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January 3, 2021

Sermon “Followers”

Star Sunday

This text from Isaiah 60 is our traditional text for Epiphany. We hear of the magi, kings from the east bringing their gifts of frankincense and gold as in Matthew. Talk of the light, but this year we connect most strongly with the people of Israel to whom the prophet Isaiah is speaking. God’s people had been in exile in Babylon for over 70 years.

They had been wrenched apart, separated by their conquerors according to their skills and abilities. Those whom the Babylonians felt had useful skills, well they were taken to Babylon to benefit the Babylonians, and the others were left behind. Today many are separated according to their skills – doctors, nurses, hospital workers –working almost nonstop and needing to stay away from their families for fear of spreading the coronavirus to them. Teachers and students, grandparents from their children and grandchildren, pastors from their flocks, even politics has separated us as never before. In so many ways we all have been separated.

Now, just like the Israelites returned to Zion, we see the end in sight. And, just as the Israelites expected to find everything just as they left it, we will have the same disappointment if we think things will be the same normal we experienced before the pandemic. Into this darkness the prophet urges them and proclaims - Arise, shine; for your light has come. That God is there among them. And, in the midst of our darkness and weariness, we are given the same summons. What more reminder do we need, have we not just celebrated Christmas, the birth of Jesus – when the light came into the world.

Have we forgotten that the light was always here? In our darkest moments, the light never left us, maybe we didn’t see it or we forgot to look for it? In verse 4 we too are encouraged by the words of Isaiah. Lift up your eyes and look around; we need to stop looking inward and look outward. When we look outward we will see God in our midst and we will reflect God’s light out into the world.

If we hold back, safeguarding ourselves, nothing can radiate. We do not absorb the light of God, we reflect it, it is not ours to keep, to hold tightly. There is no other period in our lifetime when the world so needed the light of God. The light of compassion and companionship, of love and hope. To not just share, but to give, to give with abandon, with the abundance with which God has given to us. We can be so focused on getting by, trying to do it all perfectly, or doing it our way, that we miss the light.

In following the star, the magi made several course corrections. Correcting one's course is not a failure, it is adaptive, and it gets you to the appointed goal, even if by a different way. We are not lost. There is light all around us, not only at the end of the tunnel. During the days ahead, we need to adapt, to check that our path is on course, that we are paying attention to the light, listening to who is calling us, and to whom we are to look around and see.

Our tradition of choosing Star Words on Epiphany is an aid to listen and see. In this tradition, we along with churches all over the world, participate by choosing a word that will open us to God's movement in our life in the coming year. The star word really picks you, that is why they are offered face down, you can't pick and choose.

There are many reasons behind this tradition.

First, we know that the Magi needed to adjust and adapt, as they journeyed towards the light in the east, the star, which ultimately led them to Jesus.

So, we too use all the resources we have available to us—including creative prayer practices and intention words for the new year—to move closer to Jesus.

Secondly, we trust that God uses multiple ways to guide us and speak to us.

Star words are one such lens that might provide us with a way to look for God in our midst, actively and in hindsight.

Finally, we know that the most common prayer practice for many involves speaking to God as opposed to silence or contemplation.

This prayer practice invites us into a new prayer rhythm of reflection and review that can be a powerful way to connect with God. These are our Star Words for this year. Beautiful! They are part of the devotional and worship materials from Sanctified Art that we have been using this season.

Today we will hear a couple of Star Word stories, examples of how these simple words have opened our hearts to God's leading.

We mailed a star word earlier this week to those of you unable to get out, you can find them in your family advent bags, or in the Food Depot for pick up.

If you have your star word, we invite you to type your word in the chat now. If you have not yet received your star word, we'll make sure you get one soon.

Remember to put your star word in a place where you will see it often. Pray over it, and reflect on where God is calling you through that word. Use our Star Word reflection devotion to find your own rhythm of reflection.

My journey with Star Words began in 2012 during my first field education placement in seminary, a Presbyterian church in Plainsboro NJ. The word that choose me was ZEAL. A strange word I thought, but I looked it up to make sure I understood the meaning, which is great energy or enthusiasm in pursuit of a cause or an objective. So as directed I put it someplace where I would see it often - on my laptop and wondered what it could mean for me. In the spring, as my placement was coming to an end, I received my epiphany.

Being on the older side of most seminary students, I didn't want to squander the opportunity to which God had called me. I discovered through praying over this star word that God was calling me to embrace again the enthusiasm and joy that had led me not just to seminary, but into ministry, to take back the zeal because that is what God had originally placed on my heart. I was too focused on learning the head part of my faith and had forgotten the heart part.

Each year the word that picks me has opened me more to hearing God's desire for me. Even the year that my star was blank. This practice has opened me to deeper spiritual reflection, and a zeal for finding the diverse and varied ways we can listen for God.

The magi were curious and open to where the star might be leading them, they knew it was to a king, but I don't think they expected the new king to be that new. A newborn baby. I invite us to be curious and open to what God is calling us to discover, to ponder and pray over our star words, and share your stories and journey with each other.

The light we reflect in following Jesus is a blessing to everyone we encounter. As we approach these coming days, it will still be difficult. Remember the hope and blessings that are still taking place, people getting engaged, married, and having babies. Kids are applying to colleges, and people applying for new jobs. Life continues on, differently, and we are called to remain in it. To share our blessings and gifts. If not now, when?

I pray that we give our blessings away, confident that the God we follow continues to bless us, and will always fill us. So on this Epiphany Sunday, when everyone has made it to the manger, let us celebrate the light, reflecting it out to all. Let us give with abandon the love God has given us, and be strong as our journey continues. AMEN.