

Sermon on Revelation 21:1-6a  
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By now, we are just a few days away from 2021, and with it comes a chance to turn over a new leaf on this year that contained multitudes, and for most of us, not in a good way. I know I'm eager for all the possibility that this new year brings: a vaccine and an end to this pandemic, a new sibling for our 2-year-old daughter Phoebe, a return to some version of life together in-person. Let's hear what God says in the book of Revelation about the hope and possibility of starting anew. A reading from Revelation, chapter 21, verses 1-6a, from the Inclusive Bible:

Then I saw new heavens and a new earth. The former heavens and the former earth had passed away, and the sea existed no longer. I also saw a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, beautiful as a bride and groom on their wedding day. And I heard a loud voice calling from the throne, "Look! God's Tabernacle is among humankind! God will live with them; they will be God's people, and God will be fully present among them. The Most High will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more, for the old order has fallen. The One who sat on the throne said, "Look! I'm making everything new!"

There have been so many moments throughout this past year when we've collectively said, "I can't wait for 2020 to be over!" And - yes. There's the obvious - COVID-19 has impacted every one of us, whether that's meant the loss of childcare and in-person interaction and volunteer opportunities, or the loss of jobs and income, or the loss of health and loved ones. And the reckoning with racism has forced us to do a lot of long-needed hard work that's been amazing, but the path to get there and the tragic death of George Floyd that accelerated the journey for many of us has been unbelievably painful. The division sowed before and during and after the November election has been nothing short of destructive. And even beyond these national and international events, I happen to know of an incredible amount of personal tragedy in our congregation unrelated to all of this, but heightened by it all. It would be terribly easy to say, don't let the door hit you on the way out, 2020.

But I think a quick goodbye without any kind of reflection is a huge missed opportunity. We've gone through too much together to not learn from it. And - as we hear in scripture - the old thing has to pass away and be grieved before the new thing can come into being.

So I want to bring back my star word from 2020. To fill you in if you've started worshipping with Mac Plymouth over the past year, or to remind you if you lost track, each year around this time we distribute star words to our congregation in worship. They give some guidance, like the star gave the wise men as they journeyed during these days between Christmas Day and Epiphany. We reflect on them throughout the year, post them somewhere we won't forget, and reflect on the year that was through the lens of our stars once we get to the end. My star was "Giving."

When I pulled this star, I honestly felt a little resentful. We had just received a difficult diagnosis for Phoebe and my life revolved around a complex elimination diet and medications and specialist appointments for her. I was looking forward to a full and vibrant church year with lots of plans already in the bag: a fantastic youth mission trip, a creation care-themed justice camp for the junior highers, working with ISALAH on a renewed fight for Paid Family and Medical Leave in the legislature, a Women's Retreat on gender, just a lot to get excited about. To receive this star, "giving," felt like a punch in the gut. "What do you want me to give myself to, God?" I wondered. "How can I be giving any more of myself than I already am?"

Of course, 2020 didn't go the way any of us planned. We had to let go of and grieve so much of what we were looking forward to. And my "giving" star took on new meaning. Because suddenly, all of us were rethinking what it meant to give to one another. As hard as it was, on that fateful Friday, March 13th, the session voted to suspend in-person worship due to the pandemic. And while that doesn't feel like a gift, it was a decision made to give the best chance of health, wellbeing, and survival to our congregation. I give thanks for the courageous members of our session and of our COVID Adaptation Team for making hard decisions that truly were and continue to be in the spirit of giving.

When the pandemic hit, it also became clear that the political and economic systems we have in place here in our country are failing us. As I saw the sacrifice of grocery workers and delivery drivers and childcare providers and in incredible ways, healthcare workers, I found myself grappling with the giving that was required of so many people who were going underpaid, unrecognized, and unsupported. Our organizers at ISALAH called together an interfaith coalition of clergy from across the state of Minnesota for regular calls and training, where we collectively came to recognize that the sacrifice of individuals is no replacement for a government who cares for us. And that sometimes, valorizing these incredible sacrifices distracts us from the giving that is really needed: a shared sense that when we all do better, we all do better, and the willingness to collectively work for that beautiful future. You could say that my star got me thinking, and after this year, I won't look at what it means to give in the same way ever again.

Some of you shared the ways your stars impacted you this year. Janet shared her stars of "focus" and "freedom" from the last two years, reflecting that they remind her to make the main thing the main thing. Such an important reminder during a year full of invitations to get distracted or spiral into despair. Kira's star was "sharing" in 2020, which she said reflected not just the sharing of gifts and time like we'd normally think about it, but also sharing her grief, fears, and frustration in new and more vulnerable ways. Vern's 2020 star was "hope" - and what a year for it! Kate's star, "healing," was especially meaningful to her. She reflected that she never would have imagined how much healing would be a central part of this year. And Lauren shared her word "love," saying, "This word has been incredibly meaningful to me in 2020...more than I could have imagined, though perhaps not in the way I thought or hoped it might be. No, I have not found Love (with a capital L). But God is good and her message has been clear. I have learned a lot about love in 2020."

In this season of Christmas, we celebrate all that is possible with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world - and all that is tender and vulnerable and uncertain about that new life, too. We hear these words from the book of Revelation, envisioning new heavens and a new earth. "The Most High will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more, for the old order has fallen." That vision is powerful. I think about Mary and Joseph, in that stable, with their newborn baby, with everything ahead of them and no idea how it was going to unfold. I think of 2021 in much the same way. We have an opportunity for a fresh start. A new beginning. An opening to co-create a world with far less pain and suffering than the one we live in today. But how that will unfold is eminently uncertain. It all feels very tender and precious. I want to cradle it close, like that baby in the manger.

But even within uncertainty, we can have a vision and we can approach life with intentionality. If we want to live a new way, we have to imagine a new way! So this year, we have stars again, only this time I mailed them to your homes. I hope they made it to you in time! I invite you to find your star if you know where it is, and read the word printed there. See if it inspires new and powerful visions of the year ahead. Or if it prickles you. Whatever reaction you have is an invitation from God into a way of approaching 2021. Check in with the closed Facebook group if that's someplace you like to connect. I'll share my star with you now, which I'm choosing this very moment. It's perceptiveness! Lots to think about in 2021.

Beloved, we have made it through a hard year, thanks to God's faithfulness and to the support and care of one another. Let's celebrate, vision, imagine, and embark on the journey of this next year together. God is making all things new, even us. I can't wait to see where it takes us. Amen.