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Title: Several Miles Outside Jerusalem

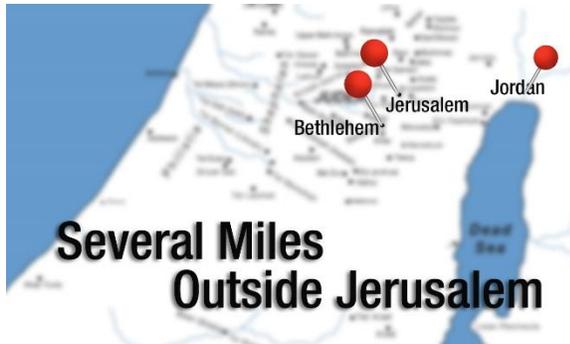
Date: January 6 & 7, 2017

Preaching: Senior Minister Randy Spleth

Scripture: [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Text: [Mark 1:4-11](#)

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Happy New Year on this first worship of the New Year. Is anyone excited about 2018? Anyone filled with joy? Several miles outside of the city, you'll find joy. Are you willing to travel that far? If you could take that joy with you every day of 2018, will that be worth it?

It is a strange weekend when it comes to the church calendar. Christmas ended Friday. I know, I know. You think Christmas is over. When is that for you? On the 25th? Or maybe when the kids go back to school and you are back at work. Maybe Christmas is over for you when you've boxed up all of the decorations and put them away. Officially, Christmas ended Friday. It's the whole 12 days of Christmas thing. We sing about it but for most of us, it doesn't register. In some cultures, a Christmas gift is given each day, just like the songs, although I don't think many people, if any, received 12 drummers drumming on Friday. They are noisy and expensive, costly nearly \$3,000 according to PNC's annual estimate. They whole 12 day experience for 2017 was \$34, 558.65.¹ But if you received a gift every day for 12 days, it would be easier to understand the tradition of the church. When it comes to the Christian calendar, Christmas is 12 days long.

Then, the wise men arrive. That was yesterday. At Christmas, we put all of the stories of the birth of Jesus in a blender, hit the mix button and come up with a Christmas stew. Shepherds and magi arrive almost simultaneously, and together, peer into the manger to see the new born baby Jesus. That's what our nativities look like. But when it comes to the church calendar, we separate the stories, deconstruct the stew and the magi arrive by themselves on the first day of Epiphany. Again, some understand this easier than we. In some cultures, Three Kings Day is a really big celebration, an even bigger gift day than Christmas. It is an incredible day of joy for kids in places like Puerto Rico and Central America.

That was yesterday; this is today. Again, by tradition, on the first Sunday of Epiphany, the church is to celebrate the baptism of Jesus. Are you following? Yesterday, Jesus is an infant, getting presents. Today, as a grown man, he steps in the river Jordan to be baptized by John. It gives new meaning to that expression, "they grow up fast." It makes your biblical head spin. How are they connected? They are each several miles outside of Jerusalem and though seemingly unrelated, they each highlight a crucial aspect of joy. Take a look.

Nine miles outside of Jerusalem is the first place where joy is highlighted. But it isn't the place where the wise men first arrive. Initially, they go to Jerusalem. They are in the wrong place, but don't know it. They say, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." (Matthew 2:3) Even though it sounds if they are asking for directions, they aren't. They are men and even in the first century, real men don't stop to ask for directions. But they are also wise. They believe they are in the right place. They have searched the heavens and ancient scripture to determine where to arrive. Jerusalem. Centuries earlier, the prophet Isaiah said, "'Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.'" (Isaiah 60:1) Isaiah's prophecy comes at a time when people were living in despair. Jerusalem was trying to recover from bad leadership, from exile. They were hopeless, depressed and discouraged. But the prophet sees a time when Jerusalem is a beehive of productive and prosperity, a center for international trade. "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." (Isaiah 60: 3) They have come to Jerusalem because the wise men know about Isaiah 60. It even tells them what to bring. They expect to find the new king in Jerusalem, the one promised by Isaiah, who will bring prosperity and peace.²

When Herod, the current king in Jerusalem hears of this, he is frightened. Can you blame him? A new king is a threat to an old king. New kings replace old kings, sometimes even kill old kings. In a panic, Herod arranges for a consultation with leading Old Testament scholars saying, "Tell me about Isaiah 60. What's all this business about camels, gold, frankincense and myrrh? There are these wise men riding camels asking about where the new king is."

They have an answer. "Isaiah 60?" the scholars say. "Those guys are using the wrong text." Isaiah 60 suggests that Jerusalem will prosper and have great urban wealth and be restored as the center of global economy, where the urban elites regain their power and nothing will really change. "They should be looking at Micah 5." "But you, O Bethlehem ...from you shall come

forth for me one who is to rule in Israel....” (Micah 5:2) They will find him several miles outside of Jerusalem.

What is remarkable is Herod’s response. He meets secretly with the wise men and in an attempt at collusion says, “You are looking in the wrong place. You need to be in Bethlehem. “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” (Matthew 2:8)

They were looking in the wrong place. Several miles out of Jerusalem, nine miles to be exact, they find what they are searching for. They go to Bethlehem and when they arrived, they “...were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.” (Matthew 2:10c-11) They instantly saw and understood that the child was to bring salvation not just to the Jews but to the world. They were filled with hope and joy, overwhelmed with it. The magi were so overwhelmed by bowing down to a baby king that any thoughts of returning to Jerusalem and revealing to King Herod what they had seen were laid aside. They went home by another road, bypassing Jerusalem and King Herod.

This does not bring joy to King Herod. It brings the opposite. The Wise Men see Jesus and are filled with joy, delight, a great happiness. King Herod sees the birth of Jesus and is filled with fear, dislike and eventually murderous rage. It isn’t the first time that people will look at things and have different opinions. We can be mistaken in our response. We can interpret as good something that is in fact evil, and we can interpret as bad something that is in fact good. It is all around us and it maybe be the very challenge you face in 2018. You may falsely rejoice over evil things and mistakenly rage over good things. For true joy, two things are needed: the object must be good and the good object must *appear to us as good*. Joy is a fruit of truthful seeing of genuine goods.

This is the Epiphany’s first lesson about joy: to rejoice in the coming of Christ, it’s not enough for Christ to have been born; we must also perceive him as Lord and kneel down before him as our savior and king. Otherwise we won’t rejoice but rather will treat him with fear, disdain, or indifference.³

If we don’t get that, if we don’t fully understand that to experience joy is to truly embrace who Jesus is, then the second story of Epiphany drives this home, even as it cause our heads to spin at the speed at which the calendar pages are turned. Thirty years later, several miles out of Jerusalem, Jesus steps into the Jordan River.

Jesus wasn't alone. Mark tells us that "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were out there." John had a following and his preaching appealed to a large section of the population, enough that many walked for several miles, perhaps as many as 21 miles outside of Jerusalem. There were there to be touched by John's ministry. John's preaching was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Has anyone ever experienced the joy of being forgiven? There is joy in the gift of forgiveness, a release that fills you with delight, wonder, and a great happiness. No wonder people were pouring out of the Jerusalem and showing up at the Jordan River. What they saw was filled with joy even though Pharisees, Sadducees and Herod saw something that filled them with disappointment, anger and eventually murderous rage. Again, there are different opinions and different responses to the very same thing.

Mark is short and to the point, describing this incredible moment in three short verses. "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, 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." (Mark 1:9-11)

Don't let the familiarity or the brevity of the story steal away from you the incredible joy that is here. God is overwhelmed with joy, so filled with joy about Jesus that God tears open the heavens, rips them apart and descends as a dove and proclaims Jesus as His Beloved Son. Only this one person has the divine approval of sonship. Jesus alone is worthy of worship. The tearing of the heavens at this moment followed by the ripping of the temple curtain at the end of Mark's Gospel (Mark 15:38) signal that the separation between God and the world has been overcome in Jesus! There no longer exists any barrier between God and humankind.⁴

To say that God is well pleased is an understatement. The word in Greek is εὐδόκησα, eudokhsa literally means filled with delight, pleasure and happiness. Jesus and what Jesus will do, brings God joy, delight, a great happiness. Like a proud parent watching a child star on stage, God wants to be the first to jump to His feet and shout with joy at what His Son Jesus is accomplishing.

Of course, there is the perception issue again. We can interpret as good something that is in fact evil, and we can interpret as bad something that is in fact good. We know that not all will perceive God breaking into the world as something good, something to rejoice at with joy. They will in fact see it as bad and eventually because of this perspective, there will be fear, anger and murderous rage.

Maybe you are starting to see why as we begin the New Year we also begin with these two stories. Epiphany is about revelation or insight and in both of stories, we discover each depends on your point of view.

A colleague of mine tells a story about a Doogie Howser type, or Shaun Murphy if you are currently watching The Good Doctor. A brilliant kid goes to medical school and finds himself at the tender age of 21 found himself, for the first time in his life, in a delivery room where a mother was giving birth to a baby boy. He'd always assumed that giving birth was a somewhat painful experience, so he was very surprised that the mother entered the final stages of the birth screaming "Joy! Joy! Joy!" A couple of hours later, with the baby safely born and the mother now holding the treasured new life, the young doctor had the chance to speak with her. "I was so moved," he said, "to hear you shouting for joy with all your heart." "You do have a lot to learn," said the mother. "I was shouting for Joy because I was in agony. Joy's the name of the midwife."⁵

Shouting for joy even in agony. That's is what we are called to do. It is who we are called to be, because of the baby born several miles outside of Jerusalem who, several more miles outside of Jerusalem was baptized and confirmed as God's Son and our Savior.

What are you seeing in 2018? What does it look like to you? Do you see it as the best possible year in the best of times? Or are you have a tough time with what might be ahead. Are you overwhelmed with joy or filled with fear. It's all a matter of perspective, isn't it?

Let's face it. We live in a tough world that has all sorts of competing voices about what is good and what is bad, about what is happening in our country, what is happening with our climate, what is happening with our economy, what's going on in the world. It can be hard to feel joy.

Add to this the personal challenges that you may be experience, the lump under the spotted in the shower last week, the mysterious comment your supervisor made about your job, your happy family not feeling so happy at the moment, a parent struggling to remember, a child losing to an addiction. Any and all of it and other challenges you could name, may cause us to struggle to experience any joy, let alone be overwhelmed with joy. What are you seeing? What does 2018 look like?

Epiphany reminds us to see all of it with joy. It's not about a euphoria that blows all your worries away. It's the discipline that says, in the end, God. In the end, whatever comes, my life is with Christ in God. It is the conviction

that the future is always bigger than the past. It's the determination that whatever one is feeling, whatever the circumstances or fear we have about what is going on in our lives and in the world, God is our destiny. We are being drawn to God like iron to a magnet because several miles outside of Jerusalem, not in Bethlehem or at the Jordan but at a place called Golgotha, Jesus mounts a cross to fulfill his mission. As God's Son and our Savior, he offers us grace and love. That is joy, overwhelming joy, to live your life by every day in 2018, for that matter, everyday even into eternity.

One last time. Happy New Year. May it be filled with the joy that comes several miles outside of Jerusalem.

¹ [https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2017/11/15/buying/862441001/.](https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2017/11/15/buying/862441001/)

² Brueggemann, W. (2001). Off by nine miles. *The Christian Century*, 118(35), 15.

³ Volf, M. (2017.) Joy is for Epiphany. *The Christian Century*,

⁴ Harrisville, R. A. (1993). Mark 1:4-11. *Interpretation*, 47(4), 399-402.

⁵ Wells, S. (2011). The discipline of joy. *Journal For Preachers*, 34(3), 9-12.