

Gracious and loving God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hurting, and hungry, and dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is Epiphany Sunday in the United Methodist Church. This year, it is the twelfth day of Christmas that we hear celebrated in a song about Partridges and pear trees and so on. Tomorrow, January 6, will be the “Epiphany,” the official end of Christmas. Only a small percentage of Christians will take note, since they ceased being Christmassy the day after Christmas even though the church celebrates the twelve days of Christmas called “Christmastide.” But in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Epiphany IS Christmas. Epiphany is the day that the “wise men” arrived at the place where Joseph and Mary were staying and worshiped the newborn baby Jesus.

In our “Cliff Notes” version of Jesus’ birth, we converge all the miracles of Emmanuel—God WITH us—into one magical, manger night. But the “wise men,” who were Persian astrologers, Gentile “wizards,” outside-the-box “scholars” of their day, were still following that strange star during this time. They were making their way to Bethlehem to find whatever awaited them at the end of their star quest, or to put it in terms Judy Garland made famous, at the end of their starbow.

They were not sure what they would find, but they followed the star well stocked. These astrologers went to a kind of theological “Bass Pro Shop” to be prepared for all possibilities of what lay at the end of the star.

One brought a gift for a “king”—nothing less than pure gold. Gold is never a bad choice. Gold testified to the true royalty of this sign-rich king. But how was this newborn child, not born in a beautifully carved crib but in a stable and laid in a manger, in any way a king? To leave a gift of gold for such a hapless child was a true testimony of faith.

The second “wise man” or “scientist” brought frankincense—a gift appropriate for a priest, for one who would serve God’s mission in this world. The gift of frankincense would provide the scent of an offering to an attentive God, and provide a sense of peace to those who made their sacrifice of the fragrant gift. Did the baby Jesus look like a potentially powerful priest? Probably not. Leaving an expensive gift of a pot of frankincense was truly an act of faith.

The third astrologer or “wizard” brought myrrh. This was perhaps the most insightful—and weird—of the three gifts of the magi. Myrrh was used as an embalming spice. It was used in burial rituals. In fact, myrrh was a sign of death. Not a very traditional “shower gift.” Yet here is death in attendance at the baby Jesus’ bedside.

Think about it. What was an amazing foretelling of what Jesus’ life would be on this earth: as a “king,” as a “priest,” and as the “messiah.”

Jesus’ birth transformed the definition of kingship from power to service. Jesus called into being a new kind of service, a service to the least, not a service to those with the most to give or a service to those most invested in keeping the status quo. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Three Shower Gifts”, Leonard Sweet. [www.sermons.com](http://www.sermons.com) accessed 1/2/15

What was it that the wise men had seen? Why is it that the Jewish scholars of the day had missed the event? Why did it take these visitors from the East to make the important people aware of what had occurred right under their very noses?

John's gospel tells us that the Word, Jesus, the light of the world, had come into the world, but the world did not know him, it didn't recognize him. Perhaps there were many reasons why the Jewish people missed the signs. Perhaps they were looking for an already grown up Messiah who would assemble a great army to put down the Roman occupation. We already know from Matthew's account that Herod was terrified at that prospect. It is when the wise men give an account of their journey, a journey that had been conceived up to two years earlier when the "star" was first visible, that he could breathe easier... what threat could a mere child be to his power? All the easier to eliminate the threat... or so he thought. So he hatched a plan to eliminate that threat by ordering the killing of all Jewish males in the area under the age of 2. A threat that was averted, at least for Jesus, when Joseph was warned in a dream to high tail it off to Egypt.

I ask these questions about how the people who were so anxious for a savior missed the blessing that was right under their nose... and they continued to miss that blessing throughout Jesus' life. I ask these questions knowing full well that far too many of us are guilty of missing the obvious too.

Instead of looking for Christ, who is right in our midst, we look to other types of stars. There are so many people who crave our adoration, yet

many of them are not persons that we should want to emulate. Or, in the church, we really look up to the church growth gurus, the superstar pastors who, in many cases, will tell you that they just happened to be at the right place at the right time for the spectacular to have occurred.

Perhaps instead of looking to the media (social or otherwise), we should look to folks who felt the call of God in their life and then acted upon it. Mother Teresa is one such person. She spent her life in the slums of Calcutta tending to the poor and the outcast in that heavily structured society. What is especially amazing about Mother Teresa is that this little Catholic nun who was so devoted to the poor and the outcast had lost the sense of God's presence. But she went on loving others and serving others because, although the spark of her faith had seemed to go out, she labored on with a confidence that God had never abandoned her. Or how about Brother Ron Fender in Chattanooga who spent his life working with the homeless until his death in February 2016, literally making one of his ministries the washing and caring for the feet of the chronically homeless; or Barry Kidwell, whose Mustard Tree Ministries, sponsored by the Scenic South District offers food, housing, job training, and other services to the homeless in Chattanooga to help them turn their life around.

We miss the presence of Christ when we think that we are too small or too old, or too young, or too tired to live out our lives as followers of the one who brought light into the world. A world that was dark with sin and discouragement, and hopelessness. The darkness did not overcome that light 2000 years ago, the darkness does not overcome it today. We must never forget that.

We miss the presence of Christ when we are so busy seeking the god of our expectations, a safe, quiet, meek and mild god who doesn't get in the way of our biases and prejudices, that we miss the God of the universe who challenges our expectations, calls us to radical discipleship and actually demands that we take up our cross and follow him.

We miss the presence of Christ when we become too preoccupied with a personal relationship with Christ that we forget that we are called to be the body of Christ, working together with other believers, each one using the gifts and graces that they have been given by God to bring the kingdom of God to life in the here and now.

We miss the presence of Christ when we become so obsessed with the mistaken idea that we must be busy being Marthas, doing the work of the church, that we forget that we need to take time to be Marys too, spending time at the feet of the master, listening for what he is saying to us and living our lives as if Jesus makes a difference.

We miss the presence of Christ when we become, as our District Superintendent Randy Martin calls it, "distracted disciples" - distracted by the voices that call us away from the important task of letting the light of Christ shine in and through us. Distractions like the news that was blown out of proportion over the proposal to divide the United Methodist Church should our continuing disagreements lead to that prospect. Distractions that keep us from seeing the people that are all around us in need of Jesus and his message of hope, of healing, and of reconciliation. Distractions that seek to divert us from the task of feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoner, and from

living our lives as a testament of God's gracious work in us. Changing us. Transforming us into the people of light and life that we are called to be.

“No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.” On this day that closes out the Christmas season, let's not put Christ away with the decorations, but keep him at the center of our focus throughout the year. It took three Kings to see what his own people missed, a Savior living in their midst. Let's not make the same mistake.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.