

Good morning! Welcome! It's so good to see you—all of you—as we gather for Growing in Faith Together. What a gift it is to be together to worship God. (Thank you for singing your special song and for leading us in worship with your Christmas pageant a few weeks ago—"Woven Together in Love—It's what? Amazing! And what amazing news that is!)

We gather today, some of us Christmas-ed out—feeling like it was months ago, instead of a few days ago, New Year's resolutions maybe already broken, having lived through what they say will be the coldest week of winter. We survived! Though I have a hunch we have many more cold days ahead. One of the good things about these cold winter days is that if you are brave enough to go outside at night, away from the city and its lights, the sky should be filled with stars. (SLIDE) For it to get this cold, it usually means the sky has to be pretty clear for the cold air to come in. If you go outside, away from your warm house, you will see stars upon stars upon stars.

I remember when I was young going out into the field by my house and looking up at the sky and being in complete awe. Have you ever had that experience? It is ahhh—mazing, like oooohhh---ahhhh—amazing. Let's hear some ooohs and ahhs (ooooh---ahhh).

Stars appear in stories throughout the Bible. They, and light, are an important part of the Bible, and who we are as God's children. Do you remember what the first book of the Bible is called? Genesis. The first thing we hear in Genesis is how God created the world, the heavens and the earth. It was dark though so God said, "Let there be light," and God separated the light from the darkness. And there was light, and God created the sun, the moon, and stars to give light on earth. And God said it was bad? No, God said it was...good.

Let there be light. Close your eyes for a moment. Close them tight. What do you see? It is hard to see without light, isn't it? Now, open your eyes. Light is a very good thing. We need light so we can live. We need light, or we get lost. People who can't see find their light with canes, or seeing-eye dogs, or people who help them find their way.

There are many different types of light (show): candles, light bulbs, lamps, the sun, a fire, and my favorite thing that shines, stars. Even in the darkest of places, these lights make it bright so we can find our way. I couldn't get any real stars for you to hold but I do have some star wands. We will pass these out—but they are to be used for good, not for bad, like God intended—so no fighting or knocking someone on the head with it. Ok? When I raise my star, I want you to raise yours and say, "Let it shine!" Just like the song "This Little Light of Mine," the stars shine and show us the way! **Raise wand...let it shine!**

We hear of stars in the Psalms, how they are a guiding light, and we think of the story of Abraham and Sarah. When they were older, at least in their 80s, God talked to Abraham and said, "I'm going to make you a great nation. From you there will be descendants, children, who will fill the world." Crazy! They were the age of being grandparents. Do you remember what Sarah did? She laughed! They didn't believe God, but God said, "Look up at the sky (SLIDE) and see if you can count the stars. When you count them, that's how many descendants you will have." Can you imagine trying to count all of the stars? Even if you divided up the sky and multiplied, it would be impossible to count all of them. Especially because the more you look at the sky and your eyes adjust, the more you can see. There are stars beyond the stars! **Let it shine!**

We remember the star that appeared the night Jesus was born. It shone over the stable, and the shepherds saw it and followed it to find Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus. The wise men saw the star too: Let's hear their story from Matthew chapter 2. Today's scripture is read from The Rhyme Bible Storybook. (SLIDES)

The wise men, also called magi, saw the light, a brilliant star, so bright, they had to follow it. Although our poem wraps up the story nicely, we really don't know a whole lot about the Magi. We don't know exactly when they arrived to see Jesus or if there were only three men who went on the journey. But it's ok. We don't have to know the exact details to know the wise people had an epiphany.

(SLIDE) Epiphany is a strange word. Say it with me, "Epiphany." It's a big word that means a "striking realization"—it's when you suddenly see or understand something in a new or very clear way. Something is revealed or shown; it's an "aha!" moment. Have you ever had one of those? It's where you see something or

learn something or feel something that changes EVERYTHING. Maybe it was the first time you tied your shoes by yourself, or rode your bike, or got your driver's license. Maybe it was the moment you fell in love, knew what you wanted to be when you grew up, or became a parent. Sometimes, "aha moments" aren't happy—like when you get sick, or a loved one dies, or a relationship fails, or you realize you've "had enough." These epiphanies, these moments, even the bad ones, change the way we live and what we do. These epiphanies, these moments, even the bad ones, are no match for the light God gave the world: Jesus, and his light changes everything. **Let it shine!**

When the wise people saw the star, they knew there was more beyond what they could see. Even without the telescopes we have today, maybe they imagined that the sky included something like this (SLIDE). That the world was bigger than any of us imagine. Anyone know what that is? The Milky Way. But if you look beyond that, this is what you see (SLIDE). This is a picture from the Hubble telescope. If you go on the left, about halfway up, there is a leaf that's sideways, that's The Milky Way. Everything else is other galaxies.

When we hear the stories of a star shining in the sky, and Abraham and Sarah, and the magi who followed the star, we know that what we see in the night sky is beyond our imagination. It goes on. (SLIDE) And on. (SLIDE) And on. (SLIDE) And on (SLIDE) —all the stars you see at night are a small part of what is in creation. Ahh-mazing!

This story of epiphany reminds us to follow a star (SLIDE). The problem is there are lots of stars to follow in life—lights we think guide us. If you were told to follow one, which one would you follow? We are tempted to think we should follow the most exciting, or beautiful, or fun new thing we can see, have, or hold. Like the wise people, we spend our lives looking for light. We think that the light of money, or brightness of success, or the glow of having the most friends, or playing ball the best, or the sparkle from being chosen first for a game, or getting the best part or song in the play, or the beauty of looking a certain way, can solve our problems.

But we are reminded today, there is only one light to follow: Jesus. His light is different. Did you notice when the wise people traveled? At night—it's awfully hard to follow a star in the daylight, isn't it? **Let's dim the lights.** The wise people, even in the dark, were willing to follow the light to see where it was leading. In fact, they HAD to go through the dark to find Jesus. Isn't it that way for us, sometimes too? (SLIDE) Darkness can be a scary thing. We can't tell what is what, or what's around us, or where to go. But even the smallest glimmer of light can help us. See how the light shines in the darkness, and the light is not overcome? No matter how dark it is, you can still see the light. That is how Jesus is the light of the world. His light fills our darkness. **Let it shine!** (Bring lights back up)

When the magi saw Jesus, they knew he wasn't an ordinary baby. They knew, with their whole hearts, Jesus was the Son of God. They saw that he was born for all of us, and is the light of the world. Who? The light of the world! He is the one who brings light, hope, and love to last forever. Even when we sin, we mess up, no matter what darkness we face, God promises we are not alone. We are loved and forgiven, and the best news of all is that this light belongs to each and every one of us! **Let it shine!**

As Christians, like the wise people, we have the greatest epiphany. We follow the star and see Jesus is the light of the world and our lives. God wants us to share the truth and shine the light of Christ for ALL to see. This little light of mine...I'm gonna let it...shine! (Sing)

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

We have some star stickers to share with you today. Our middle schoolers will help pass them out during our next hymn, kids you will get yours downstairs. Put it on your shirt, or maybe your cell phone or in your wallet, or on your mirror, to remind you that the light of Christ belongs to you, and you are called to "let it shine."

