

Following the Star

A Message for Morning Worship on STAR Sunday

January 3, 2021 – Epiphany Sunday

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

The celebration of Epiphany in the Christian tradition may well be the oldest of all the celebrations connected to the birth of Jesus. References to it can be found in documents dating back to the 3rd and 4th centuries. Originally it was connected to the celebration of the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist which is celebrated on the second Sunday of January but we now celebrate Epiphany as the time of the visit of the three “Wise Men” or the “Three Kings” to the newly born Christ Child and his family. They bring gifts which the scriptures describe as gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gifts themselves tell the story of Jesus in that the gold acknowledges the Christ Child as a person of royal blood while the frankincense and myrrh foreshadow his death.

Another noteworthy insight revealed in Matthew’s description of this event is that, by the time the three Wise Men arrive on the scene, they are not visiting the family in the stable where the shepherds found him. Verse 11 is quite clear that the Wise Men visit a house, the dwelling of the tiny miracle we call the Christ Child over which the guiding star had stopped. This is how we know that some time has passed between the birth of the Christ Child and the visit of the Wise Men. How long, no one is quite sure. The Scriptures tell us that they “observed the star at its rising,” presumably on the night Christ was born. Deciding to follow the star, these three very inquisitive gentlemen then had to organize their trips and undertake the journey itself. Most likely walking, (the camels often imagined as part of their entourage are nowhere in Scripture), it would have taken them months to travel from points in the Middle East to the lonely outpost at Bethlehem. Matthew tells us they first stopped to see King Herod assuming he would know about the star and the event it heralded, but he didn’t. However, his suspicions about a possible usurper were kindled and, while he was outwardly nice to the Wise Men, they did not trust him and did not honor his request to return and tell him of the child’s location once they found him.

So, where does all this leave us this morning on Epiphany Sunday – the Sunday that commemorates this event which announces from the very heavens that the world has changed forever with the birth of this child? Well, I would say it leaves us right where we’ve always been – right in the middle of our busy, sometimes messy, frequently challenging, often incredibly wonderful lives. But now things are different. Things are different because Epiphany has changed everything! Epiphany has arrived once again inviting us to join the Wise Men once more in their quest for an understanding of, for some sort of connection with, this unbelievable event of God-with-us that is Christmas. The word “epiphany” itself has come to mean a moment of deep understanding, an experience of something that had been confusing suddenly making sense in a way it

never has before. Epiphany, dear friends, is God's gift to us as the Christmas season draws to a close and another year begins. And this year it holds additional meaning and hope for us as it signals the dreadful year that was 2020 is finally behind us.

This first Sunday of the New Year has come to hold a special place in our minds and hearts in our church as we observe a special ritual to guide us in our search for God's presence with us as the new year unfolds with its promise of new beginnings, with its hopes that things will be better. And, holy cow, do we need that this year as 2021 kicks off. For those of you who are new to this tradition, the premise is a simple one. On this Sunday, everyone receives a "Star Word" along with an invitation to pay attention to how this word makes itself manifest in one's life in the new year ahead. These Star Words are individual invitations from God to you to look for God's presence in your life in a particular way. Perhaps your Star Word offers a suggestion of something you might look for in order to understand God and God's actions in your life more deeply. Perhaps your Star Word is an acknowledgement of something already happening and a reminder to pay attention to how that something is changing your life. The point is that your Star Word is a gift to you from God. I believe that the Word which comes to you today is intended for you in this moment in your life. You may not understand it or why "this word" but, I promise, if you just rest with it, holding it in your heart, how this word is God's gift to you will become clear as time moves forward.

Of course, given our Covid reality of worship being virtual and not in person, how we get these Star Words to you will be different this year. Since you are not here to retrieve one for yourself from the dish in which they would usually be folded up and awaiting you, like so many fortune cookies fortunes minus the cookie, we are left with a challenge. Trust me when I tell you I have been pondering this dilemma for weeks and have considered all sorts of possibilities. What I finally realized is that simple is always better and therefore, each of you is receiving the entire Star Words list for this year with your worship packet. You, then, have the gift and responsibility of determining your Star Word for yourself this year. To aid you a little in your selection, I thought I would offer a ritual for you to do at home now as you consider the possibilities contained within this list of words for you. My thinking is that this ritual I suggest might help in guiding you to the word God would like you to receive as God's gift for you this year. Here goes:

1. Read through the list once, out loud. If you are with a group of folks, one person can read them all or you can take turns.
2. Pay attention if one word sticks in your mind long after it has been read out loud. Put a circle around it if your list is in print. Write it down on a piece of paper otherwise.
3. After the entire list has been read, close your eyes and notice whether or not one word sticks out for you. If it does, and it is the same as one which caught your attention during the reading, you have your word.

4. If your word heard and your word seen are not the same, or you were struck by more than one, look at each word you have identified again. Say it out loud. Write it out on paper. Are you drawn to one more than the others? This is your word.
5. If all of this sounds too “touchy-feely” for you, that’s okay. Lay the printed list of words flat, take out a coin, flip it over the paper and wherever it lands, that’s your word. Seriously.
6. If all else fails or you don’t have a printer, just pick one!

Hints about your word:

1. Do not try to be rational and pick a word that is something you think you need to “work on”. That’s not the point of a Star Word.
2. Do allow yourself to be drawn to a word, even if you have no idea why that particular word sticks out for you. God works in mysterious ways, always. Well, mysterious to us at least. It’s important to note that God always knows what God is doing!
3. Since we are not able to have our usual conversations together this morning about your words for 2020, please contact me at any time and we can chat about it. Or reach out to someone you are worshiping with at home this morning or someone else here in the church and speak with them. Conversations with God and each other are a key part of the Star Word experience!

Dear ones, as 2021 unfolds, my prayer for you is that your Star Word reveals itself in your life as God’s special gift to you. May it be your own personal reminder that God is paying attention to you, that God loves you beyond all reason, that God never leaves you lost and alone. May our amazing, loving and merciful God walk with you every moment of every day of this New Year gift 2021. Amen.

* Grace *	* Bravery *	* Happiness *
* Hope *	* Generosity *	* Spirituality *
* Patience *	* Prayer *	* Service *
* Fearlessness *	* Determination *	* Nurture *
* Renewal *	* Purpose *	* Peace *
* Courage *	* Excitement *	* Harmony *
* Reliability *	* Goodness *	* Joy *
* Serenity *	* Humor *	* Sacredness *
* Genuineness *	* Illumination *	* Love *
* Dependability *	* Endurance *	* Honor *
* Accountability *	* Clarity *	* Sincerity *
* Communication *	* Light *	* Motivation *
* Creativity *	* Quietness *	* Curiosity *
* Deliberation *	* Playfulness *	* Appreciation *
* Cheerfulness *	* Focus *	* Balance *
* Affirmation *	* Connection *	* Faithfulness *
* Sympathy *	* Empathy *	* Sensitivity *
* Commitment *	* Attention *	* Delight *
* Responsiveness *	* Grounded-ness *	* Intelligence *