

**Columbia, Missouri**  
**The Worship of God • January 9, 2022**



**The Scripture**  
**John 1:1-5**

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;  
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”*

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

**The Message**  
**“What Is STRONG with Me? – Word”**  
**Mark Briley**

Did you make any mistakes in 2021? Just raise your hand if you even made one single mistake in 2021. How ‘bout two mistakes? Hands? 20? Just kidding. We could be here all day, right? We made mistakes – individually and collectively, we made mistakes. Some of them we learned from and grew as people. Some we are learning from and

still in the growing process, and some we have yet to learn from and run good risk of repeating.

None of this talk of mistakes is to bring shame or defeat but simply to reflect and grow. I heard someone say this week, “*Whenever there is limited reflection, there is often dangerous reaction.*” (Rich Villodas). It’s the word from Lamentations 3:40 that says, “*Let’s take a good look at the way we’re living and reorder our lives under God.*” (Lamentations 3:40).

This is the work we often do this time of year. Some call them New Year’s Resolutions but if left to gimmick alone, we are likely to be successful in our resolutions at the national average rate of 8%. Instead, as people of faith, we want to reorder our lives under God. There is a new future available to us if we examine appropriately. To do so effectively, we first must locate ourselves. Can we do that this morning? It’s hard to know where to go unless you know where you are first. It’s why when you go into a shopping mall or open a map of any kind, you first locate that red dot that says, “*You are here.*” So, take a moment and locate yourself.

Can you sift through all the places you’ve been in the last month – spiritually, relationally, physically, mentally, emotionally. It’s been a wild ride, yes? There was a sweet glimmer of old during Advent and Christmas... and many of our spirits rallied in hope that the gifts of old were returning and the hope of the future was close. But then *this week...* am I right? We’re searching, struggling, wrestling, wondering. We’ve had to learn how to spell Omicron. The spirit *bump* led to a spirit *dip* and even the strongest and most stable spirits I know are saying to me in the only way they can find to admit, “*I’m hurtin’.*” I’ve lived it too... you can’t quite put a finger on it and your inner strength is trying to mentally whip it like you used to so easily do... but something’s off. Your feelings are like a gas station bathroom – open 24 hours and an absolute mess.

I commiserated with a friend a bit and we both noted – the music sounds different right now. The taste is a little off. The smell, the touch, the look... right? It’s the senses in upheaval and the spirit longing for its grounding. So, let’s just breathe a minute; sit up a bit, and arrive at this moment in the place where our feet currently are? *You are here.* And until we can locate ourselves, we cannot intentionally and prayerfully discern where to go from here. So, close your eyes for a moment. Breathe. Whisper to your own self, “*I am loved. I’ve got what I need. Something good and of God is ahead of me.*” Open your eyes. Let’s go.

I was struck last month by a commercial that captured my attention with a play on words. Earlier when I asked you about mistakes of the year gone by... many of those mistakes may have come just prior to saying to yourself, “*What is WRONG with me?*” Mistakes. Sin. Perceived failure. All have the ability to lead us into that spiral of self-

doubt, self-criticism, and even self-hatred. We're not here today to right all the wrongs or correct all the mistakes. We're here on this Sunday we celebrate Epiphany – an in-breaking of God's reality to our own – to discover what is *STRONG* with me. That was the flip-the-script, play on words that have captured my spirit sense I first saw the advertisement a few weeks ago. Check it out... Open this link

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3C17KDdHwE> to view the video.

As God's inspiration comes from anywhere if we are paying attention, such has inspired our first series of the New Year, entitled, "*What is STRONG with me?*" We want to identify, through gifts of Scripture, faith-practice, and real-world experience the strength within each of us that has the power to ground us, serving as the foundation to our best year yet.

Coming off a year like never before, what better way to launch a new year than looking for our *strong* points, not our *wrong* points? Today, we launch with a strong WORD that, by the end of this message, will open the invitation for all who choose to draw a card upon which will be a one-of-a-kind word that may be a guiding force for you in the New Year. We've shared this practice the last two years at Broadwaym and I love the stories that come over and over again from you about the ways your word drawn for the year has shown up in your life, grounded your prayer life, opened your eyes to the world in some new way. This is, indeed, the purpose – not as some gimmicky magic trick – but an invitation to ground ourselves and study a single word like no one else will draw in this place today.

My word in 2021 was "*Steadfast.*" I posted it right up where I would see it every morning and it has carried me into and through more days that I can count; days I rose with a sour or uncertain attitude; evenings when I rolled in weary and losing hope. There it was – staring at me again and again – *steadfast.* And I stayed the course.

We call these Star Words as they are drawn on Epiphany Sunday – traditionally the day when we celebrate the coming of the Magi to visit the Christ child. A *star* guided them and led them directly into the presence of God. We hope these Star Words may do the same. It's not about liking the word you draw though we tend to have some natural reaction of inclination, repulsion, or neutrality when we lay eyes on it for the first time. Give it some time to work on your soul. Transformation often takes us on a route not traditionally mapped from point A to B.

The Star led the Magi to Jesus, but the transformation sent them home by another route. Maybe in order for your word to transform you, you'll have to leave this place by another route. Babies can have this impact on you. When's the last time you encountered a baby and didn't leave a little transformed because of that encounter?

When our first child, Morgan, was born, we rushed to the hospital. Carrie's water broke in the middle of the night, which excited me to no end. Easy for me to say, right? I was all concerned about having to time space between contractions, but with that water breaking, we knew we had to get to the hospital. So, I'm running around in a flurry, grabbing the overnight bags and such, wide-eyed that we'd made it to this moment. You would have thought *my* water broke.

Carrie was so calm and casually says, "*I'm going to take a shower first.*" "*What?!?*" I thought loudly in my head and probably shouted even louder. But she did, and then we got in the car and zoomed off to the hospital knowing we'd have that baby before we could even get into the delivery room. Doc rushes in. Checks on Carrie. Zero centimeters dilated. I was like Ross on *Friends* when Rachel was rushed into delivery. I was dilated at least three centimeters *myself!* Needless to say, 30 hours later. No sleep. Lots of work. No baby. Delivery became an emergency situation, and our baby girl was born lifeless and receiving tiny, baby chest compressions by the NICU staff in hopes of bringing her to life. A much longer story later, Morgan is good, Carrie is good, and we're set to go home from the hospital.

What I'm getting at here – is that we went home a different way. The route was the same, but we were different people. I went home transformed with a whole new vision of the world. I remember going as slow as possible, hazards a blazing, because I had the two most precious pieces of cargo to protect. Cars started to pile up behind me and I would roll down the window and flail my arm saying, "*Go around! Go around!*" I had a new focus in my life. I was going home another way. This is what it means to be transformed. How will you, like the Magi, go home differently today?

In concept, theory, or ideation, we all want this. "*Of course, I want to be transformed,*" we scoff. We know, however that transformation doesn't just happen to us. It *does* happen to us... but most often only after we put in the daily grind. Before one man fully recognized his role of discipline in the road of transformation he said, "*I was a Christian for twenty-two years. But instead of being a twenty-two-year-old Christian, I was a one-year-old Christian twenty-two times. I just kept doing the same things over and over and over again.*"

Maybe this is your year. Maybe this is my year. Say that out loud, would you? "*This is gonna be my year!*" I believe it, too. And so, let's focus on what is strong with you and what is strong with me.

The opening verses of the Gospel of John, which scholars have long called its prologue – or a separate introduction to the greater work of the Gospel – uses some extremely simple language to express some of the most profound truths of Christian theology. We can appreciate this, right? We can mine the mysteries of God our whole

lives long... and we should... but John puts forward in simple language the experience of the disciples' encounter with Jesus. Verse 16 of the prologue, that we won't get to today, may sum it up best of our experience with Jesus as one where he has given us, "*grace upon grace.*" Say, "*Grace upon grace.*"

That's yours. That's mine. Are you with me? And because we have this grace upon grace, we are to be truly seen – open and transparent to God and one another – that we may then be open to, and celebrate, the transformation of one another. It's not a competition to see who can be the most transformed. Its grace upon grace; a celebration of your process of transformation that will not look the same as mine. And if we truly care about each other? If we are "*for*" each other as we are rooted as a family, we create space for each other where this authentic work can be done.

Brene Brown says this is what we are ethically called to do for one another. She speaks specifically to the realm of education, but I bring it to our context here as a faith family. "*We create space where everyone can walk in and, for that day or hour, take off the crushing weight of their armor, hang it on a rack, and open their heart to truly being seen.*"<sup>1</sup> This is grace upon grace and John's simplest terms of our relationship with Jesus.

The Gospel – which means? (*Good News*). The Good News of John opens with that Star Wars like line, "*In the beginning was the Word.*" And if we stop there, we can be disappointed. "*Words are cheap,*" we say. You fire up your search engine and can do a word search that ranges over unimaginably vast cyber-acreage. "*Talk is cheap*" we've added. Don't give me this "*in the beginning was the word*" stuff.

But this Bible – this sacred work we treasure – looks at words very differently. Words, in our Scriptures, are almost living things. In Genesis, God speaks a word, and that word becomes a creation. Some words take on different character. Deep words beyond water-cooler banter about weather, sports, and political sound bytes.

I remember the first time I said the words to Carrie who would later become my wife, "*I love you.*" It just sort of came out of me in a moment and there it was, couldn't pull it back if I wanted to. Life would be defined by time before those words were spoken and time ever since.

Some words have a life of their own, you know? Sometimes the words are pain-filled ones about the end of love or the pronouncement of diagnosis. Words take on different character when weighted like this. John seems to be giving weight to the Word – bringing it to life as God in the flesh – "*In the beginning was the Word. The Word was*

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<sup>1</sup> I'm not certain of the origin of this quote from Brene Brown. I discovered it via a friend's social media post.

*with God and the Word was God.*” Sometimes when we refer to the Bible itself, we’ll call it the Word. “*Have you been in the Word lately?*” someone will ask. They want to know if you’re reading the Bible. John didn’t have the King James Version on his nightstand, the NRSV on his office desk, or the *YouVersion* Bible App on his smartphone. John says, “*the Word*” and he means Jesus. He’s not talking about a document, a piece of literature, or some abstract principle. He’s talking about a person. John’s prologue is his way of setting the theme of his Gospel: “*If you want to know who the true God is, look long and hard at Jesus.*”

We take this for granted 2,000 years later, but this was monumental. John says, guess what this Word, this Jesus brought into being – and not a single thing came into being without him – LIFE. And what *is* life? We’re not talking life of the party. If you had a stellar work Christmas party in recent weeks, the life of the party generally included descriptive terms like boisterous, extravagant, and excess. Writer Bob Kaylor described it well: “*The “life” of the secular Christmas party (in most years, anyway) is revelry and merriment — too much to eat and drink — and at the end of it all, a veritable mountain of trash to haul out to the curb. “Good times,” most would affirm — yet hardly the sort of experience one would sum up using the single, glowing word: “life.” Years ago, entertainment mogul Ted Turner described this sort of empty existence most vividly, when he cynically remarked: “Life is like a B-movie. You don’t want to leave in the middle of it, but you don’t want to see it again.*”<sup>2</sup>

No. We’re done with the emptiness. You’re done with platitudes – who has time for that? That’s not why you’re here today. “*Why would they come?*” I asked myself. You’ve got every excuse to stay home. The weather has been uncertain. Omicron is looming like that guy who misses every cue that “*This isn’t going anywhere. You’re done.*” We can’t get rid of it. You’re catching up on all the things post-holiday. All and any of that is acceptable. But you’ve come. Or you’ve plugged in from home today? Why? What are you really looking for?

Sharon was searching, too. She’s a nurse and went on a medical mission trip to Nicaragua a few years ago. One day on her way to the clinic, she saw a little boy scavenging the garbage dumps. Later she had learned that the boy’s name was Diego, and his family was extremely poor. Two of his siblings had died from malnutrition. His parents were migrant workers, who picked whatever was in season. Everything they owned they carried on their backs from place to place. Diego spent his days carrying a small canvas bag over his shoulder searching for anything of value in the dumps. If he was lucky, he would find some over-ripe vegetables someone threw out. Usually, he would find some scraps of metal he could try to sell.

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<sup>2</sup> Bob Kaylor is Editor and Senior Writer for Homiletics Online. The Turner quote and exegetical background is found on that resource from the commentary of John’s Prologue. [www.homileticsonline.com](http://www.homileticsonline.com).

Sharon was taken by this boy and his struggle to survive. She spoke very little Spanish but hollered at him what she did know. “*Que pasa?*” “*What’s happening?*”

Diego jumped down and stood in front of her with a big smile. “He had the face of an angel,” she said. Realizing that she couldn’t understand a thing he would say, he thought for a moment before answering her question, “*Que pasa?*” He answered, “*Buscando la vida.*” She nodded and left him repeating the phrase over and over so that she could ask someone back at camp who spoke Spanish to interpret his message. A friend informed her that he probably meant to say that he was trying to make a living. But what he actually said was “*I am looking for life.*”

Tears filled her eyes as she considered the words, he had shared with her. It reminded her that much of her life she had pursued her selfish desires and all the things that we are afforded in this country...wealth...banquets of food...Christmas trees packed with presents under the tree. But where had that led her? She was looking for life that was truly life – the kind of *Word* John was speaking of in his Gospel. This encounter left such an impact that whenever Sharon would receive communion from that moment forward, instead of saying, “*Amen*” she would whisper, “*Buscando la vida,*” “*I am looking for Life.*”<sup>3</sup>

“*That’s it,*” I thought. We’re looking for life... grace upon grace. Word made flesh... Spirit made so tangible that every one of our senses is renewed to the life Christ is inviting us into.

Let’s leave the mistakes behind... let’s grow from them... but leave them for a new hope, a new life, a new WORD. And so, we come to that moment on this Star Word Sunday. Our deacons are going to pass a basket down your row, and you are simply invited to draw a WORD. Don’t look at them. Don’t peek and put it back or shuffle until you find one that makes you comfortable. Simply pull a card, read it, and begin a journey with it for the year. Let it work on you, grow you up in some new way. Search for it in Scripture, in the world, in your music. Study its origin. Pray for God to open you in some new way because of it. Let it make you curious. Follow it as it calls you into service. Until now, it was not your word – just a word in the universe. But shortly, it will be yours. It will mark a time before this word was yours and after you invited it to deepen your faith and trust in God. May it transform. May it bring new life.

[Editor’s Note: if you are reading this and would like to receive your Star Word for 2022, simply either call the church office (573.445.5312) and request your word be sent to you or contact the church at [bbchurch@broadwaychristian.net](mailto:bbchurch@broadwaychristian.net), and your word will be sent to you.]

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<sup>3</sup> “*I Smell Bread;*” Mebane Pridgen McMahan (Sept. 2000)

**Song of Focus**  
**Words and Music: Ed Varnum**  
***“God So Loves You”***

In the beginning, there was the Word:  
with God from the beginning, bringing all into being.  
And in the Word there was Life, and the Light that shines forever!  
That Word has come to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

For God so loves the world, the Word has come to live among us.  
In love, the Word made flesh has come to be one with us in Christ!  
How greatly you are loved: the awesome grace of God.  
For God so loves us! God so loves you! God so loves you!



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