

Homily, Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 2020, St. David's Episcopal Church, Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

While the new church year started last month with the first Sunday of Advent, now our cultural calendar has caught up so here we are in 2020 on the Feast of the Epiphany. The wise ones followed the star and found the Christ child and brought him gifts. The three kings in our church nativity set have finally completed their journey from the windows to baby Jesus, and we are invited, as we leave tonight's service, to pick up a "star word" from the tree by the glass doors. The word on the star is a spiritual gift that you can meditate on all year. We tried this last year, and some found it helpful. My word last year was awareness. I wish I had spent more time thinking about it. Instead, I had to look it up on the refrigerator where I had stuck it to remember what it was when it came time to write this sermon. I guess I didn't develop awareness as a spiritual gift.

In Advent, we waited. In Christmas, we celebrated Emmanuel, God with us. Now in Epiphany, which lasts until Ash Wednesday, we celebrate a season of signs and wonders. We celebrate a season of light as the wise ones followed a star to find the holy child. We celebrate revelations. Epiphanies.

Sometimes I find signs easier in times of darkness, the way candles during this dark time of year light up the night. I recently received a diagnosis that was not what I wanted but have been staggered by the kindnesses that have come my way, many of which truly seem to be signs of God, like that star. The priest who offered to help before he knew something was wrong. The parishioner with whom I'd walked a similar journey last year extending her hand to me. Strangers offering encouragement that sounded like theology.

Why are signs sometimes easier for us to see in the darkness?

In our Isaiah reading, the exiles had recently returned from Babylon. "Arise, shine, for your light has come." What they had been praying for had happened. They were returning to their homeland.

But think about what they went "home" to. We heard "Lift up your eyes and look around you." That goes back to my star word of awareness. How many times in this past year, as I was forgetting my star word, did I fail to lift up my eyes and look around?

As for these returnees, as they looked up, what would they have seen? The temple had been destroyed decades before. Jerusalem was burned. Remember that line from Lamentations: "How lonely sits the city." That lonely city had languished, and when the people returned, it was a wreck.

Some of them would not have been returnees: some of them would have been born in exile, in oppression, and were seeing this lonely city for the first time. This city of ruin. But instead of

ruin, they were called to see the glory of the Lord. Darkness was all around them, “but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.”

Paul wrote tonight’s epistle from prison. What more desolate place can there be? He wrote from prison, where he was incarcerated for his beliefs, and he wrote beautifully, inspiring others. A sign of God’s love. We have some brightness coming to us from prison this week. Six years ago, we began working with a young man named Matthew Harper, who was discerning how God was calling him to use his considerable spiritual and leadership gifts. After four years, the Commission on Ministry determined that it could not assess his fitness for ordination while he was incarcerated but wanted to somehow acknowledge the ministry Matthew already does. Thanks to Bishop Jay Magness, Matthew finally became a licensed lay preacher, and Jay will go to the prison on Sunday night for a liturgy formally acknowledging this. What a light that service will be, to many men living in a dark place during this dark time of year.

In our culture, epiphanies are sometimes described as “a-ha moments.” Eureka! This makes them sound like sudden discoveries. But when thinking about the journey of the wise ones, which Matthew White discussed in church yesterday; or thinking of the work ahead of the exiles; or thinking of all that Matthew and St. David’s have been through in our time together: epiphanies are not necessarily sudden. They can be a long time coming. They can be the culmination of a long journey.

I encourage all of us to take a star word tonight and ruminate over its significance in the coming year. Not a New Year’s resolution, not a Lenten discipline, but a lens we can use on our long journey through 2020. A gift we can cultivate. Maybe, somehow, a scrap of light in a time of deep darkness.