

GIFTS OF LIGHT AND LIFE

Matthew 2:1-12 & Isaiah 60:1-3
Rev. Mary Scifres

Epiphany Sunday, January 6, 2018
Corona del Mar Community Church

From our first days of falling in love, my spouse B. J. and I dreamed of living on the west coast. But as young newlyweds we lived in Michigan, just a few hours away from my parents in Indiana. But every vacation found us on a plane, headed to Oregon for a quick visit with B. J.'s parents and always a long trip along the Oregon Coast. Everyone who knew us in those years knew this was not only our favorite vacation spot, but the place we intended to live one day, our dream retirement home. Every dollar socked away into savings was another dollar to one day buy our own home on the Oregon Coast. These many years later, we both still find our spiritual home along the shores of the Pacific Ocean. In those years, we treasured every moment we could capture along those shores, dreaming of the day when we would call those shores our "home." And, we were pleasantly surprised when that day came sooner rather than later. In our 5th year of marriage, a church on Fox Island, Washington, called B. J. to become their pastor. We excitedly called our parents with the good news, but my parents seemed to be in absolute shock. They were, naturally, sad that I would be moving so far away, which I totally expected. But their shock puzzled me. "Mom, you've known this is where we wanted to end up. We've always said we want to move to the coast as soon as we

can.” She readily replied, “Oh, I knew you always said that. I just didn’t think you would every actually do it.”

B. J. and I, on the other hand, weren’t shocked or puzzled. We’d had this clear vision for where we wanted to spend our lives, and we’d never wavered from it. We couldn’t quite imagine how to get there as young newlyweds, so we assumed the move would come first as a vacation home and then a retirement home. But when it came as an opportunity to spend our working lives of ministry and service on the west coast, we jumped on it. The focus had always been clear, and moving into that vision was easier because the focus was so clear. Even on the long drive across icy, windy roads of an early blizzard across North America, we knew we were on the right path, and the only life we’ve known since that time is life on the west coast. We still treasure the shores of the Pacific, but they are now a treasure we call “home” and the only home our son has ever known. That’s the power of focus.

It was this same kind of focus that led the wise sages from the east across the vast deserts and mountains of the ancient near east to a tiny region of the Roman Empire where they found the child Jesus, destined to be a king according to the star that guided their journey. The star of Jesus’ birth story in Matthew’s gospel may or may not have been a real star. The point is not whether this was a mysterious astronomical phenomenon or a magical astrological sign, but rather that

this was a clear vision, a focal point that could lead a group of well-educated, powerful leaders across hundreds or even thousands of miles, for months or perhaps even years, to pay homage to a Jewish child in faraway Bethlehem.

As another new year begins, we are also invited onto a journey – the journey of 2019. The wisdom of this story invites us to find our guiding star for the year ahead. Lots of people make new year’s resolutions, some lasting all year long, but many lasting only a few short weeks. But finding a new year’s focus is something that can guide you all year long. Discerning God’s vision for your life this year can be your guiding star on the journey ahead of you. When we have clarity on that focus or vision, it’s much easier to navigate the twists and turns that life’s journey will certainly bring to our paths. So, I want to give you some time to think and pray about your year ahead. What theme might be the focus to keep you moving forward toward God’s purpose in the year ahead? Some of us may find that vision by clarifying our own sense of call and purpose: Am I called to be a teacher this year? Or a helper? Is God needing me to lead or follow? Start something new? Strengthen some part of my family? Focus and develop a certain talent I’ve been given? Share a specific gift more generously or in a different way? These are all questions that can help you discern your purpose, God’s call in your life, or “vocatio” as we often refer to it here at Community Church.

But your focus for the year ahead doesn't necessarily need to be about purpose or vocation. I have a friend who's named his 2019 theme this simply: "I'm going to be kind." Sounds simple, but after a year of sudden business growth and change, he discovered he wasn't always as kind as he'd imagined or wanted to be. So, that's his theme for 2019: kindness. I have another friend who's theme is simply: healthy. She's a pastor who let her family and herself get lost in the busy life of leading a church and serving on a number of charitable boards in her community. So, this year, she's just aligning decisions and calendar choices with her theme: healthy.

What focus might guide your year ahead? What purpose do you discern God has for you this year? Let's take a few minutes to think and pray about this....

Howard Thurman wrote a wonderful poem of Christmas, that calls us to bring the Christmas story into our new year. He writes:

When the song of the angels is stilled....
The work of Christmas begins....¹

Thurman's poem is a call not just to individual followers of Christ, but to us as a community called "the church." The work of Christmas happens not just through individual Christians, but through communities of Christians who gather together as a community of faith. That's what we are here at Community Church,

¹ Thurman, Howard. *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*. Full poem available at this website: <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/8598/now-the-work-of-christmas-begins>

Congregational: a community of faith. And we as a community are also strengthened by a shared sense of focus and purpose. Before we close this time together, let's take a few more minutes in prayer and thought to discern what theme or focus God might have for our church in the year ahead. Is there a specific purpose or vocation that you sense we as a church might be called to fulfill? Is there a specific theme or outlook that could strengthen us as a community? Is there a way of serving and caring that you sense God needs from us? Let's ponder....

As we move into this new year, we are so blessed to move into this new year together. As a church, we can be part of something bigger than we could ever do alone – to walk with others on this journey, to find the vision that we as a community are called to pursue so that we can be light in the dark for others who are looking for focus and purpose in their lives. May vision and focus guide our way, and may Christ be the star that shines forth and calls us forward into this new year.

*Christ Jesus, our Star,
clarify our focus and vision in the year ahead,
guiding our steps on the journey of life.*

*Light of the World, shine through us so that we might:
shine a little more brightly
love a little more freely
forgive a little more readily
give a little more generously
shine for people who most need a light in the darkness,
help them find the miraculous star of your Holy Spirit,
guiding each and everyone us along the way.*