

Magi, Starlight and Starwords for a New Year

Matthew 2:1-12

Jan. 1, 2023 New Year's Day (focus on Epiphany)

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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "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." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, 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. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:1-12 NRSV

The story of Christmas continues. Let's imagine what happens next. The big night has passed for Mary and Joseph. They have packed away the swaddling clothes, cleaned up the manger, and moved into a little house in Bethlehem with their new baby. They have been there for a while now.

Since the night when the shepherds and angels and everyone showed up in a wild blur of glory and honor, it's been kind of quiet. Really, there is almost nobody bringing meals or checking in on the young couple, a friendly hello here or a kind gesture there. They are not living near life-long neighbors, friends of their parents throwing a baby shower or aunties offering advice. They are kind of all alone – maybe seeing relatives of relatives from time to time since Joseph was from the house and family of David. But this was not the way they had imagined their family life would start - not even once they rearranged their expectations to include God-incarnate crawling across the living room floor.

Joseph rented them a little house with room for a woodworking workshop. We can imagine he got a little business, enough to keep food on the table. They sent news back to Nazareth of the child's birth.

They want to tell their families - "He just rolled over on his own!" "He took his first steps yesterday!" but no grandparents or cousins had yet met the toddler Jesus. It had been just the three of them, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, in a kind of suspended rhythm of adjustment and happiness, sleep deprivation, an in-between time of sorts, settling into the miracle they shared, getting to know each other, becoming a family.

Until the day the Magi from the East showed up and called their little boy the king of the Jews.

Just when life began to feel rather ordinary, when this baby had begun to feel like he was *theirs*, a reminder that he is *not* arrives in the form of sages from a far-off land, astrologers, mystic-scholars who had been watching the skies for signs of God.

Surprising, perhaps, that those with no personal stake in the story, with no generational anticipation of a Messiah, no claim whatsoever to the promises of Yahweh to the people of Yahweh, are the ones Holy One sends. And their arrival bursts the bubble and exposes the light to all the world.

Epiphany, in church lingo, focuses on the story in Matthew 2 celebrated on Jan. 6. Epiphany from the Greek *phainein* to bring to light, to cause to appear, to show. Epiphany is a festival in many Christian traditions commemorating the coming of the Magi as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, to the non-Jewish peoples. One definition - an appearance or manifestation of a divine being, a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something; an intuitive grasp of reality through something.

Can we imagine that God says - "See that star? - That is light for all people." That changes our perspective, and lays open your life before you differently.

We realize that the Christmas moment was God WITH US, Epiphany is GOD with us. May we see that Christmas story is much bigger than we first imagined. Not just little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay. Sweet and cuddly though he may have just been. This is Holy Love Incarnate. This is the Universal Christ. This isn't your own private Messiah. This one belongs to the *whole earth*.

I like to let my imagination go further into the story. Imagine Mary and Joseph with these visitors, after their camels have been tended to and bedded down, when the strangers had washed up and unpacked a little bit, and the lamps are lit and the table is set. The meal at the table between these people who smell different and look different and wear different clothing and speak different languages and whose paths never, ever should have crossed in any conceivable way, but who were right now breaking bread together, drinking wine together, sharing together what used to be mostly their own private secret that nobody else could relate to but them.

And I almost can picture that star *exploding* right then. It had guided the Magi to the child, over desert and mountains, through night and day and night and day and night and day they followed its singular purpose, driven by the quest, knowing this is something big, being led right to it. Something cosmic is happening.

And then I imagine the star, it's purpose completed, shatters into a trillion pieces, filling the sky with scattering shards of radiance.

Maybe that is part of what we experience as the church - being the ones reminding each other that the Holy One is here in us and all creation, Divine Mystery has come, that is here, and that our very lives are part of the wonder and life-giving conspiracy of the Source of Love.

When they decided it was time for them to leave, the wise ones remembered the dream, the dream warning not to go back to Herod, and the Magi returned home by another road. Back in Jerusalem, King Herod is now chomping at the bit to stamp out this newly discovered threat to his power, and the news is out, things are not business as usual; God has really come, the world is topsy-turvy. He is plotting evil. So Mary, Joseph and Jesus flee to Egypt.

After Herod's death the little family goes home for the first time, to Nazareth, to raise their first grader in Galilee among their own people, in their own village, with the grandparents, and the lifelong neighbors, and streets they grew up on, and the tiny, provincial world that had cradled and shaped them before their lives were ripped open by the light of the world.

Epiphany is our holy invitation to the miracle being revealed in our own lives,
and shimmering in all the world.

Whatever this year has to bring, God is here.

Whatever the world goes through in the coming days, weeks and months, nothing can disrupt the God-with-us project.

This truth does not belong to us. We belong to it.

So friends, let us be light-bearers, hope tellers, star gazers, descendants of the magi who set out in trust that the Holy One will appear.

Love has invaded the whole earth and summoned all people to its unquenchable light that shines brightest in the ordinary moments between friends and strangers, in this messy, real, world. So like the adventurers of old, we will watch together, open and ready, for the appearance of the Divine, the Christ, with us, each and every day. Amen.

Star Words

Invite you to a new practice for the new year. This practice has been part of Epiphany worship services of many pastor friends and colleagues. I have a basket of Star Words, words written on paper stars in this basket. As we remember the wisemen and the star they followed, we are called to be open to Holy Light, Divine guiding presence in our lives. The word you choose

is your Star Word for the new year. Place it somewhere where you will see it often - near computer, mirror, refrigerator, car, desk.

Your word hopefully will give you some different ways to be open to the Spirit. How is God speaking to you through the particular word you got? How can we keep reflecting on this word throughout the year and notice how God may be helping us grow, reflect, and deepen our sense of God's presence in our lives?

** Parts of this sermon were adapted from a sermon by Rev. Kara Root, "This Bright, Blessed Mess," January 3, 2016 <http://kara-root.blogspot.com/2016/01/this-bright-blessed-mess.html>*

StarWords – If you do not receive a word in the worship service, email the church office and we can mail or email one to you. office@fpcsr.org