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“Searching for a Sign”Rev. Jennie SankeyMatthew 2:1-12, Isaiah 60:1-5January 5, 2020: Epiphany of the Lord |
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In the stories of Christmas and Epiphany, we read of ordinary people encountering God in all sorts of different ways. Some people get angels. Zechariah and Mary both receive surprising news of impending childbirth from the Angel Gabriel. Joseph has a dream, where an angel tells him to keep calm and carry on with Mary. The shepherds get a whole choir of angels, sending them running towards the manger.

Some people experience physical signs of God’s presence. Elizabeth, upon seeing Mary, feels the child leap in her womb and is filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit. Simeon, upon holding baby Jesus in the temple, recognizes him as the Messiah, prophesying God’s good news.

Some people spend years studying ancient texts, philosophy, and natural wonders of science that lead them to encounter something Holy. The Magi in our story today, after study, a long trip following a star, and an odd encounter with a king, find the Christ child in his home, and are overwhelmed by the joy that comes with completing a journey.

Each week we gather to worship in God’s presence, searching for comfort, illumination, hope, and fellowship in this place. We come to honor Christ and offer ourselves to God. We seek a filling up of our cup, and are sent out to share the gifts of God with the world. Worship is central to our lives as Christians, a journey we make time and time again. I suspect however, that even when we all gather in the same place at the same time with the same people, we each walk away with different experiences of God’s presence in this place.

Different people need different messages. The Magi receive the message of God’s coming into the world in a completely different way than everyone else in the story. I think if we can set aside pictures of foreign kings who carry vast riches on the backs of camels for a moment, and see a group of curious and studious scholars, we might find more ways to relate to the Magi than anyone else in the story, because they remind us that God’s revelation isn’t just for those who are sent an angel of the Lord, or just for the family of Jesus, or those who were nearby the night he was born. Christ is also for latecomers, outsiders, and travelers. The celebration of Epiphany, falling 12 days after Christmas on January 6 each year, celebrates the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth in the midst of humanity in all its differences.

This is wonderful news for us, because we do not come to faith in God or respond to the messages we’ve heard in a uniform way. Just as the Magi, foreign, Zorastrian priests who study philosophy and astronomy are drawn to find the “King of the Jews” well after the birth, we too are invited to follow Christ at different paces and in different places. Perhaps you are most likely to look for God’s presence on the top of a mountain, or in the daily discipline of scripture reading and prayer, or in moments that take you completely by surprise, or in deep discussion with your peers. God guides our journeys of faith, illuminating the way with the light we need.

Some Christians have followed a star, but not one in the sky. A growing practice in many churches is to give the gift of “star words” when the church celebrates Epiphany. A “star word” is simply a star-shaped piece of paper with a word on it. Each person receives a star word and is asked to reflect on that word for the coming year, pondering what significance it might have in their lives and how God might be speaking to them through that simple message. Rev. Kristen Stroble, pastor at Heritage Presbyterian Church in Youngstown, Ohio writes of her and her congregation’s experience:

“My first word was RESTRAINT. I wanted to throw it back. What was that supposed to mean? RESTRAINT made me think about being held back or being bound. These words were supposed to be a gift, but this did not feel like one to me. And yet, over time the word continued to work on my heart and mind. I started practicing RESTRAINT at church coffee hours and forgoing doughnuts. I used RESTRAINT to stop myself from getting second helpings at potlucks. RESTRAINT gave me permission to look at how unhealthy I had become and do something about it. When I began to see RESTRAINT as a gift instead of a curse, it freed me to change my eating habits without apology, to leave work earlier to exercise and to focus not just on my spiritual health but my physical health.

In my year of RESTRAINT I lost 90 pounds and, for the first time I could remember, achieved a healthy weight. I’m not one for New Year’s resolutions because – let’s be honest ­– they always seem to fail. Instead, these star words have become my practice for the New Year. Instead of making a resolution that I’ll feel guilty about a week later, I take a star word as a gift and keep my eyes open. The stars have allowed me to see God in unexpected ways and places. They’ve been challenging, life-giving and transformative.

One woman in my congregation received JOY last year. Her middle name is JOY. She admits, though, that she had lost her JOY, forgotten how to live with JOY. The star word reminded her throughout the year about the gift of JOY in all circumstances of life; a JOY that comes from the simple affirmation that we belong to God. Another member received COURAGE. She was in the midst of cancer treatments when this word was given to her. She took that paper star with her to every doctor appointment. She kept the word by her side as she entered hospice care and as she passed from this life to the next.”

Through these “star words,” God illuminated the journey of these disciples in the ways they needed light.

In our Old Testament passage today, the prophet Isaiah writes, “Arise, Shine; for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” The “you” Isaiah is writing about is the city of Jerusalem, which has been completely destroyed. God’s people have returned to Jerusalem after the exile only to find it in ruins. Those who have returned are divided and consumed by infighting. These words of encouragement ask them to see what is not yet true:

“Nations shall come to your light and Kings to the brightness of your dawn. **Lift up your eyes and look around;** they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away and your daughters shall be carried on their nurse’s arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.”

Lift up your eyes and look around. In reality, what they see is devastation and years of difficult rebuilding ahead. When I lift up my head today, I see some of the same: fires blazing across Australia, threats of war looming with Iran, deep division in our nation’s government and population. But God asks God’s people to see and journey towards the light and hope of God’s glory, already with them. In our story today, the Magi lift up their eyes and are led by the light of a star. Perhaps you are led by the soft warm glow of a friend who has stuck by you, or the flickering flame of unanswered questions that compel you to keep asking, or the piercing light of deep need for community to surround you in love. All of this light is God, leading, prodding, and drawing us toward the greatest light of all, the light of the world, Jesus.

When the Magi finally make it to Bethlehem, after an interesting encounter with King Herod in Jerusalem, they find the star they’ve been following stops above the house where Jesus and his family are. They are overwhelmed with joy, and upon entering the house and seeing Jesus with his mother, they kneel down and “paid him homage.” They worshiped this little baby king, perhaps getting his diapers changed, or sleeping in his mother’s arms, or playing on the floor. In the shine of the starlight, they see something in that baby that isn’t yet true, yet they know it’s worthy of their attention. We don’t have any dialogue recorded to know how this all went. But before anything else, perhaps without much speaking at all, they kneel before the baby and worship. Only after worshipping do they open their treasure chests and offer their gifts.

Today as you come up for communion, you’ll find on the tables baskets full of stars. Each star has a word on it. As you look ahead into 2020, I invite you to take this word as a gift from God, and ponder on what that word might mean for the coming year, and how this star might lead you. The magi, who traveled great distances to offer their gifts to the newborn Christ-child were responding to the gift first given to them. They received God’s gift with joy and worship, and *then* offered their gifts to God. As we celebrate communion today, receive double gifts from God. First, bread of life and the cup of salvation in the sacrament of communion, a meal of growth, nourishment, and new life that sends us out to participate in God’s mission to the world. Then, a star word, a tangible reminder of God’s generous gift.

We all need different kinds of messages. We experience God in different ways, even when we come together to do the same thing at the same time. And we respond differently to what we’ve seen. After Christmas, the shepherds walked away glorifying God. Mary quietly pondered what she’d witnessed in her heart. Herod feels threatened, responding with fear and violence. The Magi, having completed their journey, will return home by another road, no longer guided by the star, but perhaps by the afterglow of what they’ve seen. How you respond to today’s good news is up to you to identify.

Star words are not magical, but a tool in your box of spiritual practices to use on your own journey of faith. I plan to put my star word on my car dashboard, and take a picture of it to use as the background on my phone. Put yours somewhere you’ll see it often. Look your word up in the dictionary, turn it around in your head and heart, and keep it in the back of your mind. Share it with someone else after church today. Allow God to speak to you through this word with the message you need.

The stories of Christmas and Epiphany shows us how God shows up, and we search for God in many different ways. Perhaps you’ll get an angel or a dream. Perhaps you seek to study, learn, and lean into the journey. Perhaps you’ve been staring at the ground, hoping that the light won’t catch your eye.

Let this word be an opportunity for you to reflect on how God speaks to you. What might you learn from one word? What idea might evolve or treasured wisdom resurface? What truth might you find that isn’t yet true?

Arise, Shine; for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Epiphany is the celebration of God’s presence breaking through to shine as light in the darkness. Lift up your eyes today, and look around for how God’s light is illuminating your way.