

“Star Words”

Matthew 2:1-12, Galatians 5

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What’s the biggest holiday of the Christian year? Well, we just had it, right? Nothing beats Christmas. But is that the most meaningful holiday to our faith? What about Easter? What about the death and resurrection of Jesus? There would be no Christian faith without that, right? And if we study history, we find that Christmas is a latecomer to Christian celebrations. If we look at the earliest of Christian writings, the letters of Paul, how often is Christmas mentioned? How often does he talk about the virgin birth and the manger and the angelic announcement? Never. And Mark, which is the earliest gospel written does not have a story about Jesus’ birth. His story begins when Jesus is already an adult. And if we read the early church leaders, through the first few centuries of the existence of the Christian Church they celebrated three holidays—Easter of course, but they also celebrated Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church. And the third holiday they celebrated was today. Epiphany, January 6th. The day that the wise came to Bethlehem and gave gifts to the Christ child. This was the day that they celebrated that Christ came not just to be king of the Jews, not just to the nation of Israel, but to all people and all nations. The wise were not Jewish and their representation in Bethlehem tells us and told the early Church from the very beginning that Jesus came to be savior to the whole world. Epiphany means “revelation,” that something or someone is about to be revealed. It’s not just the day by which the deacons need to have the decorations put away because it means that Christmas is over. It is on Epiphany that we celebrate the revelation of Jesus as savior to all of us.

We don't celebrate Epiphany very much, do we? Did you wake up this morning with a sense of excitement and anticipation, thinking, "it's Epiphany!" No, you didn't. But maybe you should have. Just as the wise brought gifts to the baby Jesus, you are receiving a gift today. Today, I want to try to do something new. This may be a new tradition for us on Epiphany, a spiritual exercise. On our way home from Boston this week, probably thinking about the gift giving we had just shared with our kids, I came across an article on line from Presbyterian Outlook about how some churches are renewing the practice of gift-giving on Epiphany through the gifts of simple words on a paper star. We are going to do it this year and I hope we continue it into the years ahead. Enough so that in coming years I hope you will wake up on the Sunday closest to Epiphany and say, "It's Epiphany Sunday! I wonder what will happen today?"

On the first Epiphany, the wise brought gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh to Jesus and the holy family. Lots of jokes have been made about how they could have done better by bringing some blankets and diapers, but the gifts they gave have great significance. The gifts of the wise were all very precious. They were worth a lot. And the holy family would have great need soon because they were about to become refugees, fleeing to Egypt ahead of Herod's soldiers, where they would have to live for years perhaps before it was safe to return home. And the gifts of the wise supported the family in their time of need. And they were not only valuable monetarily, but they were spiritually significant too. The three gifts were gifts that could be brought to a young king. They show the extravagant generosity of the wise in response to the extravagant gift to us of the baby Jesus.

So today you received a gift as you came in. And this is a part of a spiritual exercise. That means it is something that is supposed to help you grow spiritually. When you came in today you received a star. A star that is to remind you of the star that drew the wise to Bethlehem so

many years ago and prompted them to give their gifts. The star that you received this morning has a word written on it. A star word. This is your word for the year. This is your gift. A word for you to live with, to meditate on, to think about. This is a word to let God use in your life. What will you do with it? I hope you'll take it home, you'll think about it. You'll wonder what this means for your life for the next year. Maybe you'll tuck it in your Bible and go back to it occasionally. Maybe you tape it to your refrigerator or to the side of your computer monitor so it shines whenever you see it. Put it up on your mirror or on the dash of your car. Somewhere that is a reminder for you. This is your word for the year.

But this year's words aren't just a random selection of words. This year I took the words from Paul's letter to the Galatians, the nine fruits of the Spirit. Each of you has either, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness or self-control. These are the things that should be growing in the life of every Christian. When the Holy Spirit is working on us, we should see these things in our lives and in the life of the community of faith. Now what do these words mean to you? Well, we're going to talk about that. Over the next three weeks we are going to talk about these words and what they might mean in our lives. And for our brothers and sisters in the church who are not here today, we will have our star words available for them to pick one any time in January. But let me encourage you—don't trade your word in hoping for a better one! If you got "self-control" today when you were really hoping for "Peace," don't try to trade it in—let it work. Let the Spirit work with you. It may mean far more than you think it does.

So put down everything else in your hands right now and pick up your star. Hold it in your hand so that you can read the word that is written there. The first thing I want you to say to yourself is, "I chose this word today. I accept this word as a gift that was meant to be given to me." And

next just accept the word for what it is with neither a sense of indication of need, like this is something you lack, or affirmation, as if this is something you have in abundance. Just let this word be with you. Live with it. Begin to look for it. It's not saying that you don't have the others as well. Every word in the basket has meaning to every person—there are no wrong choices here—this is just a highlight for you this year. So sit with your word for a moment. Look at it. Let it be with you.

What will this word mean to you this year? That will be interesting to see. It will be interesting to see what the word does with you and what you do with the word. That's why this is a spiritual exercise, it is something that we are working on with the Spirit of God. And it's a star. It is a way to let the light of Christ shine in our lives.