

Advent Lutheran Church
Starry Wisdom
January 5, 2025
Matthew 2:1-12

Happy New Year!

Since we last gathered for worship, we have welcomed a new year. 2025 is here!

I'm wondering how you celebrated this year's arrival.

Perhaps we could divide the sanctuary into those who stayed up until midnight and those who did not. Or we could divide into those who are looking forward to all that is ahead this year or those who are feeling anxious about what is to come. Or we could divide into those who made new year's resolutions and those who simply resolve never to do so.

Put simply, there are many ways to celebrate the arrival of a new year. Whatever you chose, I hope you found it meaningful.

Oh . . . and for all who made new year's resolutions let me remind you that Quitter's Day is coming soon. Yes, it is a real thing. Feel free to look this newer holiday up.

Quitter's Day comes on the second Friday of the first month of every year. It is a day when we recognize that the motivation for the goals we set is waning, which is why most people give up on their goals for the year before first month ends.

While nearly everyone in the room can resonate with some or all of these new year traditions, I wonder how many of you have as much familiarity with Epiphany traditions? I know that my calendar is open as I've received a grand total of zero invitations to Epiphany parties.

So how do folks celebrate?

Last year I was introduced to a new tradition: chalking the door.

Perhaps around this time of year you have visited a friend's home and noticed what looked like a math equation above their front door. If you have ever seen this it may have been at Catholic friend's home.

The tradition is centuries old and is more popular in other parts of the world. At the end of the Epiphany worship service in some contexts people receive bags filled with chalk, incense, and holy water. More often, however, people to acquire their own chalk or use chalk already in their home for Epiphany. Regardless of how they got the chalk, once they have it, they affix it to the doorframe usually with a prayer.

The message applied to the door consists of the first two digits of the new year, a cross, the letter C, a cross, the letter M, a cross, the letter B, a cross, and then the last two digits of the year.

The letters have dual meaning. They are sometimes understood to remind us of the three names commonly given to the three wise men: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar or to remind us of a Latin phrase "Christus mansionem benedicat," which roughly translates to May Christ bless this house.

The digits, of course, represent the new year. And the crosses represent the cross. This means that the inscription as a whole is a request for Jesus to bless the home within and to be with all who dwell there throughout the year to come.

The marking ceremony often ends with a prayer, such as

God of heaven and earth, you revealed your only-begotten One to every nation by the guidance of a star. Bless this house and all who inhabit it. Fill us with the light of Christ, that our concern for others may reflect your love. We ask this through Christ our Savior. Amen.¹

Last year was my first year chalking the front door of my home. I celebrated Epiphany with the life group that gathers in my home

¹ Jamie Skojec and Steve Skojec. The Chalking of the Doors: An Epiphany Tradition Explained, January 22, 2021.. Available at <https://onepeterfive.com/the-chalking-of-the-doors-an-epiphany-tradition-explained/>

each Thursday for Bible study and prayer. This was a new experience for all of us.

And it was an experience that extended far beyond Epiphany. My small group members and everyone who entered my home entered under the inscription; the chalking became an important part of my hospitality.

Our small group gathering a year ago this week also reconnected me with another Epiphany tradition. We not only chalked the door, but also received star words.

I know it is possible you've celebrated Epiphany for a few years or several decades and not yet heard about or participated in this newer tradition. I only learned of it in the last decade and received my first star word two years ago.

Here's how it works . . . A variety of stars are placed on a table or tables. In our case, they are placed at the front of the sanctuary and you will be invited to choose one following communion. When choosing you will see a plain star that looks exactly like every other star on the table, but as you return to your seat you will turn it over to reveal your star word for 2025.

Your star word is a word that will guide you for the year ahead, much like the star guided the magi. For some, the word will immediately resonate. For others, it will take time. I invite you to open yourself to the ways the word speaks to this season of your life.

You can place it on your refrigerator, your desk, or wherever you will encounter it over and over again. There is no wrong way to ponder the possibilities of the word for the year ahead.

I've tried this twice. The first year I chose a star that bore a message of clarity.² And, I can tell you that 2023 became a year when many things that had been less than clear for several years

² Greg Smith. "Star Word for 2023," January 2, 2023. Available from <https://sowhatfaith.com/2023/01/02/star-word-for-2023/>

became very clear. Then, in 2024, my star word was faith.³ And part of what became my story of faith in 2024 was becoming your interim pastor. While I've served nine congregations, I had not served in parish ministry in nine years. Faith guided me here. And, faith guided many other decisions and experiences in 2024.

My wife, Susan isn't here this morning, but she's also received star words. In fact, it was only after receiving a star word of leadership that she found herself serving as Interim CEO of the Metropolitan Library System in Oklahoma.

And, I've many stories of people who found this newer spiritual practice to be meaningful. I hope you are or will soon be among this growing group.

Before I conclude I'd like to share wisdom from the wise guys also know as the magi or wise men or astrologers from the East. They visited our mid-week Advent service a few weeks ago to speak to us from across the centuries and advise us what they want us to know today. And this came in the form of a letter written by Presbyterian Pastor Ruth Boling. That letter includes these words:

You ask what Christmas means to us. We have conferred for long hours over this question, and here is our answer.

Our experience in your Christmas story - or, more correctly, your Epiphany story - connected us to a God who is larger than any God we thought we knew. You picture us riding camels, searching for the Christ child as if we were on some sort of a quest, but we remember God coming in search of us.

*Through our expertise in the stars, God got our attention.*⁴

And then they signed their letter as follows:

³ Greg Smith. "Faith: My Star Word for 2024," January 9, 2024. Available from <https://sowhatfaith.com/2024/01/09/faith-my-2024-star-word/>

⁴ Ruth L. Boling. Season's Greetings: Christmas Letters from Those Who Were There (Upper Room Books, 2024), p. 116.

*Yours truly,
The Magi from Persia*

P.S. Our names are not Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. Where did you ever hear that one? You don't need to know our names. You only need to know our story.⁵

Siblings in Christ, today you have explored their Epiphany story. And, now you are invited to create your own.

May we all be guided by the stars.

Amen.

⁵ Ibid., p.117.