

Pastor Mollie's Sermon
January 5, 2019
John 1 and Matthew 2

So today, this Sunday sits in a rather funny spot.
We are technically in the second Sunday of Christmas...
And the text should be John 1
Where we continue to focus on the wonder of the Incarnation: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God ...
And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."
It goes on to read, "The light shines in the darkness and darkness shall not overcome it.
And even though some have put the Christmas decorations away, and the stores are filling up with decorations for Valentines day,
But not in the church. The church has not moved away from the celebration.
The church is the one place where it is still the Christmas season because the wonder of the Word-made-flesh demands more than sentimentality and tradition.
It includes but also rises above nativity scenes and candlelight services and children dressed as angels and shepherds.
The wonder of the Word-made-flesh is cosmic in scope and cannot be contained or packed away with the decorations and trappings of Christmas.
But with that being said,
Tomorrow, Monday, is the first Day of Epiphany,
The season of light
The story of the Magi following the star to pay homage to the baby Jesus.
Both John and Matthew's Gospel's speak to a powerful understanding of Christ
And who Christ is in our world.
Our crazy, messy, confusing, curious world.
At the risk of throwing too much into this Sunday...
May we claim the both/and celebrate not only the second Sunday of Christmas, but also the beginning of Epiphany...
We continue Christmas as we see God, the word made flesh, light breaking into our world.
But We begin the Epiphany season learning about The story of these astrologists from the east
And how it reminds us that even something as simple as a star in the sky might lead us into places of risk, spaces of courage, and directions that demand trusting hearts. Let's follow their lead.
Because of the role of these wisemen in our Gospel today, I want to introduce to you, the concept of "star words."
A star word is simply a star-shaped piece of wood with a word printed on it.
Every person who comes to church today as we recognize the beginning of Epiphany will receive a star word and is asked to reflect on that word for the coming year.
Each of us are invited to ponder what significance this word might have in our lives, and how God might be speaking to them through that simple message.
The star words will be passed around to the congregation using the same offering plates that we use later on in worship to gather up our offerings.
As we help ourselves to a star word (without looking—just reach in and grab!),

the significance is not lost.

In this moment, we are not asked to give; we are invited to receive.

This reminds us that this is always the order of things in God's realm—

God always gives first, and then we are invited to respond with our gifts and ourselves.

The wise men 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, then offered their gifts to God.

As we commemorate the arrival of the wise men and remember their offerings, we delight in this small reminder that symbolizes God's generosity in our lives.

Why would such a simple gift take on such deep meaning?

What is it about receiving a word on a piece of wood that touches people?

I believe that people are yearning for tangible, clear signs of God's presence.

Our congregation- like many others are filled with compassionate people who spend hours baking for sales,

cooking meals for shut-ins,

writing cards to the sick,

providing transportation to the homebound,

calling on people in hospitals and nursing homes,

praying for those in need,

stretching the church budget by giving what they can,

and hosting church suppers.

The congregation is good at being busy and "doing" for God.

This Epiphany Season, and year of 2020, can be a celebration that represents a change in our routine;

we are offered the opportunity to "be still" in the presence of God and to receive God's gifts.

This is not because we have done anything to merit such attention, but simply because of God's abundant generosity.

Everyone who receives a star word is encouraged to take it home and hang it up where they are sure to see it every day.

It may be on your bathroom mirror, or next to your computer screen

I hope we allow these words to speak to us.

When asking about star words from another church that does this each year, they shared:

People often start by looking the word up in the dictionary so that they are clear on its meaning; like...we hear the word *grace* all the time, but what exactly does it mean?

A word that seemed unclear at the beginning may gain new meaning as the year goes on.

This church also shared:

"Often the words seem very timely, as if they were indeed designated for the recipient.

It is this sense of serendipity and wondering how God might be working through this simple process that keeps people engaged.

A woman whose husband recently passed away received the word *perseverance*; a student off to college turned over her star to read *responsibility*; their music director received the word *harmony*, much to the delight of the choir.

Throughout the year,

I will encourage members of our congregation to share some thoughts, either briefly or at length, about their star words.

Thus it can be that on a bright summer Sunday in the heat of August, we will be reminded of that frigid January Sunday when we were celebrating the season of light to bolster the dim winter.

We reflect on the God who continually encourages and strengthens God's people.

Perhaps that is the delight of star words—they truly are a gift that keeps on giving, even long after the Epiphany season is over.

Like any other gift, star words can either be received with joy or discarded and forgotten.

My hope is that we can be intentional about our response to our star words.

Will the stars be stuffed into a pocket or fall into the bottom of a purse, never to be considered again?

Or will that word be considered an opportunity—a chance to reflect on how God speaks to God's people?

What might we learn from one word?

What new ideas might evolve, what treasured wisdom might resurface?

Epiphany is the celebration of God's presence breaking through to shine as a light in the darkness.

Each year may our congregation rejoice in the reminder of our generous, giving God—one star word at a time.

God, we acknowledge that we are not always ready to receive your best gifts for us. You have given us an epiphany word in order that our searching will bring us to you.

It is often our habit to turn aside, stumble over, or even reject experiences and encounters that we later understand to have been precious gifts.

Help us to be open to the gift that you offer us now through our star words.

We acknowledge that we do not fully understand what this word might mean for our faith, but we receive it from you with gratitude and pray that your Spirit will enable us to live into our word with intention and faithfulness.