

Sermon for Epiphany: January 6, 2019

Will you pray with me? Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The night closes darkly around us. Our headlights cut a narrow pathway ahead, otherwise darkness stretches as far as the eye can see. Our Toyota Corolla bumps along the dirt road towards home after a long Sunday in Dombodema, one of the church outposts where my parents serve as ministers here in Zimbabwe.

They often attend these rural churches on their own, but today it was a full-family affair, and we left home at first light. When abafundisi, the ministers, come once every few months, church lasts the whole day with worship followed by lunch and then an afternoon-long leadership meeting and perhaps a home visit. Not exactly a child's idea of a fun day, but thankfully, apart from

worship, my brother and I are free to entertain ourselves. Sometimes a group of neighborhood kids will invite us to join them in a game of matshayana -- the Zimbabwean equivalent of dodge ball.

Today, as dusk set in, we packed our things, said our goodbyes and began the journey home. Soon the view of scattered thorn bushes and the occasional cinder block house or thatched hut is swallowed by the autumn darkness. Then, without warning or explanation, my dad pulls the car over to the side of the road and turns off the engine.

"Tod, what's wrong?" my mother asks, her voice hard with worry -- this is no place to have a break-down.

"Nothing," I can hear a smile in my father's gentle voice, as he reassures us. "Let's get out." My dad opens his door, letting in the sounds and smells of the night -- frogs and insects, the rustling of the breeze, and the smell of dry earth -- and he steps out of the car.

“What’s happening?” I ask my mother. “What are we doing?”

“I guess we’ll find out.” My mother, my brother Mandla and I unbuckle ourselves and tumble out of the car.

“Look up,” my father instructs. There above us, a moonless star-studded sky stretches from horizon to horizon. The wide sparkling stream of the Milky Way splashing across it. I look up in awe and wonder. My father points out constellations: Orion, Andromeda, Aquarius, Cancer, Cassiopeia. The four of us gaze up at the stars, and time collapses. I feel small, but in a good way: part of something so vast. I forget the darkness. I forget that we are standing on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere Zimbabwe. All I can do is drink in the sea of stars above us.

Finally my dad says, “Alright you three, time to hit the road.” We pile into the car, and the engine starts up. Again, our headlights cut a narrow path in the darkness, but now, instead of the emptiness of the landscape around, I

can sense the fullness of the sky above -- the far-flung stars of our galaxy lighting up the night. God’s heavens spread out above us in all their glory! [PAUSE]

I dare say most of us have at least one star story -- at least one experience of the awe and wonder we felt as we gazed up at the vast glory of the universe. Perhaps in that moment, you too experienced God’s greatness and God’s intimate presence with you -- the paradox of God the transcendent and God the imminent -- so far beyond us and also so very near to us.

Today, on Epiphany, we hear a special star story. The story of the astronomers, the wise ones, the magi who make their way from the east to pay homage to the Christ child.

I wonder if the magi felt that same sense of awe and wonder when they first saw the star appear in the heavens. Perhaps it was this very feeling of awe and wonder that compelled them to pack their things and set

off on a long and dangerous journey to find the King promised by the star. Perhaps they already understood that the child would not only be a king but was Emmanuel, God with us, love incarnate, love born on earth as a human being -- God as immanent and present with us as it is possible to be.

If the magi did not understand when they first saw the star. If on their long journey, they struggled with feelings of doubt or fear. If they did not already know the magnitude of the gift of the Christ child, understanding dawns on them as they enter the house and see the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. They are overcome. With joy! There, in a house somewhere in Bethlehem, they receive God's gift of love and presence, the gift of the Christ-Child, Emmanuel, God with us.

It is only then that the Magi take out their gifts and present them to Jesus. We know this already, but it is easy to forget that in God's

beloved community, in God's realm, this is always the order of things. "God always gives first, and [only] then we are invited to respond with our gifts and ourselves."¹

We here at First Congregational Church are good at giving of ourselves, of our time, of our money, of our skills. Whether it's hours spent preparing for a Christmas sleepover; ringing the Salvation Army bells; ensuring that our sanctuary is decorated for Advent and Christmas; making noodles; caring for our building; stretching our church budget by giving what we can and organizing fundraisers to raise even more; giving to our love offering; buying gifts for children supported by the Namaqua Center; and collecting socks -- more than 500 of them -- thank you Greg Greaves! We are good at being the church and giving of ourselves.

Today we are going to do something a little bit different. Today, instead of focusing on

¹ Susan Foster: <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/september-2009/star-gifts>

giving, instead of focusing on doing, I want to invite you to do what you have done on clear dark nights when you've stepped outside and looked up -- gazing into the heavens. Today, I want to invite you to focus on being here and now. Today I want to invite you to focus on receiving God's Spirit and God's gifts.

As a reminder of those gifts, each of you will receive a star charm and a slip of paper with a word on it. In a moment as we sing, our ushers will come around with our offering plates. Please take a slip of paper at random and one star charm and then pass the plate on. Each piece of paper has a different word on it.

In this New Year, I invite you to reflect on the word you draw out. Take the word home. Put it somewhere you will see it -- maybe on your bathroom mirror or next to your computer screen. Allow the word to speak to you. What significance does it have in your life? How might God be speaking to you through this

simple message? Your word may seem unclear when you first receive it and then gain new meaning as the year goes on.² The star charm is an additional reminder of the gift of God's light and of the word that you receive today. They are invitations, simple reminders to help you reflect in a new way on God's presence in your life this year.

Who knows -- maybe you'll discover something new about God. Perhaps a new experience of faith will emerge. Maybe this will confirm something you already know or remind you of some forgotten wisdom. Or perhaps the paper and star will be forgotten. And that's okay, too. Because friends, there is good news for all of us! God's light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.

Let us sing together "Christ is my light" as our ushers pass out our star words.

² Ibid -- paraphrase

Will you pray with me?

Holy God,

Your gifts surprise us:

An unexpected roadside stop

Stars shining in the darkness

A baby born in a manger

Going home by a new way

A slip of paper with one word

A star

Bread and wine.

Your gifts surprise us, O God,

Because you give of yourself

You give so that we may know you better

You give so that we may be

Authentically ourselves

Beloved.

Bless us in the coming year

And bless these star words

That their gifts may shine your light anew in
our lives.

Amen.