

Gifts of God for the People of God
Matthew 2:1-12; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11
January 8, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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I am intrigued by that star. It was there for everyone in the world to see, but these three magi knew how to interpret the sign, and only they trusted enough to follow it on that great long journey to a place they did not know, on the chance of finding the Messiah there. So, the guiding star was God's gift, surely, and these three magi also had the gift of interpretation and the gift of trust and the gift of perseverance. And through all these gifts, the magi came at last to the Christ Child.

The shepherds had other gifts – God gave them angel choirs and the willingness to run fast to see for themselves. Those were the gifts the shepherds needed to find the Christ Child. As 1 Corinthians tells us, there are varieties of spiritual gifts, but one giver gives them all.

As Christians, we are also seeking the Christ Child, and we trust that God will give us the signs, the gifts, and the disciplines that we individually need to guide us closer to him. I haven't seen a great star, myself, but I do know that God has guided me over the years, sometimes in ways I could see immediately and sometimes in ways that I only understood as I looked back years later. So, we each come to this journey toward the Christ Child in our own way, and God gives each of us the spiritual gifts we need to make our way to him. The gifts you need are not the same as the gifts I need, and the gifts we needed last year were different from the ones we will need in the year to come.

With that as a background, I would like to invite you to participate ... again ... in something that a lot of other churches have been doing at Epiphany for years and years. Here is how it works:

I have a great pile of cardboard stars here. On each of them is written a spiritual gift or discipline or activity – prayer for example, or peace, or music, or charity, and one of them is just for you! The ushers will pass plates with these stars to each of you, and I invite you to take one at random. The word you draw represents a spiritual gift just for you for the coming year.

Suppose your star says "hospitality." During the year you might find that you have opportunities to offer holy hospitality in ways you had not expected. Or you might find that you need to learn to accept hospitality from others. The spiritual gift of hospitality works both ways, benefiting both the giver and the receiver. I hope you will be open to the all the ways that the spiritual gift that is on your star might express itself in your life.

I invite you to receive the word that chooses you and to trust it. Put it in a place that you will see regularly throughout the year – on your computer screen or your bathroom mirror or your fridge. Even if it doesn't seem to make sense to you right now, I think you will soon find that the word you draw has deep meaning for you in the coming weeks and months.

Here are some true stories about these star words:

A few years ago, a pastor drew the word "faith," and everyone in the congregation laughed. "Isn't that funny! Our pastor needs faith! I should have been the one to draw that," they said. But the pastor put that word where she would see it every day, and soon – as it turned out – her faith was tested over and over again that year. One crisis after another confronted her and her congregation, and she wasn't sure she had what it took to get through all of it. Yet each day, she saw the word "faith" written on her star, the star they had all laughed about, and she knew that God would give her the faith she needed to get through that day.

Another true story: There was a trustee who was famous for being a penny pincher. He drew the word "abundance." It seemed entirely inappropriate for him. But he kept his star word and prayed about it, and three months later he came to the pastor's office to chew over what it

would mean to be a trustee who trusted in God's abundance rather than always coming from a position of scarcity.

Sometimes the word we draw will hit home immediately. The first time I used these star words, I offered Dave one of the stars, and he drew one. I could see it in his face. He knew immediately that it was exactly the spiritual gift he needed for just then. I said, "Well, that is God's wish for you this year."

An hour later, Dave came back and asked, "How many of these stars have this word on them? Maybe a third of them?" I answered, "Just that one." He was blown away that out of all those star words, he had chosen this one, or it had chosen him.

We chose star words last year, and I can tell you that there are some people who were still mentioning their word to me throughout the year, sometimes with a little consternation. In some churches, people choose to write newsletter pieces about how their word resonated for them throughout their year. You can choose to take it as far as you wish. Just know that in some way the word you choose – the word that chooses you – is a gift of God for you for 2023.

So, let's have a prayer first, and then we will all have an opportunity to draw a star word to ponder over for the coming year. Let us pray:

Holy God, we give you thanks for all the ways that you equip us to be your people. As you guided the magi to the Christ Child, you give us the spiritual gifts and disciplines we need to guide us to you. Help us to be open to the gifts that you offer us now, and help us to understand in the coming weeks and months what this gift might mean for our faith and for our lives as children of God.

Amen