

A STAR WORDS CELEBRATION

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

January 14, 2024 – Morning Worship with Communion

Text: John 1:1-9; 14, 16-18

Happy New Year!! Seems a little odd to be saying that on January 14 but, then again, this is my first opportunity to do so since we were snowed out last Sunday. I am grateful our leadership always makes decisions like that with the safety and well-being of our congregation in mind, rather than some notion that it's not really "worship" if we're not here in the sanctuary. We learned that wasn't true during Covid, didn't we? I'm glad the lesson stuck!!

We could have just attempted to do our traditional Epiphany and Star Sunday service virtually last week, but I was unwilling to do that. This is one service that works best in person! So, this year, we celebrated Epiphany virtually last Sunday with our Star Sunday celebration postponed until today. We have been doing Star Sunday here for at least a decade and it has become one of our more popular services. For those of you unfamiliar with Star Sunday, on this day everyone – through some mechanism I come up with each year – gets their very own Star Word. A Star Word is a word, unique to each individual. It is to act as a "guiding light" for you throughout the remainder of the year. It is an invitation to become especially attentive to all the ways God may be reaching out to you through your Star Word as the year unfolds. So, this practice is one which encourages deeper reflection on your part as you watch, remain attentive, to the way God is moving in your life.

This is why our Gospel text this morning is particularly appropriate for our consideration as we prepare to engage with our Star Words. This text from John, which we just heard read a few minutes ago, is unique among the Gospels in that it is much more theological from the start. John, right from the beginning, identifies

Jesus as the Word of God incarnate – literally God made flesh to live among us. John from the start is clear that Jesus is God’s recognition that in order to truly understand what his beloved creation experiences each day, God had to become human. Jesus had to come into being as a means for God to connect even more deeply with us on a personal level. So, as we move into our Star Sunday celebration this morning, we are doing our little part of making God tangible in our own lives as we connect with the Word made flesh through the Star Words we claim for the year ahead.

How we’ve distributed the Star Words has changed from year to year, in my never ending quest to make it interesting. Nowadays, we also have the added challenge of finding a way to connect with the folks who join us virtually since I can’t just hand them a Star Word. So, here’s my plan for this year. We are going to do some discernment together, in conversation with each other. First, I am going to ask you to identify 2-3 other people to talk with as we make our way through this. Remember, Jesus specifically tells us “wherever two or three are gathered, there I am in the midst of them!” (*Find your conversation partners!*)

Now, your first task is to share what your Star Word from last year was, if you can remember it. If you can’t, that’s okay! Just take a breath or two and see what word pops into your mind as reflective of your experience of 2023 and share that one. Doesn’t matter if it makes sense or not! Just share it with the others in your group. And please, keep this brief!!! Each person should talk for about a minute! (*Ready! Set! Chat!*)

Okay, very good! Now, here’s your next task. I want you to sit quietly for a moment and open your mind and heart to God’s guidance for you as the New Year stretches out in front of you. What might God be inviting you to consider more deeply, to use as a foundational

building block for the year stretching out ahead of you? What word best describes that sense of God's invitation for you? That's your Star Word! Share this with your conversation partners!

Nobody panic! I realize this kind of thing can be very challenging to some of us used to thinking in more concrete terms. So, as a means of helping you to figure out your Star Word for this year, I have brought all the unclaimed Star Words from previous years with me this morning and they are scattered here on the altar. If a word doesn't come to you, then, you can come up here and grab one. BUT!! No sorting through them to choose one you "like." Just come up, grab one, and go back to your seat and share with your conversation partners. All set??? Okay then, ready! Set! Chat!
(I will hand out blank stars while folks are chatting.)

Okay then! Tell me about your Star Words! How is God speaking with you this morning?

I'd like to close by sharing with you my Star Word for this year. It's GRATITUDE. I have so very much to be thankful for. I am thankful for my family, of course. For Jack and Amanda and Jenny and Reese and my dear Peter. I am grateful that whatever challenges have come up for us, we have always faced them together. I am also incredibly grateful to be your pastor here in this wonderful, vital little church. You folks are, quite simply, amazing. Whatever challenges come up, you face them. Whatever needs to be done, you find a way to do it. Whatever crazy new ideas I come up with, you're always willing to give them a try. You embody what it means to be a forward thinking, lively and hopeful congregation of God's Beloved people. I am keenly aware that not many of my colleagues are blessed with such congregations. I am truly blessed and filled with gratitude and it is

that which carries me forward into 2024. May your Star Word do the same for you. Amen.