In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning’s sermon is based on a short poem by theologian Robert W. Jenson, of blessed memory. Jenson did not publish this poem, but rather sent it to folks on his Epiphany card list. Carol and I are on that list, and so we have received many such cards and poems from Jenson over the years. Here is his little poem in the Epiphany card he and his wife, Blanche, sent four years ago, back in 2014. It is about the Epiphany wise men as old men:

We are old now, we three astrologers.
Maybe there was some truth in all our art.
Or maybe not. It does not signify.
You ask what I remember of that child.
Little enough. We thought he was the one
To change the skies. Is there some new report?

Jens and Blanche, Epiphany 2014

To that question of the old men I can give a happy and emphatic answer: Yes, indeed! Is there some new report? Yes, indeed! Let me tell you about it. Why, the very heavens were opened! We read of it in sacred scripture, in this morning’s Gospel story:

16 And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; 17 and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

( Matthew 3:16-17, RSV)

St. Luke tells us that when Jesus began his ministry, he was thirty years old (Luke 3:23). Wouldn’t we love to know more about Jesus before that age? Vicar Caleb Douglas is not yet thirty, and he has lived a very rich and interesting life so far. I bet it was so with Jesus. What was he like as a teenager and then as a young adult? We have the summary statement about Jesus as a child — that he grew up well. St. Luke tells us this:
And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. (Luke 2:40, RSV)

Any parents would be glad to have such a thing to be said of their child. I am sure that Mary and Joseph were proud of young Jesus. Still, it would be nice to have some more details about Jesus as a child and a teenager.

Then, as an adult, we have a passing reference to Jesus as the “carpenter’s son” (Matthew 13:55). Jesus was mid-stride in his ministry and had returned to his country, Galilee. He had preached a wonderful sermon in one of the synagogues, and to express their amazement at his preaching, the people said,

Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? (Matthew 13:55, RSV)

The carpenter’s son. I like carpenters. They can do real things... make dovetail joints and so forth. So I am pleased to think that Jesus was one. I bet he worked in his father’s carpenter’s shop. Maybe he tended the counter sometimes. People would bring projects to him and his father. Standing there at the counter, they did not know it, but they were in fact chatting with The Carpenter — with the One through whom all things were made and without whom was nothing made that was made (John 1:3). So, the townsfolk of Nazareth would discuss carpentry projects with Jesus. They would decide on the kind of wood to use and the cost of the project. I would have loved to have listened in on those conversations. Did the people sense something different about Jesus — something wonderful!

Well, we do not know, because the Bible is remarkably silent about the life of Jesus before his public ministry.

So, thirty years pass, and Jesus approaches his Baptism and the start of his ministry.

Meanwhile, the Epiphany wise men are back home, growing older all the time. Let’s imagine them to have been in the prime of their profession when they followed that star and came to Jesus. Let’s imagine them to be at some good balance point between seasoning in their profession and physical strength enough to make such a long journey. Picture them, say, as in their fifties when they followed the star and brought their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to baby Jesus.

But now, at the baptism of Jesus, about thirty years have passed, and the wise men are in their eighties. They are quite elderly men, especially in those Biblical times. They have lived their four-score years, and now they are a bit frail, perhaps even a bit tottering. Do they care anymore about their old profession — stargazing. Maybe not:

Maybe there was some truth in all our art. 
Or maybe not. It does not signify.
It does not signify what? At least I think we can answer this way: If the art of the wise men — their gazing at stars, ancient astrologers — if their art was false, that would not signify that their trip had been in vain. Their long journey could not have been in vain, for they had found the Christ Child and had worshiped him (Matthew 2:11). They had given gifts to him — the best they had: the gold, frankincense, and myrrh. If their art had been illusion, it does not matter, for at least their art had brought them to Jesus.

So, these old, tottering men might not even care about their own profession anymore.

But they do still care about something. It is signified in their eager question: “Is there some new report?” Thirty years have come and gone, but their original passion has not died:

We thought he was the one
To change the skies.

Why had they set out on such a journey thirty years ago? They had set out on such a journey because they longed for something. They longed for someone “to change the skies.” That ancient symbol of stability: The skies. The stars. Who expects them to change? There is nothing more inevitable than the skies — except maybe death. It too is stable and inevitable. But these old guys had longed for someone “to change the skies.” They had longed for someone to fundamentally alter reality. They had hoped for a profound change in a good direction.

You and I join them in such longing. Indeed, we long for God! Two millennia have passed since the wise men journeyed to baby Jesus, but their ancient longing remains ours too: It would sure be great if someone could change the skies.... if someone could join the battle to make sure that love and goodness finally defeat evil, if someone could even overcome death!

And so it is that at the Baptism of Jesus there is a new report on earth — a report that even God the Father urges upon us:

17 and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17, RSV)

What a lovely saying it is when St. Matthew reports that “the heavens were opened” (Matthew 3:16). That is the sort of thing that would thrill the wise men of old. It is the sort of thing that can thrill you and me too. The opening of those heavens permitted the Holy Spirit to descend on Jesus “like a dove” (Matthew 3:16). But the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, in turn, means another good sense to the words “the heavens were opened.” It means that the heavens are now open to you and me too. The One who can change the skies has come. The One who joins us in the battle of love and goodness, so that they will win out over evil, has come. The One who justifies the good fight...
of faith has come! The One who has defeated death has come! The One who will permit us to see our loved ones again in heaven has come! The One worth living for in the years that remain to us has come! And to him — I mean our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ — be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.