

Jan 8th, 2023
Summerland United Church
Spiritual Affective Disorder: Arise, A Star Shines for Us

Music for Gathering

Threshold

Many of you have probably heard of “Seasonal Affective Disorder.” It is a condition in which the lack of sunlight, often during winter months, can affect our moods and ability to cope effectively. Millions of people suffer from some sort of anxiety or depression disorder. If you do not, chances are you are close to someone who does.

For the next few weeks, we will talk about “*Spiritual Affective Disorder*,” and consider how the uncertainty and pace of life can keep us from the spiritual and emotional wellbeing that God desires for us.

Instead of focusing on learning new spiritual practices as an antidote, we will simply focus on how everyday life activities can become spiritual practices—deepening our experience of a meaningful life and helping us shine a light on these seasonal “blahs.”

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

Sermon Star Gifts

My Hebrew Bible professor taught our class something very important when it comes to reading scripture. She taught us to go through a passage and highlight words that were repeated over and over. because when words and ideas are repeated regularly in scripture, they matter.

In the case of these two passages the words and ideas that get repeated over and over is see, eyes, light, shine, and the words you and your. In Isaiah it’s: *Your light, risen upon you, your dawn, you shall see.* In Matthew it’s: *The magi saw the star, they had seen it when it rose, and were overjoyed when they saw it rise. When they saw the child, they bowed down.*

Both passages speak of seeing and light: *the light shining, light arising and seeing the light, seeing the star*. So it's safe to assume these are the ideas the writers want us to pay attention too. And, perhaps most important is: *What will happen for us, to us, when we see this light*.

This makes sense because 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 lets just back up for a moment because there's something else going on with the magi that's easy to miss. And its my favorite part of the story.

The Magi believe all of this *before* they see it. They experience something strange and wonderous: 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.

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. If we're struggling. If we're down and feeling deep in shadow because of the time of year, or because it's how our brain functions, it's easy to lose sight of God. Easy to believe that God is not present with us in the gloom.

And this is why I also love the imagery of the star, because stars are always there, even when we can't see them. In the daytime, our own star (the sun) is brighter than all the others, so we can't see them – but they are there. Sometimes at night there are clouds covering the stars – but they are there.

And this is God too. Always there, sometimes out shone by other things, distractions, and our day-to-day lives. Sometimes God is clouded over with our own emotions, frustrations, anger, doubts and struggles. But God is always there.

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, recognized the holy in a child and I don't believe it is vanity for us to look at each other, to look 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 22nd. 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. Which is why we will spend these next seven weeks exploring ways to shine more light in our lives.

Today, I invite you to receive your own gift from the stars.

This is a practice I've participated in for a number of years. We have for you paper stars and on each star is a word. The invitation is to choose a star, without peeking.

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.

The first year we shared Star Gifts I was discerning whether or not I should take a tour to Israel and Palestine. I wanted to go, but I was afraid. It was very far away and Israel

and Palestine are not the safest places in the world. I looked for all kinds of excuses to say, ‘sorry can’t go...’ But those excuses all fell away. My family encouraged me to take the trip, my job encouraged me to take the trip and even suggested they might financially support it. It seemed to me the only thing standing in the way was myself, and I am very good at getting in my own way.

On Epiphany Sunday of that year, we handed out Star Gifts for the first time. I picked my star at random. And then I flipped over the star and my word was – Travel.

And even my friends who don’t believe in coincidences, really couldn’t say anything against this being a sign. So, there’s really not much you can do when the star points you to travel to the Holy Land? And so I went there that spring.

In later years, my star gifts have not been so straight forward. They’ve taken more time to discern their meaning and value in my life. And a couple of years, I’ll admit to downright disliking my word.

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.

We will have 3 people holding the baskets of stars, please come forward and pick your star. For those of you, for whom mobility is an issue, please stay in your seat and we will come to you. And for those of you on Zoom, please be patient at the end of the service stay on line and one of us will pick a star for you.

So, arise, shine, for your light has come...

Practices for the Week – Arise, your light has come

Each week during this season we will invite you to an at-home simple spiritual practice.

This week’s practice – Arise, your light has come – is a morning prayer. Honestly there have been times in my life where just getting out of bed in the morning is a struggle. I haven’t wanted to face the day. So this week’s practice asks nothing more than to take a moment upon waking to pause and say a prayer of thanksgiving for the opportunity to start the day anew.

As you leave today you can pick up a copy of this image and prayer, place it by your bedside, or on your bathroom mirror, or on your fridge, or by the coffee pot or kettle. And as when you see it, remember you are loved by God and you are not alone.

There is a little more detail about this week’s practice in the Reflection Journal that has been included in the weekly email.