**GREENLAND HILLS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**January 1, 2017

SCRIPTURE** Revelation: 21:1-6a
Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them as their God;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.
 **SERMON** *Finding Jesus, Starting Anew* Roy Atwood

I’m going to tell you a story this morning about a time when I screwed up. Now, I know it’s hard for you to believe that such a thing ever happened, but it did – it’s a true story – and you’re just going to have to trust me on that. I went to college in Atlanta, and for our campus ministry retreats we would almost always drive up to a house or a retreat center somewhere in the Appalachian Mountains, usually in North Carolina. Most of the students would go up in the group van sometime on Friday afternoon, but I always had choir rehearsal until 5 o’clock on Fridays, so I always drove the late car with anyone else who had Friday afternoon obligations. Now, this was a long time ago, so you might not believe this part of the story, but I swear it’s real. Back then, the internet connection on our smartphones wasn’t good enough to use a GPS app reliably, so we had to use an external GPS. In those machines, you often entered the city first, followed by the street and then the number. So, on this one fateful day, that’s exactly what I did. I typed in the city, and I typed in the street, but when I got to the number, the one I wanted wasn’t one of the options. You see, these machines were smart, and they wouldn’t let you type in an address that didn’t exist. Unfortunately, they weren’t that smart, because often addresses they claimed to be fictional did exist. When you encountered this problem, you typically just picked a random street number and hoped the GPS would get you close enough, which is exactly what I did.

Thus began our long leisurely drive out of the city, through the foothills of North Georgia, and into the mountains of Western North Carolina. On the way, we passed a few familiar sights – a picturesque town with an old courthouse surrounded by a roundabout, a local college with signs along the road. Yet, as we drove along, the familiarity of these landmarks turned from pleasant surprise to awkward unease. You see, instead of becoming less familiar as we drove along, our surroundings only became more and more so. As we finally pulled into the town the GPS had led us to, and everyone else in the car thought our multi-hour journey was coming to an end, I finally realized my mistake. The GPS had been right; the address we were looking for didn’t exist. The reason everything seemed so familiar was because I had typed in the name of the city where our last retreat was located, not the city we should have been going to. Just like the wise men from the Bible, we had embarked on a long journey with supernatural guidance – theirs being a star, ours being a GPS. Yet despite this supernatural help, we both ended up in the wrong place.

This morning we’re doing a bit of a mash-up between two different services – an Epiphany service and a Wesley Covenant service. Epiphany is a Christian holiday occurring this Friday that celebrates the wise men visiting the Christ child. It’s always held on January 6th, 12 days after Christmas, which is where we get the song the 12 Days of Christmas from – because the season of Christmas has 12 days, before Epiphany begins a new season.

Our first scripture for today – from Matthew 2 – tells the only story of the wise men in the Bible. In the story, the magi, what we commonly call wise men, come from the east to Jerusalem to honor the new king of the Jews. The Greek word for the magi here is mah-gahs, so that’s exactly where we get the word magi from. The term “magi” was used in the ancient world to refer to educated men and priests who specialized in astrology and the interpretation of dreams, which is what the magi do in this story. The term “magi” is primarily associated with people coming from modern-day Iran and Iraq, which is why Matthew describes them as coming from the east. So, “magi” is a perfect word to describe these educated astrologists from the east.

You’ll notice that there aren’t three magi in the story; instead Matthew doesn’t say how many of them there are. They did bring three gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – which is where we get the idea of there being three of them. But of course, more than three people could have come to bring three types of gifts.

Now, in terms of the star, we’re not sure if the star existed, or if it’s just a part of the story. There were two astronomical events around the time of Jesus’s birth – between 6 and 4 BC – that could explain what the magi saw. First, in 7 BC, the planets of Jupiter and Saturn lined up in the sky. The planet Jupiter represented royalty and Saturn represented the West, ancient astrologers from Iran or Iraq might have understood this celestial event as a sign that a king was born to their west, in the land of Palestine. Alternatively, Chinese astronomers recorded the existence of a nova, an explosion of a star that produces an extremely bright light, that was visible for 70 days sometime during 5 or 4 BC. Either of these events could explain the star in Matthew’s story. However, after the magi arrived in Jerusalem, the star guided them directly to Jesus’s house, a phenomenon that obviously cannot be explained by modern science. Was it a miracle? Was it a literary flourish to explain how the magi found the right house in Bethlehem? Ultimately, we don’t know.

But, there’s a better question than the issue of the star’s existence. Regardless of whether the star is real or imaginary, why did it lead them to the wrong location to begin with? Jesus is born in Bethlehem, but the star takes them to Jerusalem. These educated magi who are experts in astrology follow the star to the wrong city. Why? Probably because of their preconceived expectations of what royalty encompassed. If there’s a king to be born in the Jewish region, of course it’s going to happen in Jerusalem. That’s the seat of power, where the temple is – the most powerful site in Judaism; that’s where the king is – the most powerful person in the region. So, that’s where the magi go, directly to King Herod in Jerusalem, asking him about the newborn king of the Jews. However, Jesus wasn’t born as the son of a king in the most powerful city. Instead, he was born in a stable in Bethlehem, a rural town five miles south of Jerusalem, not the place the magi were expecting.

That brings us to the second part of our service today – a Wesley covenant service. This type of service is held by many Methodist churches around the New Year as an opportunity to recommit ourselves to being servants of Jesus. The history of this service goes all the way back to the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, himself and the prayer we’ll say later in the service uses some of his own words. Yet, there’s a problem we encounter with covenanting to be Jesus’s servant, and it relates to the problem the magi had. Is there a chance that we, just like the magi, are looking for Jesus in the wrong places? How can we commit to being a servant of Christ if we don’t know where he is?

Are we looking for Jesus in our family members, thinking that they’re obligated to love us unconditionally and forgetting that they have their own issues and insecurities to overcome?

Are we looking for Jesus in our friends, expecting them to always be by our side even when they don’t always have the time or the resources?

Are we looking for Jesus in politicians or political parties, imagining that they’ll be able to solve the problems we’re facing once they get in to power, yet conveniently ignoring their own flaws and shortcomings?

Are we looking for Jesus in the institution of the church, saying, “Surely, if anywhere, I’ll find Jesus here!” but being let down when individual church leaders and members inevitably fail to live up to Jesus’s ideals?

Ultimately the problem comes when we look for Jesus in other people and the organizations they create. Flawed people and flawed institutions will never provide us with the savior we need, and if we’re going to covenant today to being a servant of Christ, we must stop looking for Jesus in these places.

Instead, we need to heed the advice of our founder, John Wesley. In his sermons and teachings, he talked often about what he called the means of grace, or ways in which we experience God’s unconditional, sacrificial love, or in the context of this sermon, places where we can find Jesus. Wesley divided the means of grace into two categories – works of piety and works of mercy. Works of piety are ways in which we deepen our relationship with God. Works of piety include things like reading the Scriptures, meditating on them, and letting them shape the way we live our lives; thinking of our minds, bodies, and souls as creations of God and taking care of them accordingly; regularly attending worship to reflect on God in community; and partaking in the sacraments of baptism and communion to remember the loving actions of God in the world and commit to living them out in our own lives. These works of piety are places we can find Jesus in our lives today.

But, Jesus isn’t only found in works of piety – there are works of mercy too, ways in which we share God’s love with the world. Works of mercy include doing good deeds for family members and friends; visiting people who are sick, homebound, or imprisoned; feeding the hungry or housing the homeless; giving generously to charity; and working together to fight against poverty, injustice, and oppression. It is in carrying out these actions – works of piety and works of mercy – that we truly find Jesus, that we experience God’s love for us and for all people.

Just this past week, we’ve had church members finding Jesus in a variety of ways. On Tuesday, some people from Greenland Hills volunteered at the food pantry at Emanuel Lutheran Church, where we have members volunteering every time the food pantry is open to help make sure that the vulnerable members of our community don’t have to go without food. On Thursday, we had a funeral for a member of the church and we had people who volunteered their time to help by providing music, making a slideshow for the family, and working as ushers. None of these tasks are elaborate, complicated, or fancy. Instead, they’re simply small ways in which we make sure that people experience God’s love and find a bit of Jesus in this world.

Why do we carry out these works of piety and mercy? Because of the vision of God’s kingdom that we find in Revelation. In our second reading today, from Revelation 21, we find an appropriate scripture for the first day of the new year. In this passage, the author of Revelation shares a vision he has of a new heaven and a new earth when God finally dwells in complete unity with humankind. In this new kingdom, mourning, crying, pain, and death are no more, because these old things have passed away. So, on this New Year’s Day, let’s covenant to be servants of Jesus, building up God’s new kingdom here on earth. Let’s not make the mistake of the magi, looking for Jesus in the wrong places, in imperfect people and imperfect institutions. Instead, let’s look for Jesus in works of piety and mercy, actions of unconditional love for all people in unity with God. When we find Jesus in these places, we’ll finally be able to create God’s new kingdom.