

STAR WORDS: WORDS TO PONDER ALL YEAR LONG

Matthew 2:1-12

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I think it would be fun some year to celebrate the 12 days of Christmas, to keep the decorations up until January 6, really enjoying the simple beauty of them after all of the excitement has died down. You probably know that in other places, the celebration of Christmas is still in full swing into January. People in the UK celebrate Boxing Day on the second day of Christmas. In the middle ages, large parties were held on the Twelfth Night of Christmas. Many people still celebrate Epiphany on January 6, the official end to the Christmas celebrations.

The Festival of Epiphany commemorates the events in our story for today, of the magi following the star to the baby Jesus. In Spain there are colorful parades that celebrate the journey of the magi. In Mexico, the holiday gets a sweet ending with Rosca de Reyes, a sweet bread baked in a ring to resemble a crown, with a baby figurine hidden inside to represent the holy family's need to hide from King Herod. Orthodox Christians celebrate Epiphany with a water blessing. The biggest Epiphany water celebration in the world is in Tarpon Springs, Florida, where there is a large Greek population. A cross is thrown into the water, and young men of the community dive in and race to see who can pull the cross out of the water.

The 12 days of Christmas and Epiphany have never been much a part of my personal tradition nor a part of this church's tradition. I imagine most of you probably feel as we do in our home. As beautiful and wonderful as Christmas is, we're ready to clean up and get things back to normal. Christmas music starts so early in our culture,

the retail world reminds us that Christmas is coming well before Halloween. Truthfully, by now, most of us are ready to pack things away, and think about a new year.

But the biblical stories for this season are rich and deserve our attention. Last Sunday, I read the end of Matthew, chapter 1, before Beau preached and we lit the fourth Advent candle, the candle of love. (Was that really only 7 days ago?). I read all that Matthew gives us about the birth of Jesus...an angel visits Joseph in a dream. Joseph chooses to obey the angel and proceed with plans to become married to Mary, even though she's pregnant. Mary bears a son and Joseph names him Jesus.

That's all we get from Matthew, which is why we read Luke on Christmas Eve. Luke gives us the familiar, tender and dramatic details of the Christmas story - the shepherds out in the field, the angels' song, Joseph and Mary being turned away until finally someone opens up their side room, the room where the animals are kept. Luke gives us the swaddling clothes, and Mary treasuring the shepherds' words and pondering them in her heart. Luke's Christmas story is poetry.

But now we're back to Matthew and things sound ominous. King Herod gets a whiff of the news that the Messiah has been born. And he isn't happy. He's "troubled" in the version Laura read for us. Other versions say that Herod is "frightened." "Threatened" would be another accurate description. Herod was threatened, not by a baby, but by who the baby would grow up to be. Everyone expected the Messiah to be a powerful figure, and Herod didn't want anyone to rival him.

If you decide this afternoon that you want to read the rest of the second chapter of Matthew, you'll find a paragraph with the heading, "The Massacre of the Infants." Verse 16 tells you all you need to know about Herod and what kind of a person he was:

“When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under...”. Not a verse many of us like to preach about, but Matthew doesn’t beat around the bush. The birth of Jesus stirs things up, right from the very beginning. If you think that religion can avoid politics altogether, just see how Herod reacts to the news of Jesus’ birth. The world has been turned upside down before Jesus can speak a word.

It is the magi who tip Herod off. They’re not called “three kings” in the Bible, though that carol tells of their journey. Many scholars believe that the magi were priests from the Zoroastrian religion, the official religion of Persia before Islam. These magi worshiped a prophet who had been conceived by a virgin, and they believed that there would be other prophets born of virgins, and that they could predict when these miraculous births could occur by watching for signs in the stars. They became expert astronomers and astrologers. These wise men see a star that captures their attention. They arrive at Herod’s headquarters in Jerusalem to see if he knows anything about it.

With a star as their guide, these wise men show up on the scene inquiring of the one born king of the Jews. They are genuinely curious and Herod pretends to be so, too. He tells them that if they find out anything, they should come back and tell him everything they know.

So these wise men go out searching, because they believe they will find someone worthy of their worship. They give to the baby the gifts they have brought so far, but when they are in Bethlehem, they receive a message in a dream, warning them to come home by another way. Avoid Herod. Don’t tell him where the Messiah has been born. He’s up to no good.

The word “epiphany” means a revelation, a revealing. Something has become known. An epiphany is an insight, an aha moment. Sometimes it’s intellectual and sometimes it’s something you know in your heart. The symbol for the celebration of the Epiphany in the church is the star.

Jesus and Mary journeyed to Bethlehem where Jesus was born, and it was there the star appeared...and soon, Matthew tells us, they will journey to Egypt to keep their baby boy safe from the genocide Herod has ordered. Guided by a star, the magi journey from Persia to Jerusalem to Bethlehem and back home.

The shepherds journeyed from their flocks and fields to the place where the manger is found, guided by a star. The star tells the story of light coming into the world in a powerful way, one that fulfilled the promises of the prophets and caught the attention of the magi, who had the eyes to see what others, including Herod and his scribes, did not, and provided them with a direction to go.

In some ancient nautical cultures, the skill of way finding was taught. For example, there is an ancient Polynesian practice which dates back at least 3,000 years of navigating the ocean using deep knowledge and intense observation of the stars in the sky and the swells of the water. It involves more than just a geographical orientation and nautical skill. It also involves developing all of one’s senses and intuition. One writer defines way finding this way: “It’s not just sails and knots. It’s seeing where you’re going in your *mind*. And knowing where you are, by knowing where you’ve been.”

In the same way, there is more to the story of the magi finding the baby Jesus than just a simple delivery of gifts with the star as some sort of GPS. This is a story of journey and discovery that may have something to teach us about what it means to

search for God in the midst of our own life experiences. Here are some things to notice about the magi:

They had been studying. They knew their history. They hadn't merely stumbled onto this momentous event. They had searched their own past and their sacred texts, and the result of their study was a readiness, or at least a willingness, to recognize the sign when it appeared.

But they also lived balanced lives. They didn't just keep their noses in the books all the time. They also were keen observers of the world around them.

The magi were willing to seek confirmation of what they had learned and seen. They moved, they took action in order to follow this sign. They took a chance on being proven wrong – or right!

And even after they arrived, they still remained vigilant and attentive – open to further visions and insight – and so they were responsive to their dream-delivered warning to go home by another road.

The magi provide a powerful illustration of what the journey of faith, and the journey of life, can look like when we focus our intentions and attention in the right places. Willingness, observing, action, seeking guidance, responding with gratitude, and continued openness; these sound almost like a list of new year's resolutions of ways to be more faithful. The magi help give us tools that can help us find our own stars to follow towards the epiphanies God has in store for us in the coming year.

There is a tradition that is becoming popular among churches in many places at this time of year, marking this day of Epiphany with the receiving of star words. Star words are simple verbs or adjectives meant to give a point of focus or inspiration for the coming year, through which we can experience God in an epiphany-type way; unexpected, challenging, refreshing and renewing. This morning, you will have the opportunity to receive one of these words. The ushers are going to pass the offering plates. I encourage you to simply pick one from the basket, receiving it as a gift, rather than trying to select a word that you particularly like or think you need. One of my colleagues describes this as “the word picking you.” While the plates are being passed, Ruth will play for a few minutes, and then I will explain the purpose of these star words.

You are encouraged to keep this word in a place where you will see it often. When you see your word throughout the course of the day, the week, the year, reflect on what that word might be saying to you. Is your star word guiding you towards an epiphany about your life, a new insight into your relationship with God? If and when you have these points of connection, I’d love for you to share them with me, and I will share them in a sermon this time next year. I have been reading about churches that have been using star words for years, and some amazing stories have emerged from people’s relationships with these words. You don’t have to figure out your word’s meaning right away - or at all - simply let it be. Let it rest with you, and see if it may become a part of your life in an unexpected way.

This is one of those threshold times, the end of a year and the beginning of a new one. This year, it’s also the end of a decade and the beginning of a new one. These times are opportunities for reflection, for taking inventory, for giving thanks for

God's presence in our lives, for realizing that there are challenges we've overcome. It's a time for soul-searching, for deep questions. Am I living my life in the way that best fulfills God's purpose for me? Are there new habits I want to begin, or begin again? Old habits I want to leave behind in the old year? What kind of journey will this new year be? We can't choose everything about where we'll be going, but we can try our best to be intentional about the way we walk, the kind of attitude we'll take with us.

The Star Words insert in your bulletin is a tool for this reflection. This list of words might prompt you to think about a new goal. Or, if your star word just doesn't speak to you after a few weeks, feel free to look at the list and pick one that seems to be calling out to you.

We're all on a journey, and we all want what the magi wanted - to find our way to the place where God's light shines the brightest.

Some quotes taken from a sermon by the Rev. Elizabeth Milford.