

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup> He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. <sup>15</sup> (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") <sup>16</sup> From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup> The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

## Sermon

Tonight we celebrate the birth of Jesus. We celebrate the babe who was laid in a manger, because there was no room for his family in the inn. We celebrate the child born to a young mother who could not name the father. We celebrate a boy whose father loved him as his own, even though he knew he was not. We celebrate an infant who was visited by lowly shepherds who came with a story of angels in the sky and wise men who came with a story of a star in the heavens. We celebrate a toddler who is protected by angels and whose arrival is not in the light of day, but in the darkness of night, and of occupation, and of fear and evil acts. Tonight we celebrate a child who became a refugee in Egypt because he was wanted by the authorities in his own land. We celebrate a story that we know by heart, and a story that also touches our hearts in new ways each year.

The story that Matthew's gospel tells is filled with rich symbolism that points the reader to see this baby as the one that they had been waiting for, the Messiah. The stories of escape and darkness that were just read give us images that harken back to the story of the Exodus. This Jesus would be the new Moses, he would come and set his people free from the bondage of slavery and lead them through the wilderness to a land flowing with milk and honey.

The story of Joseph and the Angel pushes on the theme of righteousness. Joseph was afraid to take Mary as his wife, afraid to violate the Mosaic law. And yet the words of the angels are "do not be afraid". Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. Do not be afraid to become the father of her son. Do not be afraid for you will name him Jesus! In other words, the angel tells Joseph to shatter the confines of the old law in order to keep the new law. Will Joseph remain "a righteous man" in the old sense, or will he respond to God's new act and become a genuinely righteous man walking God's new path of obedience? Joseph's predicament mirrors our own. How shall we be righteous, in the old ways or the new?

And then there are those Wise Men from the east. Were they astronomers or magicians, sages or kings? The gospel is vague on the matter. What is evident is that here, at the very beginning of the story, we are told that outsiders come to worship this child. This is not just a Messiah for the Jews, a king only for the Children of Israel. Jesus doesn't come into the world only for the "right" people or the good guys or my people. Matthew throws out those barriers right from the beginning by having these gentiles wonder into the Jewish scene of Bethlehem, bringing their gifts offered for a king - riches and fragrances and all.

The coming of the wise men remind us that we all come for different reasons. They had an experience when they looked to the heavens. Some of us have had experiences when we looked at our parents, or we listen to our neighbors, or we met our children for the first time. Some of us had an experience that we can only explain as God stepping in, and some of us have experienced the daily comfort of our faith and church family. But what was true for the wise men is true for us. Our spiritual experiences are only a

beginning, they set us on the journey, but they can only go so far. The wise men stopped to talk with Herod, and that is where scripture was needed to get them to Bethlehem. We also need to read and hear and know scripture, if we are going to see the child and worship him.

Tonight we celebrate the birth that symbolizes so much to us and to our world. But most importantly, tonight we celebrate Emmanuel, God with us. Cradled in a manger among the animals, in the darkness of night, comes the light of love. Thanks be to God for this amazing love, may we share the light of Christmas not only with one another, but those who struggle with righteousness like Joseph, those seeking Moses to set them free, and those who are outsiders, seeking a deeper faith like the Wise Men. Let us share the light of Christmas tonight, and every night. Amen