

Sunday Sermon
January 6, 2019
Epiphany Sunday
Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12
“Star Words; Star Gifts”

Introduction

As we have acknowledged, it is Epiphany Sunday, a day we commemorate how wise men, or magi, followed the guidance of a star to journey from the East and bring gifts to a newborn king, the Christ-child.

This is, after all, where we get our tradition of sharing gifts at Christmas, to honor the coming of the Christ-child. And at the end of this Epiphany service, during the closing hymn, each of you will receive a gift. You will receive a little wooden star, bearing a printed word.

There are 80 words in all, but only one word printed on each star. So for this congregation, there are repeats. The stars are placed word side down in the plates, so you will not see the words. As a plate is passed you will reach in and take one, with no idea what word is on the other side. You cannot look at the word and change. You keep the word you take.

The star gifts will be passed in the old, former offering plates of this congregation. Note the significance. Plates used to give gifts to God used today to receive a gift from God. That is, after all, the order of things in God's kingdom; God always gives first, and then we are invited to respond with our gifts and ourselves.

Here is how you will respond: Throughout this year you are to reflect on your word. You are to ponder what significance that word might have in your life, and how God might be speaking to you through that simple message.

Star Gifts

This congregation is filled with compassionate people, people who spend hours doing things for others, delivering meals to shut-ins, writing cards to the sick, providing transportation to the homebound, visiting people in hospitals and nursing homes, praying for those in need, and stretching budgets to give for the sake of others.

You are good at being busy for God. But this Sunday, you are offered an opportunity to be still in the presence of God and to receive God's gift to you. Not because of anything you have done to merit the gift, but simply because of God's abundant generosity.

You are encouraged to take your word home and hang it up where you will see it every day. On a bathroom mirror, or next to your computer screen, or on the refrigerator, or in your car, or by the door where you come and go.

Ponder your word, and allow it to speak to your heart. You may start by looking the word up in the dictionary or on the internet, so you see its different meanings. We hear the word “grace” all the time, but what exactly does grace mean? A word that seems unclear or totally unrelated to you will gain new meaning as the year goes on.

You may get the word “craft” or maybe the word “art” and think why did I get that? That has nothing to do with me. But if you spend time with that word this year, you may come to a new understanding and appreciation of it in your life.

As we were preparing words for today, my husband looked at one star and laughed. “There are some judges in your congregation,” he said, “who will have an interesting year if they get this word.” I looked at the star. The word was “pardon.”

One individual in another church shared that the word she received was “restraint”. “I wanted to throw it back,” she said. “Restraint made me think about being held back or being bound. The word was supposed to be a gift, but it did not feel like a gift to me. And yet, over time,” she said, “the word worked on my heart and mind. I started practicing restraint in various parts of my life. And I began to see my word as a gift instead of a curse.

It freed me to change some things in my life. Instead of making resolutions that I would feel guilty about not keeping, I took a star word as a gift, and my eyes were opened to see God in unexpected ways and unexpected places.”

In another church, a woman received the word “joy”. Her middle name was actually joy, but she admitted that she has lost her joy, forgotten how to live with joy. The star word reminded her throughout the year about the gift of joy in all circumstances of life; a joy that comes from the simple affirmation that we belong to God.

One woman whose husband had recently passed away received the word “perseverance.” A student in her first year of college turned over her star and read the word “responsibility.”

Another member received the word “courage”. She was in the midst of cancer treatments when the word was given to her. She took that star with her to every doctor appointment. She kept the word by her side as she entered hospice care. She said it was the gift she needed.

As I prepared for today, I blindly reached into the pile to pick a star for myself. Turns out my word for this year is “strength.” An interesting word to reflect on this year. Strength is a gift that helps you hang on in times of change and challenge. I pray that word will help me see this year a God who continually encourages and strengthens me in all circumstances.

Conclusion

I hope that as you go through this year, you will share with each other your experiences with your word, your star gift.

Like any other gift, it can either be received with joy, or it can be considered useless or silly and discarded, forgotten. But unlike other gifts, it cannot be exchanged.

So let God speak to you through your gift, one little word. Perhaps God will use your word to bring new insights into your life. Perhaps the word will bring a memory of long ago with wisdom from the past.

Epiphany is the celebration of God’s presence coming into the world to shine in the darkness. This year may you experience the presence of a generous, giving God who coming to you in one simple word.

And may these words help us be, like the magi, able to journey home by another way, with our eyes opened to God’s presence in and around us. Epiphanies from God. May you experience that this year. Amen.