

Every year at our Ash Wednesday service, I have the blessing of telling each person, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

But I think this year, I might say, “You are stardust, and to stardust you shall return.”

For one thing, I am not sure that people like the idea of being referred to as something as insignificant as dust.

And for another thing, the second statement is true, you are literally made of stardust.

Your body is composed of the same stuff that makes up those glimmering lights shining in the dark sky.

The crucial elements for life, or the building blocks of life are: carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus and sulfur.

How did these elements get to earth?

From stars, or more specifically, from stars dying.

When stars get to the end of their lives, they swell up and fall together again, throwing off their outer layers.

During this process, a star is like a nuclear reactor.

It converts hydrogen into helium and helium is built into carbon, nitrogen and oxygen, iron and sulfur, everything we are made of.

But how did these elements get from the exploding star to earth?

When the solar system formed, it started to freeze gas into ice and dust particles.

They would grow and grow by colliding.

Eventually gravity pulled them together to form planets.

The planets are like big vacuum cleaners, sucking in everything around them.

But they didn't complete the job.

There's still an awful lot of dust floating around.

The Earth can't avoid running into this debris, so that dust falls onto the Earth all the time and has from the very beginning.

It's why the planet was made in the first place.

Nowadays, we don't even notice it.

But eventually all that stuff, which contains oxygen and carbon, iron, nickel, and all the other elements, finds its way into our bodies.

So most of the material that we are made of comes from dying stars or stars that died in explosions.

And those stellar explosions continue.

We have stuff in us as old as the universe, and then some stuff that landed here maybe only a hundred years ago.

And all of that mixes in our bodies and literally composes who we are, as organic organisms.

The stars that we see today are many of the same stars that Jesus' contemporaries would have seen when they looked up at the night sky.

In fact, while we refer to the magi who visited Jesus as "kings," that term is a little misleading.

They were religious scholars who were revered Babylonian astronomers and astrologists.

They studied the stars and planets, interpreting the meaning behind cosmic events.

Modern-day astronomers have theorized about what, exactly, those ancient astronomers saw, what were they following, as they were walking to meet Jesus.

One popular theory is that the star they saw was actually light from the birth of a new star, or a nova.

There are records from astronomers in the Far East of a new star that would have been positioned over Jerusalem, which is where their journey started.

Additionally, the new star could have risen in the sky to appear in the south.

Bethlehem lies due south of Jerusalem, so Magi could have followed the star to Bethlehem.

So, the magi were following a light, a star.

And this light is the source of life, as it contains the elements that make up organic matter on earth.

Including you and me.

And this light led them to the source of our lives, the one in whom we live and move and have our being, Jesus Christ.

So the next time someone tells you that you are a star, you can remind them that they are too!

We are all stars who are called to shine brightly in this world.

Stars only shine in the darkness, though.

And darkness is inevitable, as that's what exists in the absence of light.

Before God created light in the story of Genesis, there was darkness.

Darkness can be sacred and holy, and it can be scary and disconcerting and confusing and lonely.

There are people in our lives and there are communities that we are part of, which are in scary dark places.

That's where your light is needed, it's only in dark places where our light can truly shine.

There's a reason you don't go stargazing during the day.

All of us shine in different ways.

We have different blessings to offer the world, different gifts.

And this morning I have a gift for each of you.

We are doing our star gifts activity again, you may remember it from a few years ago.

In a few moments, the ushers will come around with baskets and you'll be invited to take a star.

Each star has a different word on the back.

The star that you choose is your word for the year.

You're invited to focus on the word you're given.

It's one way in which you can intentionally try to shine a little brighter in this new year.

If it helps you, I encourage you to put your star somewhere where you'll see it regularly, like in your purse or on your refrigerator or on your bathroom mirror.

Maybe even look up your word in the dictionary to see all of its different meanings, it may mean more than you know.

I now invite the ushers to come forward to pass out our star words...

Friends, this Sunday, January 6th, 12 days after Christmas, is Epiphany.

It is the celebration of God's presence breaking through to shine as a light in the darkness.

Remember that you are a star, shining in the darkness, and I hope the word you received helps you to shine a little bit brighter in this new year.

Amen.

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