

*“I’m Watching the Sonrise”*

*Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12*

*January 3, 2016*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

*The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

Two weeks ago tomorrow we observed the longest night of the year in Planet Earth’s northern hemisphere. The least amount of sunlight and the most amount of dark marked the winter solstice; an event we marked here in worship with a first-ever “Blue Christmas” service. “Blue Christmas” worship is designed to minister to all who are experiencing loss and grief at Christmas, particularly bereaved people. 63 worshippers heard scripture read, joined in carols and lighting votive candles, and prayed. Many were from the community beyond Mary Taylor Memorial Church. The positive responses were such that I am confident we will offer it again this year. I want to publicly thank Bob Lawrence and Priscilla James for their leadership in preparing this worship, and all those who, in addition to them, helped lead it: Pastors Hal and Rachel, Mark and Joanne Platt and Mary Lou Kampert.

I mention this experience because, since that night, the nights are shorter and daylight lengthens. On this Epiphany Sunday, we recall that light illumines our physical lives and also our spiritual lives. We watch the s-u-n rise and we are “watching the S-O-N rise.”

This S-O-N rise manifests God’s salvation in the Messiah not only to Jews but to the whole world. The word “Epiphany” means “manifestation.” It refers to Jesus being “shown” as Messiah to the Gentile (that is, non-Jewish) world. This manifestation is represented by the wise seekers, the so-called “three kings.” The official Feast of the Epiphany is January 6. The days between it and Christmas are the celebrated “12 Days of Christmas.” Epiphany, known in Latin culture as “Three Kings Day”, brings to a close the Christmas season.

By the way, how many wise men were there? We don’t know. We surmise three from the number of gifts they bore. How do we know they were wise men? They stopped to ask for directions!

These wise men were more likely astrologers. The word “magi” in the original New Testament Greek means “astrologer.” They may have been followers of the Zoroastrian religion, which came from Persia, “the East” (today’s Iran and Iraq) as they followed the star to Bethlehem.

So what? The church is counter-cultural. We’re still singing Christmas carols while the stores are marketing Valentine’s Day. For some of us it feels weird and late to be celebrating Christmas now. The world’s culture tells us Christmas is over. Indeed, for some the trees sit forlorn on curbs, lights and decorations are stored away, the holiday but a memory.

Would we be better Christians if we savored our Savior’s birth longer? Possibly. I can tell you that with all the preparation before December 25, this is one Christian who is not about to close up shop until the Season is fully over. I can tell you that it is a delight to savor Christmas, like spiced cider or wassail for the soul. If you’re not a foodie, neither am I: but those are hot, non-alcoholic punches with strong flavor best enjoyed in sips.

What if we lingered over Christmas, like sipping hot punch or standing on a great beach watching a great sunrise? You’ve done it, I’m sure, as I did it with my sons last summer in New Jersey: no small thing, getting two millennials up while on vacation to watch the sunrise! But we did it and you have, too, seeing the brilliant fireball break the horizon and looking as long as you dare until your eyes can’t take the brightness anymore. Would that memory help us be better Christians throughout the year?

Let me tell you something. One of the best Christmases I remember was celebrated in late February. It had to be the late 1960’s or early ‘70’s. My older brother Bernie was in the Navy and couldn’t get shore leave until then. My parents perfectly preserved everything—the tree (a live one!), the lights, the decorations, the stockings on the mantle—so that he could have Christmas at home. You should have seen his face walking in the door. I’m sure many of you have similar stories. This season I know a family whose celebration of Christmas

was less about trees and lights and more about a father's homecoming from addiction and the beginning of a new life.

Some people will say it doesn't matter whether or not we savor the season. Seasons come and go: life and death, joy and pain, hope and despair come and go. Sure they do. But I want and need a Savior. I need a Savior to hang on to when life is tough and a Savior to praise when life is good. I want to watch the S-o-n rise.

You and I need to do our parts, too. That's what this Covenant Service is about, used by "the people called Methodist" for over 260 years. It is about committing ourselves to love when it's costly and serve when it's inconvenient. It's about being the change we want to see in the world. And it's about doing it consistently and persistently, day after day, month after month, year after year.

1 minute, 40 seconds isn't generally much in the world of persistence. Perhaps an exception is in holding your breath, which I was able to do for little more than half that length of time. Mostly, though, 1:40 is a pretty brief span of time. Yet in a tenth of the time it will have taken to deliver this message, God adds, on average, this much light to each day as we move from the winter solstice toward the summer solstice. That change is slow at first. At this time of year, only two weeks away from the Winter Solstice, we are only adding a few seconds of daylight to each day. Yet as we progress, each day is longer and the amount of light added daily is longer. At this time of year God works slowly, almost imperceptibly, to correct the imbalance of light. Soon the acceleration of God's action will be evident and the winter blahs, or Seasonal Affective Disorder, that challenges some of us will be gone.

So for us as we live our discipleship. The covenant promises we make may mean some new behaviors that we will at first be slow to adopt. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, we will find ourselves living into the light, watching the s-o-n rise, believing that God is truly persistently desiring to save us all. So follow the S-O-N, the Savior of the World. After all, wise men and wise women still seek him.