

“Star Gifts”
Matthew 2:1-12

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It is the start of a new year and a new decade. The United States is at the brink of war, yet another far-flung, never-ending war for resources and power with the threat of countless casualties on all sides. News of wildfires in Australia rage on, bringing worries of climate change to a heightened state. We are only five days into 2020 and it seems like each day there is something new to fear.

In cultural moments like this one - moments that feel all too common in the past few years - I start to hear comments like, “I feel helpless and I’m not sure what to do.” “I wonder if I’m the only one who cares.” “I’m afraid for my children and I don’t know what to tell them.”

I don’t have all the answers, or really any answers, but I have a story to share with you. This is a story we tell every year on epiphany, but this year, this week, this day, it feels more necessary than ever.

There once was a caravan of wise men. Legend says they were three men, because of the three gifts they would later offer a young child, but it was more likely that they were a whole caravan. This was a tight-knit community of philosophers, sages, astrologers, and magi. I can’t say for certain but I like to imagine women were included in their ranks since they were a group that were not restricted to the same customs as other professions in their culture. This was a spiritual community who wrestled with ideas and looked for visions and signs of what to do and how to live and where to go. This was a group of wanderers who were consulted for advice and knowledge.

This caravan of wise men and women was traveling west to Jerusalem, learning and observing as they went across the desert together. What they observed was a new star in the sky, a light they had never seen before, and they had questions about who this star represented and where it would lead them. They believed it would lead them to a new ruler that had just been born, a ruler that would bring a revelation, that is, would reveal God to them. When they arrived in Jerusalem they asked everyone they met, “Where is the new king that has been born? We have come to honor him.”

King Herod, who was the Roman King in Jerusalem and the surrounding area, heard from his people about the newly arrived caravan and the questions they were asking. Herod cared about power more than anything else, so the thought of a new king being born somewhere made him feel very insecure. He called together his advisors and the chief priests to find out where the child was. Scripture foretold that this new king would surely be born in Bethlehem, and when King Herod learned this information, he formulated a plan.

Herod invited the leaders of the caravan to meet with him and feigned interest and appreciation of this newborn king. He said, “You want to pay homage to the new king? So do I! So do I!” The wise men raised their eyebrows, because surely Herod would greatly benefit from humbling himself in front of someone else, but it seemed unlikely that he would ever be willing or capable of doing so. Herod, missing their skepticism, asked the wise men to find the baby and then return and tell him what they had found.

So the wise men and women set off again, following the star until it was straight above them in the sky. They were full of joy of anticipation as to what they were about to experience. They asked around in town until they finally found the child and his mother Mary. When they finally met Mary and her son, the wise men were overcome with humility. Before doing anything

else, they knelt down and they worshipped God. *This was a sacred moment.* Then, the wise men started looking through all they had on them to find a suitable gift that expressed their gratitude and wonder. They reached into their treasure chests and pulled out the best of what they had with them: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These fine resources were gifts signifying how valuable this child was to the wise men.

When the caravan began their journey home, they considered the joy and humility they had experienced with Mary and her child, and they considered what Herod had told them about helping him find the baby. They knew Herod's intentions were corrupt, so they disobeyed him and took another road, going out of their way to avoid him and protect the young child and his family.

As we consider this story in light of our own time and circumstances, I'm left with three questions as I ponder how I might learn from the journey of the wise men and women.

The first is: what is the community I would like to travel with this year? Who will help guide me, who will lead in me a direction away from corrupt power and toward humility and wonder? Who are the sages, the philosophers, the wise ones who I want to surround myself with as I navigate the journey of life? The wise men did not go out alone. This was a communal journey. I imagine there were disagreements and uncertainty along the way, but I know for certain they needed each other: for strength, for perseverance, for wisdom, and for courage. As we begin a new year, who will we surround ourselves with? What community will we commit ourselves to as we continue our journey and face new challenges?

The second is: how am I called to stand up to corrupt power? The wise men did more than avoid King Herod by going home a different way. They defied his orders. They put themselves at risk of imprisonment or worse for disobeying his instructions in order to protect a

child with significantly less power than they had. As we work for justice this year, what ways will we confront corruption? Stand up to powers that do not protect the most vulnerable among us? What are we willing to give up in order to protect others?

The third is: How will God be revealed to me this year? What are the ways I can look for God around me - in my relationships, in my work, in my daily life, and what will I learn? How will I allow what is revealed to transform me, to humble me, to lead me to joy and wonder or even worship?

In response to this third question, I invite us to try something new together. So often belonging to a church is opening ourselves to giving: giving our time, giving our hearts, giving our gifts to community in service to God. I would like to start the year instead of inviting each of us to receive a gift, the same as we gave to our children earlier, a star gift. The wise men followed the star and they knew how to read the star - to interpret its signs and meaning. The star was more than an astronomical guide in the sky, it was a spiritual guide. Seeing that star revealed to them something about the nature of God and something about their purpose or call in following God.

Today most of us do not read the stars in the same way, but there are still spiritual signs around us, ideas and guides that point us to God or reveal to us something about the nature of God. Today we are going to pass out a star word to everyone who would like one - there is enough for every person here.

I invite you to take your star word home with you and put it someplace where you will see it regularly. On your refrigerator, taped to a mirror, in your car, tucked in a journal - put it someplace you will actually see it and be reminded of it, not just this week, but all year long. I want to invite you to let this word be something of a guide for you in 2020. How does it appear

in your life? Where is it missing? Where do you long for more of it? Who do you know that is modeling this word for you? How does this word or idea reveal something of the nature of God to you?

Next year, before Epiphany, I'm going to ask for folks who would like to share something about what their word revealed to them this year. This will be a short reflection - it can be written or verbal or even texted. It is entirely optional. But I'm curious to see what difference it might make, when we have something to guide us through the year - a word that is grounded in our spirituality and faith tradition, a star that shines above no matter where our journeys take us. I'm as curious for myself as I am to eventually hear from all of you.

My hope is that like the wise men we will follow our stars and allow them to guide us toward something new, toward a revelation of God's love and goodness here on earth. Regardless of where we go, regardless of how the year unfolds, I hope it leaves you with joy, wonder, and humility at the ways you find God in our world. Amen.