

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • JANUARY 5, 2020 • EPIPHANY
GUIDING LIGHT SERIES

The Litany
Based on Psalm 19

The cosmos speaks of the glory of God.

Day to day, the word is spoken; and night to night, more knowledge appears.

No speech is adequate; no voice able to tell the mystery of it all.

But the sacred song rings through the earth and into the farthest reaches of space.

Let us pray:

Your presence fills our hearts with joy, and your stillness sets peace
on the land like a dove. Amen.

The Scripture
Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

The Message
Guiding Light: Word
Mark Briley

Synopsis: "*Glory is God's Style.*" Christian writer Frederick Buchner offers this gem. When the Bible tells us that "*the heavens are telling the glory of God*" (Psalm 19:1), it is saying that the heavens are revealing God's style: sunsets, starry nights, dust storms rainforests, garter snakes, the human face -- all, says Buechner, are "*unmistakably the work of a single hand.*" God's style. On the Day of Epiphany, God's style has revealed to the world when the Magi show up to meet Jesus. God's glory made flesh; a Savior come so that world might come to claim for themselves a future with, in a word, "*VISION.*"



Happy New Year! Welcome to the Roaring '20s. 2020! It's a staggering number to me. I remember a time when the Y2K approach was all anyone could fathom, and Prince had everyone elated to party like it was 1999. 2020? Seemed like a lifetime away back then. But, here we are, a New Year, and Prince isn't around to write a song about what it's like to party this year. And "*party*" has a certain connotation with it, but it really is just getting after what it means to be fully and truly alive.

So, we've got some gearing up to do this morning. I hope you had a good time over the holidays with friends, or family, or Netflix, or whatever it was your spirit needed to find some peace and healing from a long and interesting year. While it was our first Christmas calling Columbia home in 20 years, we made some of the usual rounds visiting our families, dog in tow and all. It was just lovely. There was nothing overly spectacular about the whole thing. In fact, it mostly reminded me of the Walt Whitman sentiment: "*We were together. I forget the rest.*" I pray your time was grounding, and that you're psyched and ready now to tackle a new decade.

It *is* really good to be with you. There's a new aura of hope that permeates the sanctuary on the first Sunday of the year. Never fails. It's Epiphany Sunday – the reminder of the magi following the great guiding light of the star over Bethlehem that led those wise astronomers to the feet of Jesus. It is also "*Star Word*" Sunday – and all the sudden Star Wars fans have perked up in a whole new way. I'm sorry to disappoint. It is not *Star Wars* Sunday but rather, *Star Words* Sunday... a day when you all will be invited to draw your own unique word at random after today's message as a focal word to guide you into the New Year. It's not a magic word. It's just a tool. It won't do any work for you. It will demand of you some study, focused reflection, and experimentation.

But aren't we ready for that? Aren't we ready to do something more? To track our spirits toward a deeper level of understanding? Aren't we looking for something more than just okay? You've probably seen the AT&T ads this past year – Great ads! – Each ad offers the line, "*Ok is NOT ok.*" One shows a mechanic assuring a customer who is looking for a brake job that their shop is *just okay* at fixing brakes. He adds, "*If the brakes don't stop the car, something will.*" Ok is not ok.

There's another of a physician who walks into the room of an anxious patient awaiting surgery saying, "*Guess who just got reinstated? ... well, not officially.*" The patient admits to being nervous. The doc says, "*Me, too. We'll figure it out. See you in there!*"

There's a babysitter who is "*pretty okay with children,*" and a tattoo artist who is just okay at inking tattoos. Trust me, when you're getting that picture of Jesus riding a unicorn inked on your back, "*Ok is not Ok.*"



A minister friend of mine posted a gag gift one of his parishioners got him for Christmas. At least, I assumed it was a gag gift. It was a coffee mug that says in bold letters on the side, "*World's Okayest Pastor.*" I know it's a gag. He's doing excellent ministry in Kentucky.

I know all of us get plenty of pressure from countless angles of our lives expecting us to perform and achieve and perfect our lives, and I'm not here to add that kind of pressure to our spiritual lives. But, I am here to challenge us to not be okay with okay this year. This mostly revolves around our intentionality.

In a season where we tend to add more and more to our plate with a self-imposed pressure to perform, maybe it would be wise of us to resolve, not to do more things, but to do less things with greater intentionality. This does require spiritual discipline and discipline, as one of Carrie's running friends often states is "*choosing between what you want now and what you want most.*"

When it comes to your spiritual life, what do you want most? Do you want truth? Do you want relationship? Do you want accountability? Do you want a community to ride with through life? What do you want most? And what are you going to give of yourself to find your way in such a quest? Today, in this first sermon series of the New Year, we're calling this the search of a *Guiding Light*. Today's guiding light is found in a word.

Isaiah, one of the great prophets, brings us the word today. For Isaiah, words are watercolors and melodies and chisels to make truth and beauty and goodness, and sometimes hammers and swords and scalpels to *unmake* sin. He doesn't simply convey information; Isaiah creates visions and inspires belief. He's a poet – a maker, making God present and that presence urgent. The most impressive art of Isaiah, according to the late Eugene Peterson,¹ involves taking the stuff of our ordinary and often disappointing human experience and showing us how it is the very stuff that God uses to create and save and give hope. As this vast panorama opens before us, it turns out that nothing is unusable by God. God uses everything and everybody as

¹ This paragraph influenced by Eugene Peterson's Introduction to Isaiah in *The Message*. NavPress. Colorado Springs. 2002.

material for God's work, which is the remaking of the mess we have made of our lives into a beautiful, grace-laced symphony. In a word, God's hoping you're up for the quest of finding what you want most in your life... and trusting that such a quest will lead you to God.

Isaiah 60 opens with some of the most familiar words of the prophet. "*Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*" *Arise. Shine. Light. Glory.* Since we are looking for that guiding light in a word today, consider with me four key words found in that line alone.

ARISE. If there is ever a word that speaks for itself, it's this one. It's the greatest hope of every morning. At least one of you will say to me today when asked how you are, "*I got out of bed this morning so I must be doing pretty well.*" One version of this verse says it as plainly as that: "*Get out of bed, Jerusalem! Wake up and put your face in the sunlight!*" Arise! Never a better word to start a new year.

SHINE. This is taking "arise" to the next level. You're up, and that is the necessary start to whatever happens next. But a commitment to shine will require something more of you. It's about getting your attitude straight before you leave the house. It's about being read up and prayed up and on the look out to be a good witness of the faith to whomever you may encounter in the day. Your attitude toward another may be the thing that draws them *to* Spirit or pushes them away *from* Spirit. We certainly want to shine the good stuff to the world in need, yes?

I saw someone post a while back the statement, "*Do babies named Becky even exist or do they just appear one day with three kids and wanna speak to the manager?*" Not sure why that person was picking on Becky's. I know some lovely Becky's. But plug your own name into that statement. As a Christian, are you shining a different kind of light or can anyone really tell any difference? Arise. Shine.

LIGHT. We all want light in our lives – never more evident than during these dark, winter days. January 1 gave us just 9 hours, 25 minutes, and 58 seconds of daylight. But the days are elongating and by the end of January, we'll have ten hours of light each day.

Isaiah paints this picture of darkness that is essentially the reality of the world. "*The earth is wrapped in darkness*" ... but... he says, "*A pinprick of light will rise on you.*" This is the connection to the great guiding star that led the Magi to Jesus that we make from Isaiah's word to our Christian overlay in the Gospels. The light exposes things in a way that helps us see more clearly. Find your way by the light of the star and begin the discovery of who you truly are. This is a little different than finding yourself – which is a popular idea we throw around a lot. "*You better find yourself.*" We all get the

sentiment. But I was intrigued by a word written by Emily McDowell which cast a slight alteration to this quest to know who we are.

“Finding yourself,” she says, “is not really how it works. You aren’t a ten-dollar bill in last winter’s coat pocket. You are also not lost. Your true self is right there, buried under cultural conditioning, other people’s opinions, and inaccurate conclusions you drew as a kid that became your beliefs about who you are. ‘Finding yourself’ is actually returning to yourself. An unlearning, an excavation, a remembering who you were before the world got its hands on you.”²

This is what light offers to us. Simply the opportunity to see. It’s hard at first. When you’ve been in the dark and you flip on the lights, you have that adjustment period that can be paralyzing until you’ve existed in the light for a bit. This can be why we become impatient with the spirit life sometimes. We come to church once or pray once or read a chapter in the book of Leviticus and feel like, *“Nope. Doesn’t do anything for me.”* We need time to adjust to the **LIGHT**. The Apostle Paul was struck blind for a time before his vision returned because the life change he would undergo would require a 180 of his life. He’d need time to adjust to the light, but when he did, his direction in life became abundantly clear. *Arise. Shine. Light.*

GLORY. We all have an image of glory. It’s a moment of uncontained elation. And, if we’re honest, we’ve all probably longed to bask in some glory of our own. It’s the classic former athlete who stands on the field of an empty stadium decades after having played a game there wondering, remembering, hoping to feel something of the glory days one more time. Or it’s the Uncle Rico syndrome of the glory missed and working tirelessly to make up for the failure that can truly never be re-played.

My brother and I have a competitive tradition when we gather over the holidays. Last year, we rigged up a little ping pong net on our parent’s kitchen table and sweat for hours paddling that little ball back and forth, navigating toddlers coming through like obstacles and the table’s imperfections not always giving a true bounce. But nonetheless, one of us comes away with the glory of victory until we rig it all up again next year. This year, we got the whole fam involved in a highly competitive game of spoons... all for the title of holiday champion!

But, the prophet reminds us the glory is not intended to be ours in the first place. The glory is Gods. Getting that confused may cause more problems in our world than anything else. *“God’s glory rises on you,”* he says, *“God’s glory breaks over you.”* And we are to bask in it.

² This quote was found posted on Social Media by a friend. While attributed to Emily McDowell, I am not certain where it can be discovered in her work.

What is God's glory? We've just been hillside with the shepherds when the angel appears to them saying, "*The Glory of the Lord shone around them.*" The Psalmist (19:1) says, "*The heavens are telling the glory of God.*" Christian writer Frederick Buechner says, "*Glory is God's style.*" Buechner notes that we see God's style in "*sunsets, starry nights, dust storms, rainforests, garter snakes, and the human face – unmistakably the work of a single hand.*"³

But God's glory, God's style, rises and shines on a whole new level when God's glory was made flesh – a Savior come so that the world might come to claim for themselves a future with, in a word, "*VISION.*" While we will all draw individual words after the message today as guiding lights for 2020, the *Star Word* of focus for our congregation this year is going to be VISION.

It's been ten years since our church went through an intentional visioning process. Like many churches, organizations, and businesses, everyone had a 2020 Vision – and why not – the year naturally lends itself to the practice. Add in the mix, a new ministry partner, and it's time for us to work at this together. A Vision Team is being formed and the entirety of the congregation will be invited into this process that will take us the committed work of 2020 to find clarity. And visioning work is some of the hardest work there is. How do we create words and images as paintings of our purpose? It can be hard to speak. I read this week that the hardest three things to say are: "*I was wrong.*" "*I need help.*" and "*Worcestershire sauce.*" Visioning work can be hard, but it is also the most clarifying and fulfilling work a gathered group of people can do together.

Simon Sinek says, "*Always start with 'Why?'*" Why do we exist as a church? Why this particular band of believers? Why us? Why now? It's going to be a great year of discovery. And perhaps VISION can be our guiding light in 2020. It led the way for the Magi to find their way to Jesus, but what do we do when we can't quite pinpoint that guiding star?



Mumford & Sons⁴ front man, Marcus Mumford, offers a line of faith in the title track of their latest album release entitled, "*Guiding Light.*" In his signature raspy grit, he sings, "*Even when there is no star in sight, you'll always be my only guiding light.*" This is the draw of relationship with Christ and our eyes adjusting to the light, as we move out of the dark corners of our realities into a humble willingness to follow the ways of Christ even when we struggle to see the glory.

³ Buechner, Frederick. "Glory." frederickbuechner.com. September 18, 2016.

⁴ www.mumfordandsons.com

On this first Sunday of the year, I'm betting that we're all here ready for something more; hungry for it even. In that same song, Mumford's lyric, says, "*If we come back and we're broken; unworthy and ashamed; give us something to believe in and you know we'll go your way.*" What do you need to make that commitment to God today? What do you want most that you're willing to stick with the necessary discipline to forego what you want now? *Arise. Shine. Light. Glory.*

Isaiah says, "*Look up! Look around! The gathering is happening... sons and daughters coming from great distances...*" all on a quest to find the guiding light; seeking wholeness; rising to the challenge, ready to shine as a reflection of the glory of the Lord. God is doing amazing things all around us. That vision is here. Ready for you. Are you ready it? If so, we are faced with the next question. Will we arise and shine? We may scoff a bit and say, "*Sometime I will.*" "*Later, perhaps.*" But it's already happening and has been since God became flesh and moved into the neighborhood. How long can we sit idly on our hands?

Its college-football bowl season, and the pros are ready to take their shot at the playoffs as well. If you're a fan of any team, you've had the experience of the game coming down to the wire. You've got the drinks and wings and dips and surround sound, and it all comes down to one play. Seconds are ticking, and time is running out. Suddenly (*a very biblical word*) and inexplicably, against all odds, on the final play, somebody begins to run the ball from his own 8-yard line. He evades a few would-be tacklers and is still on his feet at the 25-yard line. He zigs and zags and cuts in the opposite direction and has reached the 40. Scoots to the 50 and the foot race to the end zone is on. Only one defender stands a chance of catching him, and you're wondering if your guy still has enough gas in the tank. Just a few yards shy of the goal line, your guy trips and is falling. He pushes off the one foot still grounded and stretches for the glory line. Does he score?

Whether he scores or not is not the point of this story. Of course, we all want the glory of the victory, but what I really want to know of you as a fan is this: "*At what point of this 92-yard excursion did you arise and shine?*" At what point, did you knock over the popcorn, or wake the sleeping baby in the other room, or grab your buddy's shoulder who is stunned speechless, or scream at the television expecting your yelling to influence your team's effort toward the desired outcome? No true fan could sit still.

We're in such a season of life right now as people of faith. And it's not the time to sit idly. The light of Christ has come. The glory of the Lord has found us *that we celebrate* on this Epiphany Sunday. And the call for you and me today is to arise and shine. If not us, who? If not now, when? And so, we're off... a new year, a new hope, a new word... one for you that will soon be determined... one for us as a church family: *VISION*. I cannot wait to see where the Lord will lead us now. Are you ready?

For the last six years, I've shared in a tradition of drawing a word for the year. What's in a word; you know? There are so many of them. There are more than a million words in the English language, about 170,000 in current use, and most of us have individual vocabularies of 20,000-30,000 words. What does a single word have to offer? Well... that's up to you and me and God I suppose.

Our deacons will soon pass among us baskets full of words... almost 600 cards, individual words – no two are alike. As they are passed, you are invited to draw one from the basket if you'd like. It's not fortune cookie magic... just a gift... an opportunity to pray and reflect in a new way. You'll have an initial reaction, but I encourage you not to judge the word too much right away. Let it work on you a bit. Look up its various meanings. Find it in Scripture. Offer it up in prayer each day. Look for it in the world. It may be a word you haven't paid much attention to in the past. But maybe you'll start seeing it everywhere... like when you got your Ford Fusion thinking "*I haven't seen a car like this*" only to discover every other car on the road is a Ford Fusion. You see more things when you're looking... when you're paying closer attention.

One person drew the word "RESTRAINT" which provided the motivation to get healthy that year. He lost 90 lbs. Another drew the word "JOY." It was her middle name, but she admitted she'd lost any sense of joyful identity in her life. She focused her year on reclaiming joy both as personal identity and also her outlook on life. Another yet drew "*COURAGE*" and was in the middle of a season of cancer treatments. She took that card with her to every treatment and doctor's appointment and found a new level of comfort.⁵

Who knows what can happen when we focus our lives in new ways? So, friends, pick a card, any card, and see how it might become a guiding light for you this year.

⁵ <https://pres-outlook.org/2016/01/star-words-a-spiritual-practice-for-epiphany/>. Stories of transformation as shared by Kristin Stroble.