

FOLLOW THE STAR

Sermon preached by Martha-Jean Fitch

With Testimony by Marla Wood

January 3, 2021

Happy New Year to all of you! What a blessing to be out of 2020 and into the new year of 2021! On New Year's Day, as I watched the Rose Bowl Parade broadcast and read postings on Facebook – there was one word that kept coming up again and again and that was HOPE. Everyone is hoping and praying for a better year than last year.

One posting that I really loved was from Marla Wood. And it read this way: *“At the end of 40 days of rain, God showed Noah a rainbow. At the end of 2020, God shows us the Star of Bethlehem.”* A rainbow and a star. Both signs of hope and promise! Each time we see a rainbow in the sky – it is a reminder of God's promise. And each time we see a star – especially the Christmas star, we can see God's promise...and have hope that God is still at work and is going to redeem and bring good out of it all.

This week, as we celebrate Epiphany, we remember how the wise men knew about the promise from God in the stars and had hope. They were given insight as they studied God's word and saw a prophecy that a star would arise in Israel – a sign of a King being born. They looked up and watched the skies – looking for that star to rise in the sky. And one day, it did! And notice: the wise men didn't just stand around, looking in awe at the star. No – they “put their feet into motion” and followed the star all the way to Israel. But they didn't go empty-handed. They brought gifts to honor this new-born king. The star led them all the way to Jesus, where they knelt down and worshiped him and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And then, they kept their hearts open to the leading of the Spirit – listening for that still, small voice of guidance. God warned to go home a different way – so they would avoid King Herod, who wanted to destroy the newborn baby.

They studied and watched. They followed and gave. And they listened and obeyed.

Could it be that is what God is calling us to do as we go into this new year – perhaps as new year's resolutions or goals? To keep studying God's word and watching for the signs. I do believe God is at work. Can we see it? And God is calling us to come and worship. Are we kneeling down, humbling ourselves in worship – and giving generously to our Lord? Can we do that faithfully, whether we are worshiping in person or online? And are our ears and hearts open to His leading for the new year? It may take us in a new direction – different than what we originally planned. Can we obey, even if it doesn't make sense at the time?

Last year, 2020, we began a new tradition for Epiphany, of giving the gift of stars. Each star had a word written on it with an invitation to let the word guide, inspire or challenge your living for the year. Do you still have the star gift you received? I know some of you put the stars on your mirror or your refrigerator at home – or maybe they were kept as a bookmark in your Bible or devotional book. It was a simple reminder to keep looking for God at work and think about how God is using that one word in your life – to lead you to Christ, much as the wise men were led to Christ by the star.

My star word for 2020 was patience! When I received that word on Epiphany last year, little did I know how much I was going to need patience throughout the year. The pandemic changed everything. And I must admit, I was overwhelmed by all the changes that affected the church. We had to make very difficult decisions about how to worship throughout these crazy times. And I kept asking God, “how

long? How long is this going to go on?” But I kept hearing God tell me to have patience. Follow the guidelines laid out for us for the safety and health of our people --- and to patiently wait for God’s work among us. I’m still not quite sure I understand it all – I think one day we will look back at 2020 and see God’s hand at work through it all. But I have to be patient and wait for God’s insight and understanding. In the meantime, I trust God’s leading and know that He will go with me and our church throughout every step of the way.

Do you remember what your star word was last year? How did you see that word as a gift for you last year? How did God reveal Himself to you through that word – or use you for His glory?

Marla Wood recently shared with me how God has wonderfully been using her in His ministry – and she could really see that through the star words that she and her husband Chris received. I asked her if she would share her testimony about that today.

Encouragement & Respect

Encouragement and respect these are the words that were given to Chris & me at the start of 2020. I decided to use them jointly because I found myself seeing these words together in just about everything I did as a nurse. Throughout 2020 we have lost several tenants where I was working. It didn’t become clear what my purpose for these words were until about November of this year when I was helping one of my tenants’ transition into Heaven. I have always hated having a tenant die on my shift, but I knew this was going to happen, so I began to pray. I walked into her room and asked if there was anything, I could do for her. She looked up at me and asked me to pray with her. I prayed to God to give her peace and help her transition into his Heavenly home when He is ready to accept her home. She was at peace after the prayer. I then began to clean her up giving her a bath, put her favorite lotion on her and combed her hair the way she liked it. Before I left the room, I bent down gave her a kiss on the forehead and said, “I love you.” As I walked out of her room, I knew that in that moment I have given her my best care and she could go see Jesus when she was ready. Thirty minutes later she passed away.

Another example of how encouragement and respect were used in my work was when I had a second tenant in transition. She has always been a very religious person and wanted me to pray with her every night I worked. The last night I was with her she asked me if I could read the 23 Psalm to her. I got out my phone with my bible app on it and began to read the 23 Psalm as I did, she started to get a tear in her eye. She said I see the light and a shadow. I said it was okay to go to the light and be with Jesus and that I loved her and would miss her. Again, I gave her a bath, combed her hair, put on her favorite lotion, and helped her get comfortable. She didn’t pass that night, but it was over the weekend I was not there. I knew I had given her my best care and that she was now at peace.

The third time I was given the opportunity to use encouragement and respect with a tenant was after she returned home from a brief hospital stay. She had to be moved to another room because she needed to be monitored more closely. During one of the encounters of caring for her she told me how much she loved to read her Bible. I asked her if she wanted me to read to her and she said yes. I asked her if she had a favorite verse and she said yes Psalm 46:10 Be still and know that I am God. As I read that to her, she smiled and asked me to read more. I read all of the bible verses she asked me to read and surprisingly they were some of my favorites as well. The more I cared for her the more we read together. The last day I was with her she asked me to read the 23 Psalm as I read it, she began reciting it with me. It was hard at that moment not to tear up. I choked back tears and continued to read with her. When we were done reading, I cleaned her up, put on her favorite perfume and lotion, kissed her forehead, and told her I loved her. She grabbed my hand looked at me and mouthed the words “I love you.” I was in tears as I walked out of that room for the last time because she passed away the next day.

In all three deaths, I had the privilege to encourage my tenants to go into Heaven knowing they were given the dignity to die with respect and love. I love being a nurse and helping others. I will forever hold these three tenants in my heart and know that I had a hand in their happiness. God has used me to help my tenants through Him to help transition into his Heavenly home. I know that there will be more deaths in my future, but I also know God will be with me to help me through the tough times ahead.

My new word for 2021 is comfort. I have already decided to journal weekly on how God gave me comfort for that week and how I was used by God to give comfort to others. I will use this word in my work as well as in other aspects of my life. Hebrews 13:8 says Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Let us all find comfort in this.

Thank you so much Marla! What an incredible ministry you have! To walk on holy ground as you sit with those who are crossing over into their heavenly home. What a gift of respect and encouragement you give! And I know God will bring comfort to you and to others - through you - in the coming year!

Do you have a story about how God worked through your star word last year? That is a story that needs to be heard!! Tell your friends and family. Post the story on Facebook – and share the story with me. Give me a call or text me.

We all now have the opportunity to receive a new star word for 2021. This word will be something you can use throughout the year for your prayer and reflection. Some say that God chooses the star word for you – a word that He particularly wants you to grow in your life in the new year. I believe that God can be leading you – as He did the wise men of old – to see God at work in your life! It may be a gift you are to give, as Marla did with her tenants. Or it may be that something is confirmed for you in that star word – or you will find that you receive something new—maybe unanticipated, maybe long-desired—something that you cannot attribute to anyone else but God. And when that happens, however it happens, I hope you will tell us about it so that we, too, might catch a glimpse of God.

So, here's how to get your star word. There are three ways. One is to go to our church's web page, and you will find a star. Click on that star and a word will be provided for you. Another way is to text or call me, and I can mail you a paper star (similar to what you received last year in church). And then a last way is to go to the link listed on our webpage to the site Dayspring, where you will be asked 7 questions about your faith. And then based on the way you answered those questions – you will be given your word for the year.

And so, this year – my word is Believe. I am not sure what all God is going to reveal to me about that word throughout 2021...but right now, I am choosing to BELIEVE that God is going to be at work in our church and in each of you throughout the coming year. I BELIEVE that God is faithful and that as He has been with us throughout all of last year, He will be with us every step of our journey into this new year.

Won't you pray with me:

God, as we stand on the threshold of a new year, we don't know what to expect. We are still living in these very uncertain times. Open our eyes God to what is certain – and that is Your presence and Your love for us. Open our hearts to Your leading and guidance. Help us be open to the gift that You offer us now through our star words. Give us wisdom, insight, and ability to live as Your stars in the

world, shining brightly and pointing others to You. We dedicate ourselves to You as we begin this new year. We love you so much and pray all this in the precious name of Jesus, AMEN

BENEDICTION

The late Oscar Romero was a Catholic bishop in El Salvador. He truly listened to the leading of God throughout his life and inspired many through his words and actions.

One time, he challenged his people, saying:

“When we leave Mass, we ought to go out the way Moses descended Mt. Sinai: with his face shining, with his heart brave and strong to face the world’s difficulties.”

I pray that today – you too will leave worship with your face shining to make a difference in our dark world. Receive a star gift this day ---- and then go to be a star gift, and shine for Christ!

Now may God bless you and keep you,
May the very face of God shine upon you, and be gracious to you,
and guide you as you follow your stars. May God’s presence embrace you & give you eternal peace.
AMEN