. They had the resources to do so. But they were deceived by Herod. But after their encounter with Jesus, the light of the world, they receive something inside – the Holy Spirit – and suddenly they can hear the voice of God. Have you ever heard the voice of God? I don't mean an audible voice – though it's possible; I mean a nudge, an inner sense, a leading from the Holy Spirit. Maybe you work with someone going through a tough time and you don't know what it is but you have this feeling that you should talk to them. Holy Spirit. Maybe a family member is far from God and doesn't want anything to do with religion, and yet you have this feeling to pray for them. Holy Spirit. Or a neighbor needs help and you can't get them off your mind, but you don't want to be intrusive but you can't get them off your mind. Holy Spirit. Or you wake up with someone's name on your mind or that name suddenly comes to you for no reason. Holy Spirit. Will we allow the light to shine through us?

Or we hear about something that's happening in the world, and we think someone should do something (raise my hand). It could be the Holy Spirit. Fear can limit us. None of us want to be rejected, but if we don't take a step, the light doesn't shine. Jesus said, You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before others that they will see your good deeds and give glory to the giver of that light.

A few weeks ago, I saw this story on CBS news. It's one of the stories that Steve Hartman tells so well. Take a listen. *[video of two little girls who call themselves twins; one black and one white]* God's preferred way of working in this world is through people. The light shines in us, so that the light can shine through us. This little light of mine – will I let it shine?

Take a moment. Who needs a little light in their life? Do you know someone who is going through a rough time and could use encouragement and hope? Is there some name that is on your heart today? God determines who. We are the how. When we share the light, we are changed – and the world sees the light.

Everywhere I go, I'm gonna let it shine...

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of December 17, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Holy God, there is a need deep within us that only you can fill. We can look in other places and seek other answers but still something is missing deep inside. May we welcome your light to fill our deepest need and to shine within us once again in this season. Thank you that you do come with light and life. Use us to spread that same light everywhere we go. Amen.

Monday, December 18

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-3

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Observation: This beautiful poem was probably first addressed to Israelites returning from exile in Babylon. The Jerusalem to which they returned had been sacked and burned—it was not, as they arrived, glorious. But God called the returned Israelites to be a light to others. God's hope wasn't just a show to watch passively. When the light shined on God's people, it called them to “Arise! Shine!”

Application: The prophet did not call the Israelites to be glorious on their own. Instead, he wrote, “the Lord will shine upon you; God’s glory will appear over you.” God’s light and love is to shine through us to reach out to nations and kings. In what ways can you more fully take in God’s glory and love so that you, in turn, can let it shine out to those around you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when the world seems the scariest and ugliest, shine your light in and through me. In place of gloom, give me a spirit that shines, not only at Christmas but all year round. Amen.

Tuesday, December 19

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:10-13

“Hear the word of the LORD, you nations; proclaim it in distant coastlands: ‘He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.’ For the LORD will deliver Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they. They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD— the grain, the new wine and the olive oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more. Then young women will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.

Observation: Jeremiah’s prophetic commission was a painfully lonely one. Much of the time, he pleaded with the citizens of Jerusalem not to throw away their lives by fighting the invading Babylonian troops (Jeremiah 21:8-9). But in today’s reading, he looked ahead and spoke of hope and joy. The day would come (not right away, but it would come) when Israel’s exile would end. And, like the glow of dawn on the horizon, Jeremiah’s words hinted at the day when God would turn all “mourning into laughter and sadness into joy.”

Application: How far does the light shine? Jeremiah 31 began with the words “at that time.” “That time” is a reference to a decisive time of divine activity and the resulting changes. How far into the future is not specified, rather the emphasis is on the qualitative changes between the present circumstances and the future God has promised. Jeremiah’s message said neither Israel’s exile, nor the world’s brokenness, would last forever. How easy or hard do you find it to trust that God’s great story ends in joy, not in sorrow?

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for the prophetic promise that your story (and therefore mine as your child) ends in joy. I eagerly look forward to that wonderful day. Amen.

Wednesday, December 20

Scripture: Isaiah 7:5-16; Matthew 1:22-23

Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah’s son have plotted your ruin, saying, “Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it.” Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: “ ‘It will not take place, it will not happen, for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah’s son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.’ ” Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, “Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.” Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try

the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

Observation: Three kings were plotting to attack Israel, and King Ahaz was frightened. The prophet Isaiah said to ask for a sign that God was with him. The stubborn king refused, but Isaiah gave him a sign anyway—a young woman would give birth to a son. Before the boy reached bar mitzvah age (age 13), the plotting kingdoms would lose their power (and they did). Matthew said Mary’s son completed Isaiah’s prophecy by being God’s presence for all people.

Application: In his commentary, William Barclay summed up Matthew’s message: “Jesus is the one person who can tell us what God is like, and what God means us to be. In him alone we see what God is and what [humanity] ought to be.” In what ways have you been able to make Jesus central to your understanding of what God is like? Has that helped you to avoid some of the negative, frightening images of God some people have? If so, how?

Prayer: O Lord, on that first Christmas you came into our midst. You were human, but you were also more. Give me insight and humility as I grapple to internalize the mystery that you were Emmanuel, “God with us.” Amen.

Thursday, December 21

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: “ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Observation: Who were these wise men (Greek *magoi*) who came from the East seeking the “King of the Jews” who had been born? Not “kings” (the carol notwithstanding), but “scholars who were students of the stars” (Barclay). Like the Queen of Sheba, they made a long journey across the desert. They were drawn, not by reports of wealth and wisdom, but by an unexpected star and the tantalizing hope of a new King who would bring the world a fresh start.

Application: Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus both wrote that at the time Jesus was born, an ancient prophecy led many to believe a world ruler would rise in Judea. They both said the prophecy must have meant Emperor Vespasian. Those Romans missed the true king; the wise men didn't. How can you keep your mind and heart open to God's work?

Prayer: Thank you, God, that you did come and that you still enter the lives of your people with light and life. Just as the magi did not give up when they strayed from the light, help me to stay focused so that all I do may glorify you. Amen.

Friday, December 22

Scripture: Luke 2:21-38

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Observation: Simeon was "led by the Spirit" to the Temple area. The text implies that the Spirit must have also led him to Mary, Joseph and their infant son rather than to any other parents who brought infants to the Temple that day. Luke said, "The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ." So for Simeon, this was truly a dream come true.

Application: "Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area." It is important to pay attention to God's "inner nudges" through the Spirit. In what ways have you sensed the Holy Spirit's leading in your life? How can you distinguish between the Spirit's "nudges" and other impulses that may come to you?

Prayer: Lord God, I'm thankful for the story of how Simeon eagerly anticipated and welcomed Jesus. I pray that I might live my life in eager anticipation and openness to your Spirit for what you want to do today. Amen.

Saturday, December 23

Scripture: Ephesians 2:3-10

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Observation: What word or phrase speaks to you from this passage? “It is by grace you have been saved.” God saved us FROM a broken, self-seeking way of life, for a very specific purpose. God’s mission, what Jesus called “the kingdom of God,” is to restore not just individuals, but this whole broken world to the divine purpose. And God saves us FOR a new life as God’s human instruments, joining in God’s work to reclaim our broken world.

Application: John Wesley applied the idea that we are “created in Christ Jesus to do good works” to everyday life through his second General Rule: “By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men.” What are one or two “sorts” of goodness you didn’t used to practice, but do now as a Christ follower?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for all that you have saved me from. Guide me day by day into a way of living that honors and carries out the purpose that you saved me for. Amen.