**Star Gifts to Guide Us into 2025**

January 5, 2025

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***10****When they saw that the star had stopped,[*[*g*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%202&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-23180g)*] they were overwhelmed with joy.****11****On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.****12****And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. -* Matthew 2:10-12

Today I invited you to pick up a star gift, a word to guide you through this coming year as a sign of God’s love and accompaniment in whatever lies ahead. And yes, there will be hard times. We know that the story of Jesus did not end with angels and trumpets. It ends here, with the arrival of the magi and the danger that lies in their departure.

I am not a fan of New Year’s Resolutions. I inevitably feel disappointed in myself because I can’t make it longer than a week or two on a strict diet or any other self-loathing technique I have disguised as a resolution. I don’t know how many of you have seen the breakout musical *Wicked* or the movie which came out around Thanksgiving, nevertheless, I am reminded of the lyrics to the song “What is this Feeling?” where the two main characters, Elphaba and Glinda sing, “What is this feeling? Fervid as a flame. Does it have a name? Yes! Loathing! Unadulterated loathing. For your face. Your voice. Your clothing. Let's just say, I loathe it all!”[[1]](#footnote-1) It is far too easy to slip into self-loathing rather than self-loving, so I invite you to take your star word and see it as a gift.

God looks at you and delights. God finds you beautiful, for God made you and you are fearfully and wonderfully made. Every year at this time I return to the beautiful, hilarious words of Anne Lamott, patron saint of keep-it-real-theology, who reminds us all, “Hi everyone; Here is the anti-diet piece I publish every year just before New Year’s Day. A diet is never the answer. Ever. Try radical self-love and take very gentle care of your baby self and watch the goddamn self-talk! It is lying to you: you are perfect, as is.

We need to talk.

I know you are planning to start a diet. I used to start diets, too. I hated to mention this to my then-therapist. She would say cheerfully, "Oh, that's great, honey. How much weight are you hoping to gain?"

I got rid of her sorry a... No one talks to ME that way.

Well, okay, maybe it was ten years later, after she had helped lead me back home, to myself, to radical self-care, gentle Self-Talk, to a jungly glade that had always existed deep inside me, but that I'd avoided by achieving, dieting, people-pleasing, multi-talking, and so on.

Now when I decide to go on a diet, I say it to myself: "Great, honey. How much are you hoping to gain?"

I was able to successfully put on weight on book tour by eating room service meals in a gobbly trance in 13 different hotels. So that was exhilarating, to make myself feel like Jabba the Hut.

And then I accidentally forgot to starve myself in December, or to go back to the gym, which I've been meaning to do since I had a child, 24 years ago.

So I am at least five pounds up — but praise be to God, I do not currently have a scale, because as I've said before, getting on a scale is like asking Dick Cheney to give you a sense of your own self-worth.

I can still get my jeans on, for one reason: I wear forgiving pants. The world is too hard as it is, without letting your pants have an opinion on how you are doing. I struggle with enough self-esteem issues without letting my jeans get in on the act.

By the same token, it feels great to be healthy. Some of you need to be under a doctor's care. None of you need to join Jenny Craig. It won't work. Some of you need to get outside and walk for half an hour a day. I do love walking, so that is not a problem for me, but I have a serious sickness with sugar: if I start eating it, I can't stop. It turns out I don't have an off switch, any more than I do with alcohol. Given a choice, I will eat candy corn and Raisinets until the cows come home--and then those cows will be tense, and bitter, because I will have gotten lipstick on the straps of their feed bags.

But you crave what you eat, so if I go for 3 or 4 days with no sugar, the craving is gone. That is not dieting. If you are allergic to peanuts, don't eat peanuts.

So please join me in not starting a diet January 1st.

It's really okay, though, to have (or pray for) an awakening around your body. It's okay to stop hitting the snooze button and pay attention to what makes you feel great about yourself, one meal at a time. It's an inside job. If you are not okay with yourself at 185, you will not be okay at 150, or even 135. The self-respect and serenity you long for is not out there. It's within. I hate that. I resent that more than I can say. But it's true.

Maybe some of us will eat a bit less, and walk a bit more, and make sure to wear pants that do not hurt our thighs or our feelings. Drinking more water is the solution to almost all problems.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

So, let us lean into healthier ways of being, and generous self-love, more water, comfy pants, some better exercise and let us see how our Star Words offer insights into the new year.

Every year I give out Star Gifts to help serve as a surprising one-word guide to your year. If you are new to this practice, here are some guidelines. Star words are a prayer practice connected to Epiphany. On each paper star is a word and an accompanying Bible verse. Here are some ways to use your star word. 1) **Reflect** on the word for the coming year. 2) **Wonder** what it’s significance will be in your life for the coming year. 3) **Consider** how God might speak to you through this word. 4) Take the star word as **a gift** and **open your eyes, heart and spirit** to see what it reveals to you. I do not have a plan or an expectation how it will play out. It reminds me of a saying Reed uses about how we may not remember each of the sermons we have heard, just like we forget all the countless ordinary meals we have prepared and eaten throughout the year, nevertheless all of them, both sermons and meals, have nourished us to make it through the year.

For me, each year my word plays out differently. I am undergoing different seasons, stresses, hopes and fears and the word floats among the moods and triggers of my year. I store them with the year scribbled on the back in a drawer in my desk. I don’t pull it out until the end of the year as I write my Epiphany sermon. It’s an interesting way to look back over the years. If you remember your word from last year, I would love to have you share with me or write a personal reflection on what you learned from that word.

Our Advent devotional this year was all about Starry Nights: An Advent Devotional full of light and wonder. And yet, the twinkle, twinkle, little star element of the Nativity Story is not how we close the Christmas season. From the Gospel according to Matthew, the stars lead us as we remember the wise men from the East who come in search of Jesus. Tradition has created it to be three men, but as usual, reading the text carefully, we don’t know if there were three or more. Who knows, maybe there were even women among the group. They came to pay homage to a king. They had followed a Star, the Star of Bethlehem. First, they arrive before the powerful head of state, King Herod. The magi came from the East and were Zoroastrians. They were known for reading the stars and telling horoscopes. Matthew writes of these magi, Gentiles from the East, as part of his telling of how folks who weren’t Jewish—or Gentiles—could see even at birth that Jesus was the son of God.

Now King Herod was terrified to hear the news from the Magi that they were heading to find a newborn King because he didn’t want to lose power. He knew of the Jewish tradition that a child would be born in Bethlehem, a descendent of David to fulfill the prophecy that God would be born on earth. In fear, King Herod ordered all male children under the age of two born in and around Bethlehem to be killed. Reading the text from Matthew’s Gospel can help dispel some of the myths we create about the birth of Jesus being a Hallmark cozy Christmas. It wasn’t. There is a murderous king who kills babies. People are refugees. There isn’t enough room for all the displaced folks, and yet, it is into this hard time that Christ is born.

And so, 12 days after Jesus is born, the Magi arrive on the scene. They are people who practice another faith, and yet, they kneel before the baby and pay him homage. They bring three gifts: frankincense, gold and myrrh. Frankincense was a costly incense and myrrh a costly perfume. As we still know, gold is always useful.

These magi were also wise, they listened carefully to the murderous tone of King Herod and didn’t report the location of the baby. They left under the dark of the desert night, heading home by another way. An angel appeared to them and warned them in a dream not to return to Herod, so they slipped away under the quiet of a dark night to return home by another road back to their own country.

King Herod erupted in a fury when he discovered that the magi had left without giving him any information about the whereabouts of this infant child Jesus. Herod was not about to lose power to a child who might usurp his throne. And Mary, Joseph and the infant child, they all flee to Egypt to seek asylum.

What will we do with our star words and our attempts to follow Jesus? We can decide to be like the magi and go forth and worship Jesus with gifts of value or the priceless gift of our hearts and lives like we sing of in the hymn “In the Bleak Midwinter.” And we can become aware of the Herods in our own time who strive to make us bow down to power and turn away from love of Christ and love of one another. We will strive to be more like those who came to worship Jesus, and we will give him our hearts.

May we follow stars and indeed be filled with starlight as we go forth from here this evening. Amen.

1. <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=lyrics+to+I+will+be+loathing&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anne Lamott, Facebook. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)