

Jan 7th, 2024
Summerland United Church
Epiphany Sunday and Communion
A Gift from the Stars

Threshold

This week we transition from the season of Christmas to the season of Epiphany. A season of the returning light. We'll hear the story of the Magi following a star – a light in the darkness and we'll hear in scripture the words "Arise, shine, for your light has come." Today you will receive a gift from the stars, a possible light for you to follow yourself this year.

Scripture:

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

Reflection: So the thing about stars is that they're always there. And it's really easy to forget that. Right now there are stars in the sky, we just can't see them because the light of our closest star – sol – is brighter than all the stars. So even though they're present – we can't see them.

I grew up on the coast so there were also many many many many rainy, cloudy nights where I didn't see stars – but they were there.

And God is like that huh? Always there, just easily overlooked by the brightness of distraction and the clouds of everyday life.

Which is why, I think we light candles and why we put up Christmas lights – consciously or not we seek this light when the world is in shadow – literally and metaphorically.

And for me anyway, it's probably why I like Matthews's version of the Birth narrative best, over Lukes. Sure Luke has the shepherds and the angels singing – which is pretty great. But Matthew has the star and the Magi – it's bright and rich and kind of exotic.

And yes, a sky full of a heavenly host singing glory to God in the highest – is pretty mysterious, somehow the star is the sky is more so. And I found myself wondering about why that is. Because – stars are always in the sky, I've seen them a lot. I've never seen a heavenly host singing hallelujah, I've never seen a heavenly host doing anything truth be told. So shouldn't that feel more mysterious, more, dare I say, magical? But as I thought more about it I came to realize that in my practical mind I'm pretty sure I'm never going to see a heavenly host doing anything. But I know enough about the cosmos and workings of the universe that there is a slight possibility I could witness something like the Christmas Star happening in the sky. Halley's comet was visible in the sky in 1986 and I sort of, kind of remember seeing it. It'll swing around again in 2061 – which is only 37 years from now – so I might see it again. There's the chance of

witnessing a supernova or some other cosmic event akin to the cosmic event that inspired the story of the Star in Matthew's gospel.

And so for me – I find this part of the birth narratives so much more intriguing because I *could* be a part of it. This is the point of both passages and something I've been talking about over the last few weeks – we're meant to see ourselves in the story, we're meant to engage with the scripture by taking part in it. And honestly, don't we all prefer the well dressed magi over the grubby shepherds? I mean if we really need to choose?

We call this time of year Epiphany. Epiphany means according to Merriam-Webster - *an intuitive grasp of reality through something (such as an event) usually simple and striking.*

We sometimes refer to our own epiphany's as 'having seen the light' or 'a light bulb' moment. Icons and cartoons routinely illustrate intuitive grasps, moments of clarity realizations, with images of light bulbs popping to life over the top of heads.

When we're confused about something and then figure it out, we might exclaim – oh, I see!

The Magi intuitively grasp a new reality through the event of seeing a simple baby, which is striking because they also see God in this simple baby.

And this is exactly what these passages want from us – to see this new reality as well.

But more importantly, The Magi believe all of this *before* they see it. They experience something strange and wonderful: a wild star, not behaving as stars normally do and they believe it to mean something important. Even if they aren't entirely sure what it's all about.

I like that they believe without proof. They trust that the truth will be revealed to them in time and all they need to do is believe until they see it.

This is so different from our modern world where we want proof, documentation or pictures or we won't believe it. I wish we were more inclined to believe without seeing. To Trust the truth of our experiences especially when they touch on the holy and divine.

We can't see the stars in the sky right now – but we know they're there and we (I hope) believe they exist even when we can't see them.

For me, this part of the story is a good reminder to have faith and to trust that God is present in our world and in our lives even when we don't feel the presence of the holy. To remember that the stars are in the sky all the time.

Isaiah says to us – *arise shine your light has come* – reminding each of us that *the glory of God is in you. Nations will come to your light, the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around... you shall see and be radiant.*

So even if there is no light around us, even if we are surrounded by shadow literally or figuratively God's light will rise. And it will even rise within us if we allow it. Always and forever. and that's a good thing to remember these days.

The Magi followed a star and were gifted with a new understanding of God. They saw God in human form, and recognized the holy in a child and I don't believe it is vanity for us to look at each other, to look at ourselves and see the holy within us too. To see God in every human we see before us, including ourselves.

Hard to see sometimes, no doubt about that. Especially when we're asked to see that about ourselves. Yet, that's what's being asked of us in readings for today – You are God in Human Form, God's glory is in you, your light has come with the brightness of dawn. Look around and see – yourself – radiant with God's light.

We are all being given the gift of light, the gift of this realization, this epiphany.

Epiphany, as a season in the church, lasts from January 6th until Ash Wednesday, which this year is February 14. For us in the Western Hemisphere and far from the equator, these are months of dreary darkness. Yes, the light is slowly returning, but it can seem a long way off.

Today, I invite you to receive your own gift from the stars. As you come forward for communion, you are invited to choose a paper star (without peeking). On each star is printed a word.

This word is your gift from the stars for this coming year. Perhaps you'll connect with the word right away, perhaps you'll feel affronted by this word. Perhaps this word won't make any sense to you at all. Any response you have is good. And maybe you'll put this star in your pocket or bag and forget about it the moment you walk out the door. Or maybe you'll put your star somewhere that you will see it everyday and think about this gift and what it means for you. Any response you have is all good.

However you receive this gift, know that it is freely given with no expectation.

Last year my Star Gift word was – Learning – which seemed very appropriate considering I am here as a student and learning is a very important part of my life right now.

I've asked a couple of people to share a little about what their star was last year and what it meant for them.

First – I'll share a bit from a member who asked me to read for them. Then John Bubb will come and share a little about his star word.

From a Member:

"Last year I received a "CELEBRATE" star.

I smiled when I got it as I knew of a few milestones that could happen and also wondered if I was underestimating or being overly optimistic about the future. Each month of the year I found a reason to celebrate – I began to eat healthy and to get more exercise. I celebrated time with my grandchild over spring break and summer holidays – which allowed me to improve my relationship with my son and daughter-in-law.

My family celebrated improved health after major surgery in the summer. I celebrated my 50th High school reunion and got back in touch with friends from my high school days. Throughout the whole year, there were many more trips family gatherings and events worth celebrating.

At the same time, there were sad celebrations that will always occur in life. A friend was diagnosed with cancer, a friend lost their adult son in a car accident, we lost another friend to cancer – we celebrated the lives of these people and the way they touched us. And they helped us celebrate the small things and the way our lives impact each other in ways we don't always realize, often in small ways. I do my small part in the community and hope that it somehow impacts the greater good."

That's something to celebrate.

John invited to come share.

I can make no promises that your word will be 'an epiphany' when you receive it, but it might be. And so, I invite you into that possibility.