

*Generous God, bless us with a spirit of gratitude for all you have given us, and a spirit of understanding for all you have yet to teach us. Amen.*

I need to start out today by telling you all how much you have impressed and inspired me.

For years, you have been supporting Luke House and the St Stephen's Food Pantry with your donations of food and time.

More recently, you eagerly joined a project to bring food to low-income children at Schenk Elementary School.

When the Worship Mission decided two months ago to celebrate Epiphany by collecting gifts in honor of the baby Jesus, you responded immediately and generously. Just look at the assortment of items that we have gathered to share with children through Domestic Abuse Intervention Services!

Honestly, I decided to put your donations on display myself, because it was meaningful – even worshipful – to me, to see all of the things that you donated. So if the display looks awful, it's my fault.

But what I noticed when I was setting things out, was that you brought items like diapers and wipes and shampoo, diaper rash cream and baby bottles. There are cute baby clothes too, but everything that is up here today is a practical gift. You recognized that your donations were for things that people *need*, not just extra hair bows or something for a child who is already well-dressed and well-fed.

You gave good gifts, and you gave them generously.

So today, as we celebrate Epiphany, we will bless these gifts, in hopes that the blessing will extend to the children and parents who receive them.

Gift-giving is one of the primary themes of Epiphany.

This is the day that we celebrate the wise ones coming to visit Jesus, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Though arguably, despite their reputation for wisdom, the magi weren't as good at giving gifts as you all are.

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh?

What use does a baby have for these things?

I mean, the baby's *parents* can use gold – all of us could use gold, right?

Money, in ancient times as now, is a very practical gift. And it's certainly an appropriate gift for someone you consider to be a king. But it's not exactly what we would expect someone to present to the child himself.

Frankincense and myrrh?

There are several theories about these two gifts, though no one knows their meaning for sure. Frankincense is a resin from a particular type of tree, that is used as incense used in worship, or as a perfume. It is rare and very valuable. Myrrh is also a rare resin, used as medicine, incense or perfume, and also to anoint a body at the time of burial.

These two gifts might have been a reference to Jesus' death – that's one traditional interpretation, that the magi brought the same gifts that would later be used to anoint Jesus' body after he was executed.

Or they may have simply been kingly gifts.

If you're going to bring something to a person you consider to be royalty, you bring the most valuable thing you can get your hands on – and due to their rarity, frankincense and myrrh would certainly fit the bill.

So the magi brought gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus. We don't know why, but we know that they wanted to worship him and present him with something meaningful.

The gifts of the magi were generous and self-sacrificing. They brought things that they could have used for themselves, but they gave them instead to the one who they wanted to worship.

That's generosity.

The wise ones who considered Jesus to be an infant king brought him gifts that were valuable and confusing.

Maybe they weren't *helpful* gifts like the ones that you all have brought for the children at DAIS, but they were meaningful in their own way.

The generosity that I see regularly in this congregation, through your donations of food and baby items, and knitting ability and teaching ability, and time and money, reflects the generosity of the magi. And, in my opinion, your generosity is at least as helpful as the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were to the baby Jesus and his parents!

The Gospel teaches us to be generous.

Through the example of the magi, we learn that God intends us to give to others, even when it is at the expense of our own comfort.

The magi's gifts to Jesus are an example of this kind of generosity.

And your gifts to DAIS today, and to the food pantry and Luke House, and to the knitters and the Sunday School kids – all that you give to the ministry we do through Lake Edge – they are a way of living out and embodying the Gospel.

Another thing that is impressive about the gifts of the magi is that they are not given out of pity to the baby.

The wise ones don't come in and say, "Oh, what a poor baby. His parents can't afford to give him nice things, so we'd better do something for him so that he can have a good life."

Their attitude is almost the opposite of that.

"A baby has been born who we believe will be royalty! We want to be among the first who will show our allegiance to this newborn ruler, to learn what he's all about and to honor him by bringing gifts."

This is a similar attitude to what you all take when you give to DAIS or Luke House or the Schenk Weekend Nutrition Program, I think. You don't give out of pity to the recipient. Instead, you give because you honor the children, or the hungry people, or the folks who don't have the means to provide for themselves. Your attitude is, "These people are children of God just like I am. And they deserve to be fed and clothed."

And so then you give, in order that *all* of God's children might be fed and clothed.

This is how we, as a congregation, imitate the Gospel. It is how we put our Christian faith into action.

So today I want to express my gratitude to all of you, for teaching me about generosity and showing me just a few of the ways that God's love can be embodied for the world to see.

This is the purpose of Epiphany – God has become embodied. Jesus is God in the flesh, God with us, choosing to live a human life, complete with stomachaches and head colds and muscle cramps and grumpy moods. In the good and the bad, because of Jesus, God feels our pain and celebrates our joy. This is truly the best gift of Epiphany.

The magi recognized that gift, from God to us. And they honored it by going to visit Jesus and bringing him valuable gifts.

You all honor God's gift every time that you offer something of yourself to the ministries of this congregation.

And in honor of Epiphany, I'd like to give each one of you a gift today.

It might not seem like much, but I'm hoping that you'll appreciate the spirit in which it is offered, and take it seriously.

The ushers are going to pass the offering baskets down the pews, but instead of putting something into them, as you often do, so generously, this time I invite you to take something out.

There are stars in the basket, with a word on each of them. Take one star out of the basket, and read the word to yourself. This is your gift today.

The magi followed the star to find Jesus. By the leading of a star, they grew closer to God and discovered a new way to worship.

That's what I'm inviting you to do today.

You get a star, and each star has a word that can hopefully give a new perspective to your world.

One of my friends on Facebook posted a link to a place where you could request a word to find out what you would "manifest" in 2017.

Well, Epiphany is the day when we celebrate God manifest in the person of Jesus! And I'm inviting each of you to manifest these Star Words over the coming year.

As we celebrate Epiphany today, I hope that you'll take your Star Word and reflect on it. Consider how it speaks to you. What does it mean for your life at the moment? What might it mean for your career or your interactions with family or your self-care plan?

I didn't make up this idea of giving everyone a star on Epiphany – like so many great ideas, I borrowed this one from a colleague.

Star words are a devotional practice that some faith communities have been doing for many years already. Some pastors and I know have reflected on the meaning of words like "time" or "faith" for their spiritual journey. Some people end up with "playfulness" or "welcome" or something that might seem simple at first, but inevitably ends up still being a vehicle for growth.

I think that Star Words are a new practice for us. My hope is that you can consider this word today, and maybe take it home with you and let it inform your spiritual journey throughout this year.

Tape your star to your bathroom mirror or the steering wheel in your car – put it somewhere you'll be able to see it every day.

By reflecting on one particular word this year, and considering how God is speaking through the stars that we are picking out this morning, I hope that we will all find new ways to live out the Gospel.

As I mentioned at the beginning, you all do an impressive job of embodying the Gospel already, through your generosity and your passion for helping those in need.

But even people who are good at something can always learn how to be better. So, my hope for us this year is that we can see God revealed to us today on Epiphany, like the magi did – and that we can also see God revealed to us in the coming days and weeks and months in our Star Words. God may have new ways to challenge us or encourage our spiritual growth. And the word on the star that you have in your hand just might be the way that God is challenging you this year.

Take your star word home, look up it's definition, see if you can find a Bible verse where it shows up, ask your closest friends and family what they think it means for you... And using this word, find a new way to embody the Gospel in this coming year.

Today, as we celebrate Epiphany, and God coming to be with us in the person of Jesus, honored by shepherds and wise men – today we also recognize that God continues to show up in our midst. We will never learn everything there is to know about God. But we can keep trying to learn more.

I hope that your Star Word will help you learn more in the coming days or the coming year about how God intends to bring meaning to your life.

And I also hope that you will share that meaning with the rest of this faith community. As the year goes on, we'll have chances to revisit and reflect on what our Star Words mean, just as I'm sure the magi reflected on what their visit to the baby Jesus meant.

My prayer for all of us today, as we celebrate Epiphany, is that we would recognize God in our midst in whatever form God might take, just as the magi did.

Amen.