



# The Fourth Gift of the Magi

*TEXT*  
*Matthew 2:1-12*

January 5, 2020 — Epiphany Sunday — Sermon by Rev. Melanie Hardison

**W**hen I was in high school, I attended a retreat with other Presbyterian youth on a mountain in Tennessee. It was an unusually clear night, so a few of us walked out to a field to lie on the ground and look at the stars.

It was a cold night I remember, in October, and we shivered and huddled together. Someone brought blankets, and soon we forgot about the cold, because there were more stars in the sky than any of us had ever seen.

We felt closer to the sky on top of the mountain, closer to each other as we oohed and aahed over falling stars, and closer to God, as we spent most of the evening in silent wonder at the expansiveness of the universe and a majesty beyond our imaginations.

I didn't know a thing about astronomy or what to look for, beyond falling stars and the Big Dipper. All I knew is that I felt a sense of complete wonder. "Star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light."

I wonder what it was like to be one of the wise men that night. The wise men likely were astronomers and mystics, so watching the night sky was their life's work. And they lived in a time when people believed that anything out of the ordinary happening in the skies had significant meaning for us on earth. We're not exactly sure what they saw that night, only that they "observed the star at its rising."

What did they see? Had they waited their whole lives watching the sky for such an event as this? Had astronomers before them waited too? What about this star was different?

How did they know?

And can't you see them? Oohing and aahing as the star of wonder rises ... pondering what it means ... in total disbelief, yet trusting what they saw ... knowing together that it was time to pack their bags and go ... feeling compelled to follow this star to who knows where.

It was about this time last year that I had a sense, an intuition, that a huge change was on the horizon in my life. I didn't know what it was about, but I had just marked 20 years living in Louisville, Kentucky. If you had asked me 20 years

ago if I would end up making Louisville my home, I would not have believed you because I moved there for a one-year intern position and had no plans to stay.

If you had asked me 20 years ago if I would end up attending Louisville Seminary and earning two Master's degrees and becoming an ordained minister, I would not have believed you — because I thought graduate degrees were for people far smarter, and ordained ministry was for people far more faithful.

If you had asked me a year ago if I would be leaving the home and community I came to love in Louisville, to move to Kansas City to be a pastor in a dream job in a remarkable congregation, *probably* I would not have believed you — but I *might* have, might have — only because I had a sense of intuition, a knowing deep within, that a monumental change was on my horizon.

It was also this time last year, exactly a year ago, that I was homesick and unable to attend worship on the first Sunday of the year, which was a completeummer — not just because I was missing church, but because I love this story of the

Magi and the star; and I love Epiphany, when we celebrate God's light coming into the world; and I love an Epiphany ritual my church did called Star Words. (Notice I didn't say Star Wars, but Star Words.)

Every year, the first Sunday of the year, on Epiphany, our church gave out Star Words. They're little paper stars, like this one, with one word written on them — a word having to do with the spiritual life. So the invitation was to draw a Star Word out of a basket and to carry this word in your heart throughout the year, and to use the word to reflect on your relationship with God.

Getting a Star Word on Epiphany is something I looked forward to. So I was extra bummed to miss church that day — but then excited to remember that my pastor friend Carrie gives out Star Words through social media every year! So I hit Carrie up for a word ... and waited with excitement and anticipation.

Except the word she drew for me was "*meekness*." *Meekness* — what in the world was I gonna do with that?

I'll be honest. I knew I was supposed to be all spiritual with it, but I wanted to give *meekness* back. I associated *meekness* negatively, with being weak and helpless. Being meek as a female sounded to me like the old saying that women should be "seen and not heard." "Meek and mild" — that wasn't very appealing.

So I told a friend about my conundrum. I said "My Star

Word is *meekness*. I gotta journey with *meekness* all year?"

And he had a completely different take. He said "Melanie, Jesus said, 'Blessed are the meek.'" *Blessed are the meek*.

"OK," I said. "I will sit with meekness. Maybe there's something to learn here."

Well, that didn't last long, because lo and behold, the next Sunday, I walk into church, and there's a basket of leftover Star Words, for anyone who couldn't make it to church the previous Sunday. "Aha!" I thought. "I'll get a new word!" I reached in and pulled out a star. The word was *guidance*. Now *guidance* was something I could work with.

Remember that sense, that intuition I had, that something huge was about to take place in my life? "Ahhhh," I thought. "Guidance I need."

And as it turned out, guidance was something I continually had to seek last year, because the big change that took place is that I started searching for a new call to ministry. Where I had previously thought I would stay in Louisville, God started calling me to look beyond Louisville, to open my search to places and positions I had never dreamed possible. And a year later, that intuition has been realized. Thanks to God's guidance,

I find myself in Kansas City, in a dream job, in a remarkable congregation.

And you know what? In the midst of all that guidance, I realized that meekness was as big a part of the equation as

guidance — because guidance and meekness go together. It turns out you can't truly seek God's guidance without a healthy dose of meekness. I needed meekness in order to be open, in order to follow the call of God on my life.

Over and over again, I found myself tapping into meekness, and openness, and a sense of awe and wonder at the whole process — not unlike what I felt on the mountaintop under the stars; not unlike the excitement and anticipation the Magi must have felt as they "observed the star at its rising."

Matthew says that when they reached the Christ child, they were "overwhelmed with joy." They have brought three very expensive gifts over a long, arduous journey from another country, and what are these gifts? The first one is gold, the second one is frankincense, the third one is myrrh.

But all of that goes by the wayside when they arrive. They are "overwhelmed with joy." They stop before the baby, and bow down and worship him, first. First, they give him *their hearts*, before they give him gold and frankincense and myrrh. So the fourth gift of the Magi — the gift of themselves, the gift of their hearts — was actually the *first* gift the Magi offered Jesus.

The star has led them to the right place. Their study and intuition and faith and trust have led them to the right place. "For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." That is why

they went. That is why they followed: to pay homage to the Christ child.

And isn't that our story too, that we observe his star at its rising in our lives, and come to pay him homage?

We have journeyed through the season of Advent and Christmas once again. We have heard the story and sung the carols once again. We know this star. We know where it leads — and yet how hard we find it sometimes to follow the path that is illuminated before us.

We get lost in the mess of life. We get lost in our fears, at being on the brink of an escalating war. We get lost in our despair, as we watch the fires in Australia ravage a continent and swallow up entire species.

But when we're quiet, when we find ourselves on a clear night looking up at the sky, sometimes we are open enough, meek enough, bold enough to let the light break through and reach us.

So I invite you to take the Magi with you into this year. I invite you to take the light and hope of the star — to take the light and hope of the Christ child — right into the mess of life.

Whether it's getting through your own tough day after day — or finding solutions to global crises — we are in it together. And the light of Christ has the power to lead the way, if we follow.

If you would like, there are Star Words in baskets by the door as you leave worship this morning. You are welcome to

draw a Star Word and take it with you. I'll say that the stars are upside down in the baskets for a reason. No rifling through or giving words back or choosing something you like better like I did last year. (Because trust me, it will stay with you. Even meekness will stay with you.)

Let the word choose you. Even if you draw a word that makes no sense to you now, it's OK. Be patient. Let it work on your heart.

What to do with your word? Pray with it. Put it up somewhere where you see it every day. Watch for the ways it shows up. Pay attention to how it points you to God. See how observing this little paper star might help you remember to pay homage, to follow Jesus, to open yourself continually to the light and love of God breaking into your life and into the world.

**Star Words** are still available. If you are interested in receiving one, please contact Melanie Hardison. You are welcome to stop by her office at the church or contact her at (913) 671-2367 or [melanie@villagepres.org](mailto:melanie@villagepres.org).

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.