

“Follow that Star!”

January 5, 2020

Star Words: A Spiritual Practice for Epiphany (and Beyond) Series - Epiphany

“Picture yourself separated from the other “billions” of people where you can see them all from a distance. You know, every 90 minutes you go around and the world turns underneath you like a big jewel.

And I think what everyone would find, if they could be in that position, if they could see the whole world every 90 minutes and look down on the places where we do things right and look down where we're doing stupid, brutal things to each other and the inevitable patience of the world that houses us, I think everybody would be reinforced in their faith. And maybe readdress the real true tenets of what's good and what gives them strength.”

These are the words of Chris Hadfield, an astronaut who has flown space missions, completed space walks, and spent months in space. I heard Hadfield's interview a long a time ago. His descriptions of sunrises and sunsets witnessed from space - the power, majesty, and awe that he experienced while in space and his words on perspective - how vast the universe is and how small we are - have stayed with me.

But something else he said did, too. “It's not a risk-free business when you want to try something hard and new, when you want to explore someplace you haven't been before.” Hadfield was referring to his career in space exploration, but his words made me think of the magi who followed the star - and challenged me to think about my faith as we enter a new year.

Tomorrow is officially Epiphany - the end of the Christmas season - and the beginning of the season of light. We celebrate that the Light of the world is here! Jesus is born. Salvation has come! And it has come for all!

Epiphany is a celebration of the “showing forth” or “the revelation” of God's presence - even to unlikely people in unlikely places. The magi fit the bill - coming from far away - probably present-day Iran or Iraq. They were experts on the stars and observers of the world around them. They were looking up to see what was happening. Usually they counseled those in power. But this time, they followed a star themselves.

So these observers became investigators. They went to see for themselves. They came to Jerusalem from the East asking about the new king because they had seen a star. They wanted to worship this king, so they went to the most logical place - to King Herod. We heard the rest of the story last week - how Herod's jealousy and thirst for power caused the death of many. But all along, the magi are on a dangerous journey - longing for something more and seeking something new.

The magi follow the star. And it says they were overjoyed when they came to the house where Jesus was. These observers and investigators became worshipers - bowing down and offering gifts that remind us who Jesus is: gold because Jesus is King, frankincense because of the sacrifice Jesus will make as the great high priest, and myrrh because Jesus will be anointed for burial. These wise ones brought to their knees by a child - the power of the Light of the world!

These men were Gentiles – not Jews – who came to worship - the first Gentiles recorded in Scripture to worship Jesus. And they were descended from the Babylonians. Their ancestors had taken the Israelites into exile. God’s incarnation - God coming “in the flesh” isn’t an exclusive cosmic happening, but an inclusive act of God who chooses to come that all would know God’s love and grace. God welcomes all, and the magi offer one more affirmation of God’s inclusive love.

Their journey reminds us that following God’s signs for us and seeking deeper faith in Christ is not easy. It involves risk. Their journey was arduous. Scholars figure that they traveled many months – even up to two years – to worship Jesus. They show perseverance and persistence.

We might want a life of faith to be easy, but it’s not. How many of us have said that? Living our faith requires commitment, sometimes waiting and praying and hoping and waiting some more. It means that there are struggles - not because God makes it so, but because we are human. It means that there are joys - some overwhelming and some quieter - but all of them blessings that we claim and celebrate because God is good.

God chose to show love in Jesus and reveal love in a special way. And if we follow Jesus, Epiphany tells us to show Jesus, to make Jesus known, and to reveal Jesus – so that the whole world might know him.

Even in trying and tragic times, whether it’s the state of the church or the state of the world or the uncertainty around the world, our witness that the love of God is for all people matters. This week, after we gathered last Sunday, there was violence as a group of Jewish brothers and sisters celebrated Hanukkah, unrest in the Middle East, fires in Australia. But Epiphany tells us that our witness matters - no matter what.

Did you hear what the prophet Isaiah said? “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.” What a strange message! The people had lived much of their lives under foreign rule. They had seen war. They had witnessed their loved ones carried away to live in exile! They had come home, but to a place that didn’t look or feel the same.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.” Before this, Isaiah has been calling the people to repent and turn back to God – and

then he gives them this message of hope! God's glory will be among them. The exiles will come back home. And other nations will come to Israel and restore its wealth.

So God says, "Get up and move because my light is shining upon you!" Even though what you see is death and destruction, even though you experience trying times, even amid tragedy, even though nothing seems to be going right, get up and get ready, because God has a plan to redeem you!

Isaiah's prophecy speaks to us! Looking back, we can be dragged down by what we've seen and experienced. Even right now, we can be dragged down by many things. But hear it again: "Arise, shine, for **your** light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon **you**." Following God's light is a gift!

Ruth Haley Barton says, "The story of the magi is a story of pilgrimage. It is about being willing to leave that which is familiar in order to arrive at our deeper spiritual home. It is about seeking something we don't fully understand until we stumble upon it where we least expect it." The magi are good models for us. They pay attention. They trust God's guidance. They humble themselves when they encounter Jesus.

That's my hope as we engage with our "Star Words" this year - that it will be a way that we dig more deeply into our spiritual lives - paying closer attention, trusting God more fully, and humbling ourselves more so that we might see what God is doing and how God is leading us.

So as we celebrate the season of light, we come to the table where Jesus offers us a feast of his love - love that makes sacrifices for others, love that shows mercy and forgives, love that includes everyone. Epiphany reminds us that Jesus comes for everyone that Jesus cares for everyone, that Jesus can redeem everyone. In Jesus, God tells the world that the Savior has come for everyone – not just for some. There are no exclusions in God's family. All are welcome. All are invited. May we follow God's light.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS of CONFESSION and WORDS of ASSURANCE

God, we acknowledge that we are not always ready to receive your best gifts for us. You have given us an epiphany word in order that our searching will bring us to you.

It is often our habit to turn aside, stumble over, or even reject experiences and encounters that we later understand to have been precious gifts.

Help us to be open to the gift that you offer us now through our star words. We acknowledge that we do not fully understand what this word might mean for our faith, but we receive it from you with gratitude and pray that your Spirit will enable us to live into our word with intention and faithfulness. Amen.