
Isaiah 60:1

Arise, shine, for your light has come...

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. ² They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

"A Star-Led Journey"

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Hello, friends! It's the beginning of a new year. The wonderful truth of our faith is that in Christ, each day can be a new beginning, a chance to start over and make a fresh start. But there is something about the turning of the calendar that challenges us to take stock of where we've been and where we are going. It is a season to reflect on our blessings (and also our shortcomings) and anticipate the good things (and also the growth edges) ahead of us. Whether it is on the cusp of a new year, or a typical Tuesday in February, sometimes we need to pause, reflect, look around us, and consider where the road we are on is taking us. We might discover that we have lost our way and need to reorient ourselves to the destination we are trying to reach.

Reaching a destination is easier for some of us than it is for others. I am directionally challenged. We all have our gifts. A good sense of direction is not one of mine. I can follow a map as long as I have a few moments to get my bearings - figure out which direction is North - or I'm liable to make perfectly correct turns in exactly the wrong direction. I do not navigate well quickly, or under pressure. Needless to say, I am incredibly grateful for GPS. I have a deep appreciation for that friendly computer-generated voice guiding me through the proper turns and exits, especially in unfamiliar territory.

The Magi were in unfamiliar territory. They had come from the East - from Persia, most likely - without the benefit of GPS. But they did have something guiding them: a star.

Generations of human beings have been guided by stars. Stars helped sailors chart courses across oceans. Stars were a point of reference for explorers mapping new territories. Stars provided a constant point of reference in a changing world. But for the Magi, the star was more than a beacon guiding them in the right direction. For the Magi, the star told a story. The star was a gift given to them from the creator of the universe...a gift that told the story of the divine drawing near to earth in the form of a baby born to be king.

The trouble with stars that beckon us to follow them is that we can never know, at the onset of the journey where their light will lead. The invitation is simply extended: "arise, shine, for your light has come." The invitation may come in the form of an unexpected opportunity, a new relationship, a chance for adventure, or even a crisis or loss – anything, really, that calls us from beyond ourselves to a new place or way of being. Or the invitation may come from within, a deep longing or desire compelling us forward.

But it takes courage to begin new journeys.

We often feel ill-equipped for the challenges of new unknown paths. "It is important to remember," as the Right Reverend Mariann Edgar Buddle reminds us, "that we are not without resources when we begin significant journeys. We have ourselves, the strength of our character, the content of our dreams, the cumulative power of our skill and past experiences, and even, in the paradoxical ways of grace, our weaknesses to help us. It may not seem like much, what we bring to the journey, yet what we have and who we are is important. The Magi, you know, were not simply wise men in the generic sense. The Greek term, *magoi* indicates that they were priests and sages, experts in astrology and the interpretation of dreams. They knew something about stars, and they were called for a reason to follow the one leading to Christ, as are we whenever a new light beckons us. We are called for reasons that are grounded in who we are."

We just don't always know why we are called to follow the path we are called to follow. "On the surface, we might seem like the least likely candidates to go where the stars lead." There is a wonderful scene in *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J.R.R. Tolkien in which "the wise wizard Galdalf assures the young hobbit Frodo Baggins that he is indeed the one destined to carry the evil ring on a perilous journey back to its destruction in the fires of Mordor. No one would have guessed it, looking at Frodo." Hobbits were small, unadventurous

creatures who liked the comforts of hearth and home, and at least 6 meals a day. Frodo was young, naïve, and afraid. "But there is something about him – his loyalty to friends, his inner strength, and an innate capacity to resist the ring's evil – that made him the one." "The ring came to you for a reason, Frodo" Gandalf tells him, "There is comfort in that." "I wish the ring had never come to me," Frodo despairs. "I wish this had never happened." "So do all who live in such times," Gandolf replies, "but while we cannot choose the times we live in, we can choose how to respond to the times we are given." Then in perhaps the bravest words uttered by hobbit or human, Frodo says at last, "I will take the ring, but I do not know the way."

It is often like that. The magi chose to follow the star, not knowing where it would lead. Frodo chose to carry the ring, though he didn't know where to take it. In ways large and small, we all say yes to things we cannot fully comprehend. But that is the wonder of saying yes: it may lead us to adventures and experiences more meaningful and profound than we could ever have imagined for ourselves.

What journey is God calling you to take in the coming year? Has the twinkle of a distant star caught your attention? Is there a longing in you to move towards something that is just beyond your reach? Take heart, friends, if God is calling you forward on a new path, God will equip you to reach the destination. Consider how much you already have that prepares you for the journey: you have a dream to illuminate your path; you have your unique gifts, talents, skills, and imperfections; you have courage, and heart, and the strength of your character; you have your family of faith to listen to your hopes and dreams, to encourage you and support you. We aren't *the fellowship of the ring*, but we could be *the fellowship of the star*. I can't promise you a pleasant GPS voice narrating every step of the journey; and I can't promise that we won't miss a few turns along the way. But I can guarantee, that if you commit to following where God leads you, it will be an adventure. And your family of faith will be with you on the adventure.

To mark the occasion of this Epiphany, I have a gift for you – a star gift on this star Sunday. The star was a gift to the magi from the creator of the universe: a gift they understood and knew how to follow; a gift that led them to kneel before a child who would be king and present the gifts they had to offer. I believe that God still speaks to us through stars – the ones that fill the heavens and inspire in us awe and wonder, certainly. But I am offering you the gift of a

small journey in the coming year in the form of a star word. There is nothing magical about these words; they certainly don't have the power to predict the future or change the course of your life. But I do believe that any one of these words, in any one of our hands, could inspire a journey that helps us discover something about ourselves and something about who God created us to be. I believe that if we open our hearts and minds to understand how the word has a place in our lives, we could be led on a journey that draws us closer to God. And that journey, the one drawing us closer to God, may just open up opportunities for us to use our gifts for a greater purpose.

In just a moment we are going to sing, and while we sing, the ushers are going to pass the offering plates, just as they do when we present our offerings to God. Only this time, instead of putting something in the plate, I invite you to take a gift from the plate – one of the star words. I encourage you not to think too hard about which word you select – I really do believe any word you draw could be a meaningful journey, and I invite you to trust the moving of the Holy Spirit as you select your word. But it's also OK if you really don't like the first word you draw and want to exchange it for another. This is your journey, after all. When you have selected your star, put it somewhere that you will see it throughout the year: taped to your bathroom mirror; under a magnet on your refrigerator; on the corner of your computer monitor. Just put this little star somewhere that it will continue to shine a little light on your life and your journey of discovery. May it, in small ways or large, compel you forward towards the king of the universe who knows you, and loves you, and blesses you with all the gifts you bring to his faithful service.

Let us pray:

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.