



# Epiphany



**First Congregational Church of Anoka**  
**United Church of Christ**  
*an Open and Affirming Congregation*



January 7, 2024  
Epiphany Observed

This bulletin is designed to assist you as you watch our livestreamed worship service, whether you follow along live or view it at a later time. The stream can be found on our YouTube channel at this location:

<https://www.youtube.com/@AnokaUCC>

Welcome & Announcements

Centering Music

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

\* Opening Hymn

“As with Gladness Those of Old” #159 (vv. 1-3)

*Traditional lyrics are “as with gladness men of old”*

**As with gladness those of old did the guiding star behold;  
as with joy they hailed its light, leading onward, beaming bright;  
so, true Morning Star, may we evermore your splendor see!**

**As with joyful steps they sped to that lowly manger bed,  
there to bend the knee before One whom heaven and earth adore;  
so, may we with willing feet ever seek your mercy seat.**

**As they offered gifts most rare at that manger plain and bare,  
so may we with holy joy, pure and free from sin’s alloy,  
all our costliest treasures bring, Christ, to you from whom they spring.**

A Time for Children (10:30)

Choir Anthem

“A Little Light Was Born”

Michael Barrett

*Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director*

*O, a li'l light was born in Bethlehem. Oh, Jesus is the Light of the world.*

*O, a little song was born in the hush of the night, a song of hope and joy for the world.  
Into our darkness (O, a li'l Light was born)  
O, into our empty hearts (o, a li'l Light was born)  
into our silence came a song of peace and joy.*

## We Gather at the Table

### *Invitation*

Friends, we know what it feels like to look for God. We know what it feels like to turn our heads up to the sky, looking for stars, listening for a voice that calls us beloved. Perhaps that's part of why we end up here, because we are hoping that in the midst of this messy world we might catch a glimpse of God that will carry us through.

Well friends, I have good news. God is already here. Like a mighty wind, God is moving through this room. God is at this Table, inviting us forward. The invitation may not be as clear as a star in the sky or a voice that parts the clouds, but just as God called Jesus "Beloved," God calls you the same.

So come to this Table with your questions and your doubts. Come with your joys and your gratitude. Come seeking, hungry, curious. Open. Come not because you have to, but because you can. Come with all of you, for there is room for you here.

This is God's Table; this is God's meal. You are beloved, so come. Let us pray.

### *Great Prayer of Thanksgiving*

One: God of today, tomorrow, and yesterday, as we begin this new year, we once again find ourselves looking for you. We long for the clarity of a star in the sky, or a voice in the clouds declaring your presence in our lives. So today we ask that you would make yourself known to us. Do what only you can do. Reach into our spirits to give us a boost of confidence that love is real and we are not alone. Remind us that we are beloved in your eyes.

**Many: We know we're asking a lot for a group that may bring less. We don't have gold, frankincense, or myrrh. We haven't thrown off our shoes to honor your holy ground. We haven't been baptized in the Jordan River. We haven't spent the last several days traveling here by camel. We're no Magi, Moses, or Messiah, but we're yours.**

One: Instead, we bring ourselves to this Table—to your Table—in hopes of catching a glimpse of you. Speak to us in this bread. Speak to us in the cup. Speak to us through these star words. Speak to us as you spoke through the clouds at

Jesus's baptism, so that these star words may be a tool that helps us look for you in the coming year. Holy God, you call us beloved. You are with us in our joy. You are with us in our sorrow. Surely, even as we pray, you are with us here as well. So with grateful hearts, we unite our voices in prayer, using the words your son taught us to pray, saying:

*Prayer of Our Savior (unison)*

*The Prayer has many versions; pray whichever you desire (debts, sins, trespasses, etc.).*

*We affirm that God has many names, so use one of the suggested or another of your choosing.*

**Our Father/Mother/Creator, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.**

*Words of Institution*

Did the stars shine that night when Jesus gathered with his friends in an upper room, that they might dine together one last time before he was taken away? Surely they did; surely they shone down as they had for billions of years, their light itself a promise of God's enduring presence and transcendent majesty. They shone down that night, even as they shone at the Galilee when he prepared a meal of fish, and in Emmaus when two disciples recognized their friend in the breaking of the bread. Surely they shine down now, even through the luminance of sunlit skies, shining upon us the Spirit's blessing as we prepare to share in this holy meal.

One: Let us prepare and partake of these elements again, now, knowing that just as the stars continue to shine, so too does God—Emmanuel—continue to be with us at this Table in bread that is shared with all and a cup that is poured for all.

**Many: Thanks be to God! Alleluia!**

*If you are watching the livestream/recording from home and you wish to receive a Star Word, call or email the office and one will be provided.*

*Carol*

“The First Nowell” #139 (*alt.*)

**The first Nowell, the angel did say,  
was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;  
in fields where they lay keeping their sheep,  
on a cold winter's night that was so deep.**

**Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell, born is the King of Israel.**

**They looked up and saw a star shining in the east, beyond them far,  
and to the earth it gave great light,  
and so it continued both day and night.**

**Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell, born is the King of Israel.**

**And by the light of that same star, three magi came from countries far;  
to seek for a king was their intent, and to follow the star wherever it went.  
Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell, born is the King of Israel.**

**This star drew nigh to the northwest, o'er Bethlehem it took its rest,  
and there it did both stop and stay, right o'er the place where Jesus lay.  
Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell, born is the King of Israel.**

**Then entered in those magi three, full reverently upon their knee,  
and offered there, in his presence, their gold and myrrh and frankincense.  
Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell, born is the King of Israel.**

*Prayer after Communion*

**One:** God of open horizons and open roads, like the Magi so many years ago, we are here, seeking you. Step by step, we have wandered into this moment with the hope of feeling you in our midst. Step by step, you have seen us, claimed us, and called us beloved. Today we have drawn star words. For some, these words are full of meaning, challenge, and invitation already. For others, these words are a blank canvas, inviting you into our lives.

**Many:** As a new year dawns, we pray that just as you have spoken to the generations before us, you would speak to us again. Allow us to use these star words as a tool that might help us hear you more clearly. May they guide us, as the star guided the Magi. In a year, may we find ourselves here, together again, with mouths full of praise for the ways in which you have been present with us. Together we pray, with joy in our hearts. Amen.

*(10:30) Children ages 3 and up may depart at this time for faith formation activities.  
Activity bags are available in the back of the sanctuary for those who might enjoy them.*

Scripture Reading - Matthew 2:1-12 (*New International Version*)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: <sup>6</sup> "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" <sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

**Many: Thanks be to God.**

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Offering

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*You can support the church further through the RaiseRight program:*

*[www.raiseright.com](http://www.raiseright.com). Our unique church ID is 9WKLGX8TRZCN.*

Offertory

Koki Sato

\* Doxology

All Praise Be Yours, My God, This Night #100 (v.4)

**Praise God who gives all blessings birth;  
praise God all creatures on the earth;**

**praise God, who makes, sustains, sets free:  
one holy God in persons three.**

\* Benediction

\* Congregational Blessing

“Go Tell It on the Mountain” #154 (v. 3)

**Down in a lowly manger the humble Christ was born,  
and God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn.  
Go tell it on the mountain, over the hill and everywhere.  
Go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born!**

Postlude

Koki Sato

*You may be seated as you listen to the Postlude. If you choose to depart at this time,  
please speak gently as you exit out of respect for those who choose to listen.*

**For my part I know nothing with any certainty,  
but the sight of the stars makes me dream.**

*Vincent Van Gogh*

**COFFEE HOUR IS SERVED BETWEEN SERVICES.**

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

It’s peculiar—and perhaps even an epiphany in the sense of a moment of mind-blowing sudden awareness—that the story of the three visitors who bring gifts to Jesus rests firmly in a context of idolatry. That’s the implication we shouldn’t forget. These magi were following a star, and in the Hebrew tradition, that seems to have been something of a no-no. Deuteronomy 4:19, as part of a wider set of prohibitions about idolatry, says, “and when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them”. But that’s almost exactly what these “magi” may well have been doing. Sort of.

They’re not kings. Let’s just get that out of the way. The religious tradition that these were three kings named Caspar, Balthazar, and Melchior has no basis in the Bible. That came around the seventh century, and it’s more of a political thing. Balthazar is said to be an Arabian king, Melchior from Persia, and Caspar from India. I suppose if you’re trying to demonstrate that the nations of the world are bowing to

Jesus, you'd run that way. But they aren't kings. They're *magi*, sometimes translated "wise men," even though the word in Greek only demands that at least one of them be male to have a plural, masculine ending on the word.

Conventional wisdom and scholarship interprets the magi as astrologers, with additional efforts to tie them to some other religious system. But we can leave it at that. They were people who studied the stars, looking to them for meaning, inspiration, and guidance. That's nothing new; we know that lots of people—and this certainly includes Christians—find meaning in the heavens. After all, Psalm 19:1 tells us, "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork." Far from being an appeal to other divine beings, a Christian could look to the stars to read them as a story of God's majesty. That's not what the Magi were doing.

Presumably, the Magi looked to the stars just like modern astrologers, with the caveat that they were familiar with the Hebrew prophets and read them as foretellings. "For out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." Now, we know, if we are being intellectually honest and religiously welcoming that the Jewish people don't read their own prophets as foretelling Jesus. That's a Christian thing, and it hasn't always been a good thing. We know that these readings probably referred to kings living at the time, quite possibly Hezekiah or Josiah, since they were the "good" ones during the waning years of Judah. Alternatively, the future-sounding stuff could have been words of hope to remind people that God would not abandon them. But in the realm of this story from Matthew, these magi looked to both the stars and the Hebrew prophets and discerned that a savior was about to be born or just had been born, even if their knowledge of world politics was limited. They didn't seem to understand that Herod wouldn't receive this news with gladness!

So let's set aside the political implications, particularly the tradition that these magi were national representatives coming to pay homage to a super-king. Let's keep our focus on the star. On the astrology. On how even we who don't follow the guidance of stars still look to them as an invitation to marvel at God. Or, possibly, as an avenue through which the Holy Spirit might be speaking to us today.

For we still look to the stars for meaning and inspiration, don't we? If nothing else, they're an apt and omnipresent metaphor for so many of our ideas about the all-encompassing, creative power and presence of God. In a way, stars are our dreams made manifest; it was Van Gogh who said, "for my part I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream." We need only gaze at his "Starry Night" painting to see those dreams given color and form. He's not wrong! When we look at the stars, we are met with a kind of power that invites us in, sucks us in like a black hole that has such gravity that not even light can escape it. The stars send their tiny points of light into our spirits, drawing us out into the cosmos to ponder the wonders of the universe. Its infinity. Its mind-bendingness. Its myriad forms of life about which we know very little but imagine much. Stars invite us to dwell upon the possibility of strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.

But of course, boldly going is still mostly just a dream. The most we've been able to do is send a machine floating out beyond the outer reaches of our star system where we yet fear to tread. Or to build amazing telescopes that let us see what's out there, especially out to the depths of space, billions of light-years away. That's good, given all we can really do at this point is gaze outward and ponder. But so it is with God. On some level or another we sense the vastness of God, even as we behold the vastness of the universe in the night sky, and we find ourselves asking questions. "Who?" "What?" "How???" Or as the Psalmist sings, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you

have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” Gazing into the inky depths of space can make us feel small.

But not too small for God, for care for us God does. Like a gardener tending a new-sprung shoot. Like a mother lifting a hungry baby to her waiting breast. Some, like the magi, perceive that care as being written in the stars, a story we can read. We, today, perceive that lovingkindness in the giving and receiving of Star Words.

In the United Church of Christ, for some time we’ve had a saying: “God is still speaking.” In this church, after we hear the Scriptures, we say in the words of Revelation 2:7, “Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.” Today and for the 354 days that follow, we will listen for what God is saying to us through these Star Words. We will look carefully through them, a lens by which we might see the movement of the Spirit. Perhaps they will even be like a stethoscope, enabling us to hear the beating of God’s heart mirroring our own.

That’s the whole point of these words. They’re a new spiritual practice that provides you with a focus for your reflection. How is the Spirit speaking to you through your word? How is that word manifesting in your life? How is it speaking comfort to you, or challenge? Post it where you can see it, on a refrigerator or maybe your bathroom mirror. Let your eyes rest upon it daily. Take just a moment, even if just a breath, to speak the word aloud or in the depths of your mind. Open yourself to that Star Word’s light and inspiration, that it may guide you in unexpected ways in 2024. And if you should be so fortunate as to hear God speaking through that Star Word, follow where it leads.

And then, next year, consider whether you might tell us the story of how the stars shone for you this year. Your Star Word shines for you this year; may it be a treasure beyond your expectations.

Amen.

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*First Congregational Church, UCC of Anoka is an Open and Affirming Christian Community for all. We affirm that the image of God is most fully reflected in diversity. We invite all people to share their energy and talents in full participation with our community. We welcome all individuals and families of any sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, relationship status, race, national origin, socioeconomic status, age, mental and physical health or ability, or belief. Together, we celebrate these and all other facets of one’s essential being.*