

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2005

The Fine Art of Waiting

Isaiah 64:1-9

The First Sunday in Advent

Rev. Richard K. Gelson, Fairmount Presbyterian Church

On this first Sunday of Advent, I invite you to use your imagination to visit a fine art gallery with me. If you don't particularly like visiting art galleries (real or imagined) or if you haven't studied anything of art since grade school, then let me offer a word about what "fine art" is and is not.

It's tempting to think of it as artwork created with the very finest materials found in this world. But if this were true, then we could create fine art just by giving nursery school kids and kindergartners 10K diamonds and genuine flecks of 24K gold to glue onto some construction paper. Such projects would arrive home and, completely bedazzled, we would say ever so sweetly, "Oh, honey, this is a very fine looking ... um, a beautiful picture of a ... um ..."

Identifying fine art is about more than whatever materials were used to make it. It's actually more about how well the artist applied those materials. To be called a "fine artist" means the person has perfected a particular form of artistic expression. Think, for example, of da Vinci's Italian Renaissance masterpieces the "Mona Lisa" and "The Last Supper." They are works of fine art because they reveal the immense skill of their Creator's hands.

The fine art gallery I invite us to visit this morning by way of our imaginations features figures and scenes made of sculpted clay. The fine artist who has perfected this particular form of artistic expression is none other than God.

Entering the gallery, the first piece we come to is generally regarded as God's very earliest work. It's a piece titled, "Adam and Eve in Eden." What hopes God had that this work of divine creativity would forever reflect perfect goodness and light! God intended it to be totally inspiring, a scene of harmony, wholeness and hope. Its principle figures were to be a self-portrait of their Creator. Tragically, this was not so. The moment God rested from sculpting this masterpiece, God watched as the clay hardened and then

completely cracked in a way that broke God's heart. It was as if the masterpiece didn't know to trust and appreciate its true beauty and decided to cast itself into a kiln of condemnation, forevermore to be resistant to any further touch from its Creator.

God could have tossed this expression of his heart and art aside. But God loved it eternally. And so God waited (waiting is such an important part of the inspiration and creative process). God waited until new scenes came to mind. Then he sculpted them, again with the intention they would reflect divine goodness and light, harmony, wholeness and hope. As we stroll slowly down the hall of our gallery, escorted by our imaginations, we can see them. These subsequent works have titles such as "Noah and Sons," "Abraham and Sara," "Isaac and Rebecca," "Jacob and Joseph," "Moses and Aaron," and that magnificent effort we know as "King David and the Holy City."

God committed to each of these works great love and intensity, graciously forming each figure and placing everything in salvific settings. But to no lasting avail. Sadly, with time, each of these poignant works also proved to harden beyond their Creator's good intention. Even collectively, the works could not convey the goodness and light, harmony, wholeness and hope truly befitting God's fine art.

We need to pause with these important pieces. They are deeply significant for our faithful journey through the gallery. When we study them carefully, seeing just how powerful God's hand was upon them, we appreciate the patience and commitment of this Master Artist. Pausing with these pieces, we prepare ourselves for the masterpiece just ahead in the gallery of grace.

In an unending quest to restore what he intended "Adam and Eve" to represent, God waited out long inner struggles until the fullness of time came about. And that is when his quintessential masterpiece was born. This is the work on display directly in the center of the gallery, right in the middle of our mind's eye. It is centrally located because it helps us to interpret everything we see before it and everything we see beyond it. It is unlike any other piece in the gallery. The composite of clay that formed it is remarkably different. You see, all the previous works of clay had the breath and sweat of God's will and God's labors in their mix. But into this central masterpiece God completely poured himself. This allowed the clay to really breathe. And so this stunningly beautiful work of fine art is rightly titled, "Emmanuel – God With Us."

In the next few weeks to come, let's take a seat beside this utterly unique, totally personal expression of goodness and light, harmony, wholeness and hope. Let us do so in order to more fully appreciate the fine art of God. Let us do so patiently, studying the scene with our hearts, our minds, and our souls. Let us take notes on what we see. Jot down our feelings about it.

And as we wait for its truth to even more fully come upon each of us, we'll do well to ask questions of it. How does it inspire us? How does it challenge us? What has this masterpiece of God have to do with our lives today? More specifically ... why the manger scene to depict the glorious birth of God with us? Why not a castle atop Mt. Sinai instead? Why an unwed, peasant teenage mother from the simple mountain hamlet of Nazareth? Why not a royal queen from the holy city of Jerusalem? Why a quiet night scene with shepherds attending the birth? Why not a scene of trembling mountains and nations underneath a torn open sky full of descending angels?

Our questions do not diminish the power of "Emmanuel – God With Us." They draw us deeper into its beauty and truth, which is the very heart of God. Yes, through this masterpiece God is fully revealed as the quintessential fine artist, a true master of creativity who always pours himself through the stuff of life and love, grit and grace, rebellion and redemption. It is out of awe and pure respect for this Creator God that we decorate our days with our renderings of his most personal work during the time of year now upon us.

The gallery is always open. Admission is always free, though it costs us time and study sufficient for us to see how the definitive, divine masterpiece of "Emmanuel" gives us hope beyond the hardness in our own self-sculpted understandings.

Again, we must not rush to interpret all that we see. Waiting itself is a fine art, which God has also mastered. There are festive songs and bright lights in this gallery to encourage our study. There are friends and family members, poets and storytellers who sit and stroll with us. The more we carefully examine the "Emmanuel" masterpiece in this gallery of God's historic grace, I am confident we will realize its full significance for each of our hearts and each our homes. Amen.

Wait In Peace

December 4, 2005

Second Sunday in Advent: Peace

Rev. Richard K. Gelson, Fairmount Presbyterian Church

I didn't check the clock when I heard the swooshing sound of tiny pajama-clad legs moving across the bedroom. Rebecca quite often proves to be a reliable alarm clock. That particular morning, though, I didn't feel much like jumping right up out of bed. So, I remained on my side, with my back turned toward the inevitable, incoming sound of "daddy, can you get my breakfast?" Although I expected this request, with its usual tone of sweet urgency, it did not come. She was on a different mission that morning.

The night before, she had expressed to us some jealousy about the number of teddy bears Anna gets to sleep with all around her bed. Not able to make a quick and expensive trip to Build-A-Bear or to the Gund display over at Long Valley Pharmacy, I decided to ask her if she would perhaps like to take one of those bears – one that belonged to me – and take care of it for the night in her room. She was more than happy to agree. She seemed to cherish the idea of snuggling protectively with daddy's favorite old bear named Sam.

Her reason for swooshing across the room the following morning was to return Sam to me safe and sound. Reaching ever so gently over me, she nestled Sam between my chin and the covers. Then she gave me a very adorable little kiss on my left cheek, turned around and softly left the room. I was smiling inside and out. In that moment ... that wonderful, gentle moment ... I experienced a firmly certain peace.

When was the last time you experienced a real moment of peace? Where were you? Who were you with? Or were you alone? We all experience peace of mind and, more

significantly, of heart, in our own ways.

I know of many folks who most feel at peace out in nature. In fact, this past week while on retreat at Camp Johnsonburg, I heard someone say, “I’m a black-dirt, smell under the leaves kind of person.” She had quite an organic spirituality! Whether getting dirty in the garden, raking leaves, rearranging stones, taking photos, or simply staring at an ever-changing landscape – be it in the woods or “down the shore” – there is much peace to be gathered by appreciating pieces of nature.

I also know of folks who feel most at peace when they are keeping busy. It’s peaceful for them to stay active, stay on top of things, executing projects and managing their own and others life affairs. The satisfaction of a job well done, of making checks on the “to do” list, of meeting needs in a timely fashion can be quite rewarding and restful.

Hopefully, attending worship, fellowship events and serving Christ’s Church also brings about a significant sense of peace in many lives. Our faith in things hoped for, our convictions about things unseen, is bolstered by this community. So we sing our majestic hymns. We gather for Bible study and prayer. We enjoy our coffee talks and food. We pitch-in however we can to help our many avenues of ministry stay open.

Moments of peace, in all the ways we experience them, are good soul-care. They remind us of the vast greatness and enduring power of faith, hope and love. They help us to be more trusting and to feel an abiding sense of security.

So much so, that waiting for moments of peace to happen while we are experiencing stress and duress can be very difficult for us. This waiting for peace can lead us to live life in uneasy, embattled and defensive ways. The interim period between feeling ill at ease and feeling all is right with the world may even lead us into a fog about our faith. With diminished faith in the living presence of the Prince of Peace, impatience with God can grow strong.

The Bible lesson this morning from 2 Peter speaks to this period between soulful skirmishes and soulful peace. It is a guide for how best to not only wait for peace, but to wait on God in peace whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

The peace the Christians originally being addressed in 2 Peter were waiting for was very specific. They were waiting on the promise of the second coming of Christ. Keep in mind, this was a faith community living in the second century. The expectation of the first century church that Christ was coming right back to judge the living and dead was very high. He'd been born, had taught, healed and made salvation possible, and was going to promptly return to fully reconcile all things to God.

With the passage of time into the second century, hopes of this happening sooner rather than later definitely started to feel dashed. Distrust in this promised, definitive peace of God gained prevalence. And with distrust arose alternative theories. Mostly from people who sought to promote their own versions of what peace in life and with God is all about, versions that emphasized more immediate resolutions to satisfy the impatient of heart.

We can't blame those early Christians for buying into false teachings. Dashed hopes, especially when they hint at feeling betrayed by God's promises, don't make for peaceful living. The author of 2 Peter however, wasn't so accommodating. For him, the only path to peaceful living was to wait with peace of mind and peace of heart on God's word alone. To trust in the words of other voices, especially voices he knew were living lives of licentiousness, self-indulgence, greed, and deep self-deception (2:1-5), was to battle against God! Faith in false words meant one thing and one thing only -- false living and ultimately, an unbearable fate on the actual day of the Lord's return. 2 Peter does not shy away from offering dramatic imagery about such a fate.

So 2 Peter's big point is this – wait for Christ in peace. Do not be found ill at ease. This book of the Bible affirms that while it may feel like it'll be forever, we are reminded that “the Lord is not slow about his promise” to return as “some think of slowness.” (3:9). Christ is not keeping the same watch as we are. Time is not measured in minutes, days, weeks, years, decades, and centuries. We need to keep in mind that “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” (3:8). To tap our watch faces in an attempt to time the fulfillment of God's final, promised peace is to suggest we can clock infinity.

This passage is one suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary for preaching and study during this time of Advent. With good reason. The word Advent comes from the

Latin word Adventus, meaning the coming of the Savior. It is the period of time on the church calendar of waiting to celebrate once again the joy of that initial arrival of our Emmanuel. At the same time, though, it is also a period of time for us to check in with ourselves about how faithfully we are awaiting the second arrival of God with us. Of waiting on the day when all the forces of chaos in this world will cease completely and all the saints will go marching home.

Have we grown forgetful that Christ will come again? Are we suffering some sort of spiritual amnesia? Even as our hearts wait on the peaceful intimacy of silent night, O holy night ... we need to also focus on the great and holy promise that Jesus is Lord and will reveal this further and even more fully in a time to come. In accordance with his promise, “we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (3:13). “Therefore, beloved,” it reads in 2 Peter 3:14, “while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by Christ at peace.”

Ah, how I pray every moment of my life can be one of feeling that gentle, faint four year old kiss. And how I pray to trust with faith like a child that Christ will return to me as surely as my old bear Sam was. How peaceful I want my perspective to grow about this world at war with itself in so many ways.

You and I ... we work. We worship. We wait. We can do so with faith easily fogged up by falsehoods, or we can do so with faith focused firmly on the promises of God. Choose God's Word. Prayerfully concentrate. Wait in peace for Christ to transform your heart again and again until you are found firmly in His eternal embrace. And do so companioned by all the ways you find yourself experiencing moments of peace, for all moments of peace, my friends, are born of God. Amen.

Magnify the Mighty!

Luke 1:46-55

Third Sunday in Advent: Joy

December 11, 2005

Rev. Richard Gelson – Fairmaount Presbyterian Church

For the past couple weeks, a few of us have been sitting down on Sunday evenings to discuss selections from a book of poetry called “Faces at the Manger” by J. Barrie

Shepherd. This is one Christian poet who tells it like it is with great wit and soulful depth. Readers are all but forced at star point into self-examination. There are poems about Joseph as a foster parent, about parents who reluctantly participate in Christmas pageants, about angels and animals, and of course, Rev. Shepherd dishes out about the shepherds.

And then there is the poem, "Mary at the Manger." We sing of the manger so sweetly, don't we? Well, ever wonder what must have been running through Mary's mind as she found her way to that rather inhospitable delivery room in Bethlehem? J. Barrie Shepherd invites us to discover a Mary who finds comfort in the blessed confirmations given to Elizabeth and to Joseph, and in the angelic announcement of her lauded place in sacred history. Then he invites us to hear the very down-to-earth aspects of her heart and mind as she contemplates this further, saying --

"This journey in the bleakest dead of winter, long and aching, bitter with my tears and Joseph's fears along the way; our welcome to this Bethlehem – Joseph's ancestral town – where the streets are crammed with soldiers and with beggars, and the inns are full and every door locked tight against the stranger; is this a greeting for the Son of God? Is this the kind of blessing that was promised when the angel called me, 'Blessed among women?' Such blessing may be better done without, that brings me to this drafty cattle cave, this unassisted birth among the straw, this broken manger bearing so much hope – both human and divine – within its worn and battered wall. 'Blessed among women' indeed! What kind of blessing did he have in mind?"

As usual, this Presbyterian poet raises a very poignant question. We believe that her blessing was that of bearing and birthing Jesus, our Emmanuel ... God with us. We know she did so in some rather raw and miraculous circumstances. But from our vantage point today, we also know that throughout the history of the Church, the exact nature of her blessedness has been a bone of contention between Protestants and Roman Catholics.

Is her blessedness among women (and, of course, men) defined by her being the Queen of Heaven, through whom we pray to God? With respect to the Roman Catholic tradition, this is indeed her blessedness. We who are Christians in the Reformed Protestant tradition, however, do not view Mary in this way. We pray directly to and

through Jesus Christ alone. However, this doesn't mean we Presbyterians ought to place her on some dusty top shelf of an ecclesial closet, only to take her down and examine her significance when contentious debates about her arise. To dull or dismiss Mary's beautiful example of exuberant faith, her most sacred calling to have the power of God alive within her so uniquely, is quite sad.

Thank heaven we have poets who invite us to experience Mary on a deeply personal level, beyond historic debates about her blessedness. But it's not just poets. From some of the most influential Presbyterian Church pulpits, there is a call for us to consider this blessed virgin mother more carefully. One such church is Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago, whose senior pastor is the Rev. Dr. John Buchanan. He proclaimed the following in a sermon preached last year –

“It is time for Protestants to make a place for Mary. She is central to the whole story, the only biblical character to be there at the birth of Jesus and his death and every day in between ... Mary and her story are invitations to bring more than our intellects, our objective, rational, analytical capacity to this unlikely story; she is an invitation to bring our love and our hope and our imagination.”

I believe Pastor Buchanan couldn't be more right. It's one reason I've been drawn to read and teach poetry about Mary. My love and hope and imagination need a spark plug to ignite my personal understanding of her blessedness. So sparked, I found myself prayerfully anchored in this morning's lesson. In traditional terms, these verses are called “The Magnificat.” I read them and hear them as a song of faith, a joyful diddy I prefer to title, “When I Magnify the Mighty!”

The mighty magnified by Mary, of course, is God. For her, as recorded in verse 49, God is the “Mighty One.” Like a spotlight on a stage, this is where our attention is drawn. The original Greek word Luke uses here is *dunatos* (duna-tose). This word inspires us to know God as having the attributes of one who is a pragmatically powerful, strong and able in this world. It is used mostly throughout the New Testament to describe the rule of kings and authorities.

But I believe of special interest to this morning's lesson is how the apostle Paul uses this word in his first letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 1, verse 26, Paul asks the

Corinthian Christians to focus on how God does not call on “dunatos (duna-tose) people” to be the Church. God instead calls on those who do not have dunatos (duna-tose), that is, who do not have power and authority.

Paul preached this message roughly around 54 AD, during a time when a physician named Luke was his student and traveling companion. Luke’s own account of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus followed, written some fifteen to twenty five years later. It’s safe to assume, then, Luke’s study of God was significantly influenced by the apostle Paul. Seems to me this may well explain why Luke casts Mary as the quintessential example of someone whose low estate is fully bolstered by the dunatos (duna-tose) – the power, strength and ability -- of God. Her meekness is her blessedness. Through her low estate as a faithful, pregnant peasant girl, the Son of God is magnified.

If we fail to identify with Mary’s remarkably unmighty yet boldly blessed status, I believe our own ability to magnify the Lord will suffer. I believe we’ll run the risk of always glorifying God from the outside-in, instead of from the inside-out. So let’s rejoice with her and feel a kinship with God’s choice of such a one to bear His Son. By doing so, we are better able to comprehend how even today, God continues to call on those considered weak by worldly standards to be and to lead the Church.

Mary’s song of faith inspires me to share quite a personal word of witness with you all. It’s a word about my mom. From the time she was born, she was the victim of a devastatingly abusive father. The abuse of love and trust led her into a life of addiction. At nineteen, I came along. She was living in near poverty, and pretty much powerless to turn things around. Especially since, soon after, my father abandoned us.

If anyone had told mom back then that God had loved and blessed her, and that God was going to raise me up as a church leader, I’m sure it would have sounded pretty ridiculous. And yet, years later, she shared a reflection of that time with me in a card. I keep a cut-out from this card in my personal Bible. It reads, “I never knew love until the day you were put into my arms.”

The love she felt was a mother’s powerful love for sure. But I believe it was even deeper. I believe it was a magnification of God’s mighty love stirring in her heart, the powerful

love that chooses to work through great lowliness and weakness to redeem lives and build up His Church.

I share her story, and thus my own humble beginning, not to lift us up. I do so to magnify the mighty! I do so to share how personally meaningful the divine dunatos (duna-tose) – is. Mom’s experience was hardly on par with the abundant, joyous love Mary felt with God enfleshed and nestled in her bosom, but what she shares with that humble teenaged mother is the sense of being looked upon favorably by God, of having God give a sign of strength in an otherwise world-weakened life through the gift of a child. Today, clean and sober for many years, she certainly does rejoice in God her Savior. And together, we can’t help but make a place for Mary. We hear her song of faith and sing right along! We love her joyful tune!

In what ways has your heart heard Mary’s song? In what ways have you experienced the surprising, divine dunatos (duna-tose) in your life, in the life of loved ones, or otherwise observed it at work in this world? Your answers, I pray, will lead you further into the blessed, utterly joyful heart of Advent and Christmas.

After posing the question about what kind of blessedness is hers, Shepherd’s poem, “Mary at the Manger” continues to show us a Mary who is fearfully seeking her own truth. At several points, she frets that perhaps she or Joseph have done something wrong, something to corrupt the angelic prophecy about them. In other words, maybe they messed up, offended God, and thus this is the reason they wound up in a manure covered cattle shed instead of someplace seemingly more befitting a divinely royal birth.

Having led us through this imaginative reflection, though, Shepherd ultimately steers us to the natural outcome of realizing one’s true blessedness. Joy. I conclude my privilege of standing in this pulpit today by quoting the words he places on her lips – and thus magnifies in our hearts –

“Still, here he lies at rest. And something tells me that the blessing which I seek lies deep in him. Yes, within this tiny, vulnerable frame there is a life which, like no other, will bring joy for me, to this whole world before its end. Just look at me now!”

Amen.

A House for God

2 Samuel 7:1-17

4th Sunday in Advent: Love

December 18, 2005

Rev. Richard K. Gelson, Fairmount Presbyterian Church

Have you ever gone on an evening drive with the kids, or grandkids, at this time of year just to spy out how folks around town have decorated the outside of their homes? I figure a lot of work goes into putting up beautifully elaborate displays of lights and other festive symbols, so it's best to drive by and appreciate it! If you happen to have Homer Simpson in a Santa suit on your lawn, though, know that I love Homer and appreciate your festive fun, but that I'm not quite sure how I feel about him standing in a Santa suit near to manger scenes and mechanical deer!

What I like most about the strings and strings and strings of lights is how they highlight the architectural beauty of the homes. Handsome designs are all that much more handsome when lit up with strands of twinkling electric stars. I grew up in a duplex with green aluminum siding, which, even when decorated with fat, colored light bulbs, was terribly boring. So when I see, in particular, old stone farm houses and the new homes built to look like them, bathed in heavenly light, I find myself feeling as though I'm waltzing by living works of art.

Even better is when I get the privilege of visiting inside of homes. Any home. Any time of the year. That's when I begin to appreciate more than what can be seen from the outside. Surveying a person's home décor and the particulars of their living space helps me feel like I've gotten to know them better, more personally. I learn more than I ever could just by seeing them here at church or at local functions. I pay attention to artwork, to photographs, to unique items that always have fascinating stories attached to them, to memorabilia, and to those very special items hugging household corners, like mugs that say "World's Best Grandma." Ever notice everyone's house seems to have at least one such mug like this? Whatever the home, I glance around for "clues" to help me understand and appreciate the host more.

I remember visiting a nursing home a few years back. The parishioner I was visiting for

the first time had reluctantly come to reside in the place. There again, she was 101 years old and had outlived just about everyone near and dear to her. I arrived wondering how well I was actually going to be able to get to know her. Wherever she had previously called and decorated as “home” was gone, along with most all of her most cherished, most personally telling belongings.

But you know what? In that home away from home, that home of last resort, I found Zelda’s tiny living space adorned with family photographs, note cards from people who cared, and best of all – I found her shelf full of novels. Most of her body had withered out, but her eyesight and her mind were sharp. In fact, as I approached her on that first visit, my eyes trained in on a Tom Clancy novel she was in the middle of reading! I’m not sure I have the mental wherewithal to get through one of those! That “clue” alone about her personality and interests lent itself to some wonderful connecting points for conversation.

My appreciation for homes, for living spaces inside and out, gets me wondering. If God had a home here on earth, what would it look like? Would it be a snug sized apartment in an inner city? Maybe an igloo? Or a hut in the Sahara? Would it be a magnificent Tudor mansion? Would it be some kind of glass and steel linear design in the Hollywood Hills? God’s got to be tempted to evict Bill Gates and move into his massive, high-tech complex. Nah. God would probably prefer a fishing cabin in the woods.

An even better question, one for me at the moment but that you can consider later for yourself. If I could be God’s personal home architect and interior designer, what would God tell me to create? Obviously, I’d have to get to know God very well in order to talk design. I’d have to give great consideration to exactly where God Almighty, the Alpha and the Omega of all that is, was and evermore will be, would be pleased to dwell. Of this I am certain, it would need to be a home designed to reveal God’s great love for all of his family.

Just so happens that in this morning’s lesson, we find someone contemplating an answer to this question. Once upon a time, King David had been very intent on building God a new home. He was inspired to do so because he didn’t feel God’s previous home was befitting the divine beneficence bestowed on him and on Israel. Let me explain.

The Israelites believed God lived in two places – in the high heavenly realm and in something called the Ark of the Covenant. Unlike Noah's big zoological party boat, this ark was only about three by two foot or so in size. The Israelites quite literally believed that where the ark was, God was sitting right there.

Until the time of David, and to a lesser degree King Saul before him, Israelite lives were ones of wandering. And so, whenever and wherever they wandered, they carried the God seat on poles overlaid with gold which passed through rings on its side. It was a measure of security, the focal point of their worship. It was a transportable Temple. They protected God's house, and believed God, in turn, protected them.

King David, who started out as a humble shepherd boy and as a gifted musician, was very grateful for all of the ways God had blessed him and raise him up to power. And since he had been divinely inspired and gifted to unite all of Israel, he thought it best to create a great house where all of Israel could visit God. Why have God moving around in a little trailer while his servant people were settling into their central locale of Jerusalem as their holy, capital city?

David pitched this idea to his court prophet, Nathan, who was initially warm to the idea. Can't have a capital campaign without first getting the blessings of your spiritual leader! God, however, was not warm to the idea of being boxed in at one spot. And he was especially not warm to the idea of what kind of house David intended to build. Most likely influenced by, or maybe jealous of, neighboring kings who had been appointed by their false gods and who had then gone on to build lavish temples to express their appreciation and display their power, David was intent on building a house of the finest material found anywhere in the middle east at that time. It would be a house, then, fashioned from wood from the cedars of Lebanon.

God's biggest problem with David's architectural intentions, however, had nothing to do with the materials or the size of the blueprint. It was that David seemed to overlook the fact that God had never once requested such a home be built. God's idea of where to live was simply this – God wanted to live wherever all of his people lived. Not in one spot, but scattered about. In a very real sense, the only house for God was in his people's hearts. David was thinking too literally, and perhaps, a bit too much about his legacy.

Still, David was indeed called and blessed, an integral piece of God's grand scheme of salvation. So God told the prophet Nathan to offer David a tremendous blessing in the form of a promise. Instead of having David build God a house, God would instead build David a house. God alone would be its architect, and thus, it would be a house that would stand forever. Not a place, however, built of fine cedar, but a house in the sense of a household. It would be a house for family, a house of love. A house built of flesh and bone and blood.

All the ancestors of David, and of Israel's faith, got their first truly honest glimpse of God's eternally strong, everlasting house, the promised place God was fully pleased to dwell, when its cornerstone was delivered many years later in King David's ancestral home of Bethlehem. God did not call on a political leader with oodles of money and power and influence to set this cornerstone on the face of the earth. God chose instead to work through a young woman of little means. The only investor needed was the Holy Spirit.

This young woman, Mary, her particular "in" with God came as a result of her being engaged to a carpenter, a carpenter who happened to have royalty engrained in his heritage. He was a direct descendent of King David. And so the cornerstone would become known as a royal one, the likes of Israel's greatest leader. It would become known as a fulfillment of the promise Nathan had given to David.

And when the night came for the cornerstone of this true home of divine power and promise and love to be delivered, it did not come to rest in the midst of the cedars of Lebanon. It came to be placed, instead, in Mary's tender arms as she rested in a cattle cave after the delivery. Shepherds, kings, and animals alike came to see and to celebrate with great joy the cornerstone of God's home here on the earth.

Etched into the cornerstone, in an angelic font, was a name. It was a name placed right below God's own inset handprints. The name on the cornerstone was Jesus.

Yes, I love looking at houses. I love visiting them. I love how they often tell me a lot more about the people who dwell in them – their interests, their loves. I especially love the house of God. I love how it has been built up for a couple thousand years from the cornerstone delivered in Bethlehem on a midnight clear long ago.

This house is greater and more intricate than any home a human being could ever hope to build alone. It is a home for God with love as its interior design -- the love God had for David, for all of Israel, and for each one of us. It is a love that makes promises despite our misguided designs. Its Architect is eternal. Additions are always being added. There is always available space. No rent, no mortgage. The cost has been paid in full. This home for God ... this home in our hearts ... will never end. And that's a promise. From God. Amen.

Serendipity Under the Star

Christmas Eve 2006

Matthew 2:1-12

Rev. Richard K. Gelson, Fairmount Presbyterian Church

Casper, Melchior and Balthazar. We know their traditional names. Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. We know the names of the gifts they brought. Yes, we know their story, the witness found in Matthew's Gospel confirming the blessed identity of the beautiful baby born in Bethlehem of Mary and of miracle. Whatever you feel most comfortable calling them -- the three Wise Men, the Magi, the three kings -- do you know they also have a gift to give us on behalf of God right here on this most sacred night? It is a gift given to us across the ages. It is a gift given to inspire our faith journeys to the manger ... and beyond.

Truth be told, it's actually a re-gift, for they had unexpectedly received it as they arrived to see the Son of God at that humble location underneath his risen star. This is not a material gift. It's worth is immeasurable. It's a gift of the Spirit. And through their story, their holy witness, we too are blessed by this truly remarkable gift. It is the gift of accepting sacred serendipity.

Are you familiar with the meaning of serendipity? In its sheerest, it's secular sense, it can be defined as finding something unexpected and useful while searching for something else entirely. Do you use Post-it notes? Well, it was a serendipitous moment in 1968 when a 3M researcher named Spencer Silver tried to design a very strong adhesive and failed. It was serendipitous because a short while later a colleague of his happened to be contemplating a way to put bookmarks in the hymnal of his church

choir. That's when it dawned on him that Spencer Silver's "failure" was pure gold!

From a faithful Christian perspective, however, we realize we can't chalk up all such serendipitous moments to chance. We start to realize that God surprises us with special graces, ones that lead us to joyfully realize God's greater purposes at work in this world. When we experience sacred serendipity, we are changed for the better because we are drawn deeper toward the divine will for our lives and for this world.

Martin Luther once described the Wise Men as "intellectuals, students of the stars and seekers after truth." I imagine them as rather serious, dignified gentleman who spent their days pondering and wandering, the kind of guys who come into power and authority because they are well trained to dispense sound wisdom, and because their counsel is widely respected. This image of the Wise Men is quite a contrast to the ambiance of the manger scene in Luke's Gospel. There we have lowly, outcast, not exactly well educated field workers who race to the scene after an angelic explosion happened over their heads while tending to their flocks. The emphasis in Matthew can be summed up as "inquiring minds need to know!" So it is that the very first human word spoken in Matthew is "where," uttered by those linear thinkers, those dutiful scientists of the sky.

The question is about the location of the one they had heard rumors about. The rumor was that the King of the Jews had been born, and that there was a star signaling his arrival. Being respected astrologers, it would have been embarrassing to their credibility if they could not locate this star and the royal figure associated with it. Further, being in the upper-echelon of society themselves, it would have been rude not to pay this new king homage, that is, to offer a public display of respect. What is very important for us to realize, though, is that these were not Jewish men. This is not a story about how Jewish leaders had a line on the very long awaited birth of the Messiah, and so eagerly sought after him. They were, to put it bluntly, pagans pursuing verification of their belief that new rulers were associated with astrological anomalies. Not the most Hallmark moment of characters, but, as we shall see further in a few moments, this fact makes them all the more poignant to all people of God.

These intellectual, philosophical figureheads figured the best way to gather more information was to go to the Jewish king in office at that time, someone whose Jewish

chief priests and scribes would surely be able to enlighten them. So they invited themselves to the court of King Herod – a lackey of the Romans who was not at all well liked by his people. No wonder he felt threatened by the news of a new king. He did, however, have the information the Wise Men needed. The place under the star they were seeking was Bethlehem, for this was the location prophesied about in verse two of the fifth chapter of the prophet Micah.

Ever the opportunist, and already starting to hatch his plan to dispose of this new threat, Herod didn't encourage the Wise Men to continue their pondering, wandering way. He ordered them to do so, and to do so diligently (as in "don't dare come back here until you've met with success!") He did so while vagrantly lying about his intention to go pay his proper respect to the new king once the Wise Men returned to him. He couldn't have ordered anyone more capable of the task than a trio of non-Jewish scientists with no vested interest in the impact of all this on his rule of Israel.

With the divine sign of the star having been confirmed by the Scriptures of a God that wasn't theirs, and under the order of King Herod, the truth seekers set out. Following the signaling light of the star, they found their way not only to Bethlehem but to the exact spot where the new king lay. There, they paid him homage as they had planned, with gifts signifying religious rule -- precious gold and myrrh denoting royalty, and Frankincense, which, when burned, they understood to be an odor pleasing to the Jewish God.

Mission accomplished, right? They'd followed through completely, done their social duty, pacified their pondering with fact. They were free to return to Herod, file a report about the new king of the Jews, and resume their continued search for truth in the universe. Their credibility would remain in tact.

Ah, but something happened under that certain star to these professional pagan philosophers they hadn't at all planned on -- something more sacred and true than anything they had ever previously calculated and come to know and to claim. In a moment of exceedingly clear sacred serendipity, they were filled with the overwhelming joy born of coming to intimately know God with us! Instead of mere confirmation, they received unexpected jubilation! So much so, that a second sudden serendipitous moment washed over them, one that revealed just how big a hypocrite 'ol King Herod

was. All their usual, predictable, plan producing tools for discernment were shut down so they could be transformed in a way that inspired them to return home a different way. In a powerful way, they returned to their daily planning, routines and perspectives on life having become different thanks to the amazing initiative of God reaching out to them beyond their own plans to fulfill the broader divine promise of salvation for all.

Now, here we are tonight, huddled together under the star of Christmas -- Jesus himself. The story of the Wise Men has gifted us with a reminder that sacred serendipity happens because God loves us more than we can ever plan to know.

Yes, of course, you and I schedule this time to be here with God and one another. This is tradition. This is a staple commitment on our calendars year after year. This takes place in the midst of a whole host of other carefully planned and prepared for holiday happenings.

Beyond our various ways of scheduling Christmastime, however, is our deeply personal, always ongoing search for the joyous truth of our God. Some of us seek it in a rationale, scientific way. Others of us seek it in a more intuitive, philosophical way. All ways of seeking are here tonight and all over the world, under one star, at the side of the same manager of miracle and might.

As you rest here in these sacred moments, let me ask you something. I know ... you haven't prepared an answer. Don't worry. Being unprepared is the point! My question is whether or not you have experienced sacred serendipity tonight (or some other time) during this blessed season -- through our lovely music, the beauty of this historic sanctuary, the company of other Christians, our private and public prayers? Even, pray God, my words? Have you found yourself with an unexpected, unplanned, impossible to fabricate on your own kind of joy curiously flooding your heart? Despite the many hurried hours of wrapping and cooking and practicing and traveling, are you feeling gifted with God's joy?

I hope and pray for us all to experience serendipity under the star this Christmas. I hope and pray we will realize that God is reaching, always and forever reaching out to us in new and unexpected ways, wherever we are on our faith journeys. I hope and pray, most poignantly, that we come to discover the Christ-child, God with us and our loved ones

and with this whole world we live in, in a way we hadn't previously experienced or understood; a way that inspires us to go home feeling wonderfully different and more fully loved.

God is always taking the initiative to draw us in closer, to gift and to grow our faith, to lead us into the starlight of the Son. So let us, as a fellow preacher once proclaimed, "revel in the light of that star beneath which the ordinary becomes holy and the holy ordinary, beneath which it becomes exceedingly clear that there is nothing more we must do, or be, to be loved by God." Joy to you! Joy to the world! The Lord has come! Amen.