

Our scripture reading comes for today comes from the Gospel According to Matthew 2:1-12

*2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi[a] from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east[b] and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah[c] was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:*

*6*

*'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[d] my people Israel.' "*

*7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east,[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped,[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

The Word of the Lord

**Thanks Be to God**

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Let us pray.

God, Immanuel, god of new beginnings, God of gifts and stars... may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, oh God our Rock and our redeemer, and may our lives reflect the glory we know and celebrate on these holy days and seasons.

From December to early January, from say the 19th of December to maybe the 6th of January have always been one of my favorite times of the year...

Adding in Lucy's birthday to that window has only added to the joy of those few weeks...

It's the traditions that make it...

Major motion pictures often have like those of the Lord of the Rings franchise have debuted, and family pilgrimages to the cinema, and in later years, rewatching those again and again

Watching other favorites from years past: It's a Wonderful Life, A Christmas Carol, or more recent ones like Elf, or Home Alone

Seeing holiday lights, River of Lights was awesome,

Watching the ball drop in Times Square

Eating the cookies, the cinnamon rolls, the turkey, drinking hot chocolate or whatever dish makes the season feel festive for you

From the last few days of advent, through Christmas, and New Years, and all the way up to Epiphany on January 6th, the Holiday season is special...

And in my opinion it is the traditions, the rituals we keep that help us to mark and celebrate and make the days, more than merely rotations of the earth but help us to internalize what is so special about the season.

Rita Barreto Craig said that “Traditions touch us, they connect us, and they expand us.” –

Or as Tevya says of a precarious life, like a fiddler on the roof needs balance, it is tradition is what gives balance to the people of Anatevka

I wonder... I wonder, how many of you have enjoyed some of those activities: some of these traditions, have they given you balance this season? Have they connected you, touched you, expanded you?”

I wonder...

Anyone here go see the River of Lights?

Did anyone put up lights themselves?

How about a Christmas tree orMaybe luminarias in your front yard?

Anyone go to a movie;

anyone rewatch one of their favorite movies

How many of you sang Silent night...

Another tradition, admittedly far less meaningful, but another one I enjoy is Bowl Games... I wonder if any of you watched any College Football bowls?

Anybody go to a Bowl Game in person?

Not this bowl season, but in 2022 my mom and I actually headed from North East Maryland to Annapolis, to watch my mom’s alma mater, the Duke Blue Devils, take on the University of Central Florida Golden Knights in the Military Bowl at Navy–Marine Corps Memorial Stadium...

Navy-Marine Corps Memorial stadium is full of its own traditions, and all bowl games have traditions, from Rose Bowl parade to the Duke Mayo bowls, mayo bath for the winning coach, Bowl games carry their own traditions

One of the things we had to do, was to get directions, and I give thanks for the invention of GPS and that it works on my smartphone... we needed directions to take part in this tradition; we needed help to figure out where we were going; where we were parking, where we were going to eat lunch ahead of the game, where to enter the stadium...

And every step of the way, I was able to pull out my smartphone, and able to follow the ever helpful google to guide and if we took a wrong turn, we were almost immediately able to be guided back on the way

The wise men, the magi, the kings, the gift-bringing astronomers from the east, were not able to pull out their smartphones, google wasn't invented until 1998,

You could buy a handheld GPS in 1989, but it would cost you \$3000 dollars, weigh over a pound, and have a battery life of about 2 hours, and certainly did not have turn by turn instructions...

The magi had a different way to navigate... not based on satellites, but based on stars.

Scholars debate, and speculate on where exactly the magi came from, who they were, why they came to pay homage to the newborn King

But they were most likely astronomers, those who study the stars.

And we do know that they came from the east... seeing the star, they expected the newborn king to be in Jerusalem, but no... the god of the small; God of the unexpected, the underdog, the orphan and the outcast, isn't born in the palace in the big city, but in a manger, in the town of the

smallest tribe of Israel in order to usher in a new and radically different kingdom...

They followed the star and they gave gifts as so many of us do in honor of Jesus' birth to this day. Introducing a new tradition:

They followed the star to find something new, to find something surprising, to pay homage and give gifts, but to first experience overwhelming joy...

And no doubt they are forever changed by the encounter and on their return home I can only imagine how transformed by this encounter with Jesus they were...

*When they saw that the star had stopped, [g] they were overwhelmed with joy*

My hope for you, for me, whenever we come to worship, here, online, in any church is simple...

I hope you know that God loves you so much that you are overwhelmed with Joy, and that feeling of Joy and your experience of that love transforms, guides, and shapes your life...

I talked a bit about traditions earlier, and I am asking you all to share in a tradition that has been meaningful to me in my life

For nearly as long as I can remember a tradition of Epiphany stars has been a tradition I have taken part in.

The tradition, of passing out simple paper stars, with a word written on them... and the tradition came from elsewhere, and is by no means unique to that church

And I have heard a rumor that you all have done this tradition, and maybe it has been a while, but at least once upon a time here.

The traditions passing out a star with different words, and it is by the holy spirit, that a person then reads their word as a gift for the coming year,

Last year someone pulled and gifted me a star with the word wonder...

Some years the word has encouraged me, or affirmed something I felt like was a strength;

Sometimes, the word has challenged me, or been what we like to call a "growing edge"

Sometimes the working of the Holy Spirit is clear, sometimes it is a little murkier...

Whether the clarity is crystal, or more like mud the word is a gift, and a guide, and so here is my challenge to you this year... during this year, put this word somewhere you will revisit it... in your bible, on your desk, by a mirror... and let it inform your prayer, your worship, your service this year. Let this word guide your life of faith and love this year;

Let it connect you, expand you, touch you, provide you balance, stretch you, teach you, and support you.

Ann Weems wrote a poem Called Star Giving, and

*What I'd really like to give you for Christmas is a Star . . .*

*Brilliance in a package,*

*something you could keep in the pocket of your jeans*

*or in the pocket of your being,*

*something to take out in times of darkness,*

*something that would never snuff out or tarnish,*

*something you could hold in your hand,*

*something for wonderment,  
 something for pondering,  
 something that would remind you of  
 what Christmas has always meant:  
 God's Advent Light into the Darkness of this world.  
 But Stars are only God's for giving,  
 and I must be content to give you words and wishes  
 and packages without Stars.  
 But I can wish you life as radiant as the Star  
 that announced the Christ Child's coming,  
 and as filled with awe as the Shepherds who stood beneath its Light,  
 And I can pass on to you the love that has been given to me,  
 ignited countless time by others who have knelt in Bethlehem's Light.  
 Perhaps, if you ask, God will give you a Star*

there will be baskets by the doors as your leaving the sanctuary, and I  
 would invite you to take one for yourself, and if we have extras, take one for  
 your neighbor, your friend in the congregation who doesn't drive or is  
 otherwise not here this sunday.

I'll remind you at the benediction,

So take a star as a gift; a gift not from me, or from our church,

Take a star and that word, as guide to you, and as a gift from God. Amen.