

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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*Oh My Stars!*

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*Let us pray . . .*

Over New Years, my 5 year old grand niece Audrey, told me that she noticed whenever she had a dream about children it meant her mind was calm. I thought that was really something! Five years old and she recognized a link between a dream symbol and the state of her mind. She clearly realized that she'd had the dream before and that there was a pattern. Furthermore, she was aware of the difference between a calm mind and a not calm mind.

Our dreams hold their own language and guidance. And in our lesson this morning, in addition to a dream, a star also held its own language and guidance. In fact the whole lesson is full of mystical and other-worldly thoughts and ways of knowing and being. For example, the main characters are Magi - they were astrologers. As such, they observed a star and some kind of astrological event and knew to pay attention to it because it was written through the prophet.

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

The story also holds fear, secrecy, and overwhelming joy.

From a dream, comes a warning for the Magi to not return to Herod, but to go another way home.

Biblical scholars tend to agree that the story of the magi — like many Biblical stories — is not historical, but more mythical. It’s really important for us to remember that just because something is a myth doesn’t mean something isn’t true. Remember a myth is — as Joan Jordan Grant describes — not true on the outside but true on the inside. A myth is a way of pointing to something true, something that is difficult

to convey in the usual ways, so the truth is conveyed through fantastic imagery and storying.

So this mythical and mystical story of stars, fear and joy,  
of dreams and warnings has something of God in it . . .  
and it's all wrapped up to point toward Epiphany.

The word epiphany means an appearance or manifestation, particularly of a divine being— and of course an epiphany is an ah ha! type of moment, an illuminating discovery, especially one that comes unexpectedly.

Leading up to Epiphany are the 12 days of Christmas — beginning on Christmas morning, these 12 days symbolize the time it took the magi to travel to Bethlehem following the birth of Jesus. That lands us on the date of January 6th, when Epiphany is celebrated — or as is the case this morning, the Sunday before the 6th of January — which interestingly enough, is also little Audrey's birthday.

Anyway, the point of Epiphany is to lift up the revelation and manifestation of Christ the King to the Magi, whose mythical story represents the first manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles, who were the non-Jews. It meant that God loves and cares for everybody.

In our story, I think one of the most intriguing events — in all the mystery, fear, secrecy, joy, dreams and warnings, is within verse 9:

*and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.*

In the original Greek, the word used for stop *histémi* (his'-tay-mee) refers to stopping or standing so that something is set up in the presence of others and established. So in the story, it's obvious and easy — the star stopping above Jesus' birthplace is establishing him as the Messiah in the eyes of the Magi and the world.

It's important that we remember that

*Only God can establish what is Holy.*

Only God can stop and make the things of God known. This idea of stopping and establishing is God's work and if we're lucky or paying attention — I'm not sure what's at play — but sometimes, we too might notice that something of God is being established in this world too.

If the point of the Epiphany story is that God established God's love and access for all, I wonder if the point of the star is that it's there for the taking for all who wish to follow Christ.

All the imbalances in the world would suggest that many do not follow God's star, that is to say that many do not follow the things of love, justice, mercy, compassion and so on.

I believe and teach that we will know God's voice or the things of God because we will be surprised and perhaps also experience a form of joy and deep knowing, like the way the magi were overwhelmed when they saw the star stop. God's voice can be fearful as well, as Herod experienced when he heard of the birth. In both moments, the Magi and Herod recognized something of God.

Beloveds, we worship and follow a God of revelation. God's greatest revelation for humanity was birthed into this world over 2,000 years ago. But that didn't mean God was finished. God is still stopping stars for us — meaning God is always pointing us in the direction of what is Holy, in order to give us hope and guidance and to help us keep in covenant, in Holy relationship, with God.

With a new year before us, and all the hope and possibilities that a new year brings, my prayer is that we work on finding the place in us that 5 year old Audrey so easily accessed and trusted. My hope is to help you develop your ability to recognize when God is stopping stars for you, so that you can understand what God is trying to convey.

Many of you have begun by accepting the invite to receive a star word, which is a word of intention and focus for the year. In churches all over the world, it is a prayer practice to give out a star word on this — Epiphany — Sunday.

However, because we worship virtually, I'll be mailing those out across the next 2 weeks. If you'd like a star word, there's still time, just email me by the end of the day letting me know and I'll include directions on how to use them.

Our friends at a Sanctified Art explain for us that there are many reasons behind this tradition:

First, we know that the Magi followed a star, which ultimately led them to Jesus. Therefore, we too use all the resources we have available to us, including creative prayer practices and intention words for the new year, to move ourselves closer to Jesus as well.

Second, we trust that God uses multiple ways to guide us and speak to us. Star words are one such lens that might provide us with a way to look for God in our midst, both actively and in hindsight.

Finally, we know that the most common prayer practice for many involves speaking to God, as opposed to silence or contemplation. However, a star word prayer practice invites a new prayer rhythm of reflection and review that can be a powerful new way to connect with God.

The star words I'm sending out were prepared by the clergy and artists at a Sanctified Art. In preparation for receiving your word, they invite us to share a prayer over the words. I'll be doing that Wednesday morning at 8 AM and will be sending out a link for anyone who would like to help pray over the words.

For now, let us first prepare for our pastoral prayers with some silence.