

God's Beloved  
Meditation for East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church  
January 8, 2012  
Rev. Jim Stover

Texts: Matthew 2:1–12 & Mark 1:4–11

Theme: The call of our texts today is to remember the amazing blessing of God's love for us.

Pastor Enniss shared this story in a recent edition of *The Christian Century*: "Years ago during the Christmas season, I was in the office of the inner-city congregation I served when the intercom buzzed. "There is a young man here who wants to see you," said the secretary. I knew what that meant. There were many homeless in the neighborhood, and they all asked for money, especially at Christmas. But the emergency relief office was closed, so I said, "Sure, show him in." He was not what I expected. He was neatly dressed, clean-shaven, in his late twenties. There was an air of dignity about him, with no glassy look and none of the usual signs of having been on the streets.

"Sorry to take your time," he apologized, "but I just want your blessing." He did not seem depressed or desperate but in good spirits, polite and very much in control. I attempted to explain that Presbyterians did not usually confer blessings, but the man was not there for a lesson in ecclesiology. "All I want is your blessing," he said again. With some theological misgivings, I agreed and asked his name. "Andy," he said, and knelt on the carpet while I offered a general prayer of thanksgiving for God's presence in Andy's life, an acknowledgment of the ways God had already blessed him and of God's continuing concern and purpose for him. When I said "Amen," Andy stood, smiled, shook my hand, thanked me and left."<sup>1</sup>

While the events of this story may seem a bit odd to us, I think that, underneath, all of us can relate to Andy. All of us have times in our lives when we want – when we need – a blessing. And our faith proclaims that wherever we are, no matter what, we have the blessing of God's love for us. We don't need a special ceremony or a pastor to pray over us to receive that blessing, but we do need to be reminded periodically of that great blessing we already have. And being reminded of God's amazing, unchanging love for us is our theme today.

As we turn to our Scripture passages, we note that our first text from Matthew commemorates the visit of the wise men. On the church calendar this is

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<sup>1</sup> P.C. Enniss, "Living by the Word," *The Christian Century*, 27 December 2011, 21.

known as the feast of Epiphany, and is celebrated every year on January 6<sup>th</sup> as the official end to the Christmas season.

Our second text from Mark commemorates today as Baptism of Our Lord Sunday, and marks the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry. Together they bring us two messages. The first is one that many of us already know all too well: Christmas is over, and it's back to the struggles of daily life without the holiday trappings. But our texts also both affirm that we are sent into the joys and sorrows of this new year with the promise of the blessing of God's love for us.

As we look more deeply at our first text from Matthew, we find that for Mary and Joseph the drama of the visits from shepherds and angels and the birth of the baby Jesus is all now over. Now the hard work of caring for an infant child begins. And I'm sure, like many, many new parents before and since, Mary and Joseph were in need of a blessing. That blessing arrived in the form of wise men from the East bearing gifts.

Although I'm sure that many a new parent has been lavished with a multitude of gifts, I think we can agree that the lavishness of the gifts brought by the wise men to Mary and Joseph is well beyond our experience – a truly overwhelming blessing to match the already overwhelming, difficult, and also wondrous circumstances of Jesus' birth.

Beyond all the symbolism of the gifts and exultation of our newborn Savior, I think the blessing of the wise men's visit serves another purpose as well. Mary and Joseph were about to experience struggle and suffering well beyond that of most new parents. Mary and Joseph were about to become refugees fleeing for their lives.

For, sadly, the "wise men from the East" had stopped to ask directions from the vicious Roman puppet, King Herod. As we heard in our text from Matthew, King Herod and the religious and political elites of Jerusalem were very disturbed by the news that a "king of the Jews" had been born outside of Herod's own family.

Following our text Matthew relates how Joseph is warned in a dream to take his wife and infant son and flee to Egypt as Herod explodes in insecure, jealous rage – ordering the slaughter of all the young children in and around Bethlehem.

I believe that Mary and Joseph certainly needed the memory of the great blessing of the wise men's visit as they joined the millions throughout history who have been forced to become refugees by the violent oppression of their own governments. I believe that for Mary and Joseph, the wise men's visit was a

reminder to them that the blessing of God's love would always be with them, no matter where they were forced to go.

Turning to our second text from the Gospel Mark, I believe that Jesus, himself, similarly needed the memory of God the Father's blessing of him at his baptism. Our text says that as Jesus emerged from the baptismal waters of the Jordan River, "He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

I believe Jesus needed to hear these words of love and affirmation as he began his ministry of proclaiming in word and deed the kingdom of God. For in the waters of baptism, Jesus, who had no sin, immerses himself in the sin of all the crowds of Judea and Jerusalem who had come out to be baptized by John. Symbolically, Jesus here is taking on all their sin and the sin of all humanity – including our sin. Jesus indeed needed the memory of God his Father's words of love as he began carrying the burden of that sin all the way to the cross.

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." We can only imagine that these words from God the Father must have rung in Jesus' ears as he faced rejection and abandonment by those he loved and suffered torture and death on the cross for all of us.

As we turn back to thinking about our own lives in this new year, it is most likely that none of us will experience suffering to the extent of Mary and Joseph or certainly of Jesus. Yet we know, too, that there will be ups and downs. Sometimes the downs will be dramatic for us and for those we love. Sometimes they will be simply the struggles of just grinding out daily life. Regardless of what is to come for us as individuals, as a church, as a community, as a nation, as a world in the new year, it is certain that there will be times when all of us will feel like Andy did in our opening story – all of us will want a blessing.

And our Scriptures give us the assurance that we already have a blessing from our God, As God was with the refugee family of Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus fleeing to Egypt, so we have the promise that God will be with us wherever we are, no matter what. Furthermore, as God spoke words of blessing and love to Jesus, so God – in Christ – says those same words of blessing and love to each one of us. "You are my son, you are my daughter, you are my precious child; I love you; with you I am well pleased."

The call of our texts today is to remember the blessing of this amazing love of God. A God, who, like a parent, looks upon each and every one of us as a precious child. A God who is always with us, no matter what.

To remind us of the amazing blessing, of being loved as God's precious daughter or son, no matter what, I want to end where I began – with a story, this time from David Slagle. He writes:

“My twenty-one-month-old, who had just learned to say, “Daddy,” had been struggling with asthma and an ear infection for two weeks. He coughed and sneezed continually, and his nose ran like a faucet. Each night when I came home, he ran to meet me at the door, smiling, coughing, nose running, yelling, “Daddy! Daddy!”

I was not repulsed by his runny nose or close-range sneezes in the least (he “slimed” every shirt I own!). I love him deeply and enjoy his love for me.”<sup>2</sup>

So God, whom Jesus called Father and whom Scripture also says is like a mother, loves us – no matter what. Can't you just hear in that anecdote the words of love spoken by God to us: “You are my son, you are my daughter, you are my precious child; I love you; with you I am well pleased.”

In this year ahead let us remember the blessing of that ever-present love of God, come what may.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> David Slagle, “Running for Daddy” in *1001 Illustrations that Connect*, ed. Craig Brian Larson and Phyllis Ten Elshof (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 107.