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**Athelstone Uniting Church #89**

**26 January 2020**

## **Epiphany 3**

**Text:** *Isaiah 9:1-4 and Matthew 4:12-23 NIV*

Hello!

It's good to be back! Paul and I enjoyed our break – it was a combination of relaxing and being productive. It is good to see you all and I'm looking forward to what God has planned for us in 2020!

Let us pray:

Light shines.

Light calls.

Light guides our way.

Through your Word, help us focus on the light of Christ, answer the call and follow where Christ leads. Amen



I love sunflowers!

You might remember me mention before, that I love sunflowers! They are such a happy radiant colourful flower. And in this season of Epiphany I find sunflowers to be a helpful image as we celebrate that Jesus is the light of the world.

It is so fitting for us to be able to celebrate Epiphany, the season of light, in our Australian summer, when we are basking in the heat of the sun's rays – and sunflowers are in bloom!

Anyway, it fascinates me how the young sunflowers follow the sun through the day, from east to west and during the night they turn to face the east, waiting for the rising sun.

While the adult sunflowers settle down and just face the east.

The warmer they are, the better they are at attracting pollinators, like bees, and so, more effective at producing more sunflowers.

As Christians we are like sunflowers

We follow the light

The Sun who sustains us, gives us energy, helps us to grow and warms us

This blessing of the Sun then becomes a blessing to others

Our warmth, our joy in the Lord is not just for us – it is to be shared, so that others may come to know the light of Jesus in their life and flourish too.

we are in the season of epiphany – the season of light – and today's texts proclaim the light that has come in to the world.

This light has come especially to those who sit in darkness – the darkness of exile, the darkness of division, the darkness of suffering, or the darkness of confusion.

themes of light and darkness focus the readings. *In the midst of loss (for Isaiah – the destruction of one's homeland and for Jesus - the imprisonment of John the Baptist)*, In the midst of loss, hope is not lost.

God's light shines in the darkness. "The people who walked in darkness / have seen a great light; those who live in a land of deep darkness - / on them light has dawned. (Isa 9:2)

Isaiah reminds his sister and brother Israelites of their call to be a light to the nations, helping them find a focussed hope during times of being invaded or being in exile.

And Jesus, in response to these prophetic words in Isaiah, calls the first disciples.

Rather than being discouraged by the bad news about John, Jesus set out to begin building his team!

Jesus is a promise of light to all those who live in the darkness.

Let me read to you the familiar opening words of the gospel of John:

**1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was with God in the beginning. **3** Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. **4** In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.....

**9** The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

And here we are on Australia Day – a day of mixed emotions – a day to celebrate our great nation and a day to lament the experience of the first peoples of this land.

Across our nation there are many experiencing light and many experiencing darkness  
Over the last weeks, no, months, our country has experienced an extraordinary amount of bushfires.

We have been thrown into the dark shadow of smoke, ash and dust.

So much loss... of lives, property, animals, livelihoods, plants and trees, and the list goes on

Yet, through it all, Jesus has shone his light into so many situations..

There have been so many stories of hope

people have donated incredible amounts of money and given generous amounts of time to rescue, rebuild, feed and comfort those affected.

Volunteers have risked their own lives and properties to help others

And we have seen images of new green shoots following recent rains

If you listen you will hear stories of hope, generosity and kindness emerging

As we sang earlier, in Malcolm Gordon's song, 'Beneath the southern cross'

This, the land on which we stand. This holy ground, made by God's hand

Marred and scarred, yet marked by grace

*held and healed, in Christ we find our place.*

*Found by one who came for all*

*In this tale of spacious love we're born.*

As light shines in the cloudy, confusing places of our lives, the words of Jesus can clarify our focus and help us answer God's call

Do you find yourself in a time of darkness? Lost, discouraged, tired, unwell, lacking purpose, confused?

Turn to Jesus, the light of the world. Pray for his light to lead you to a place of hope, joy, health, peace, direction or clarity

Can you think of someone you know who is in a time of darkness?

Pray for them. Picture them surrounded by the light of Jesus

Encourage them. Help them see where God is at work in their life and kindle the flame of hope that is flickering within them.



You may have noticed that we have kept the stars up around the place. This is to remember the significance of the guiding star at epiphany

Sometimes at night, the only light we have to guide us, is starlight

And it was a particular bright star that helped the wise men find the infant Jesus

Stars have provided direction for travellers for a long time. Celestial navigation has helped sea captains for centuries, and also aircraft pilots during the early days of aviation. In the southern hemisphere, the constellation of the Southern Cross (which appears on the Australian flag) can be used to point out the direction south

Jesus, the bright Morning star, as it says in Revelation 22, invites us to follow him

Come, follow me, he said

Jesus still calls to us: come, follow me!

Are you seeking direction in life? Do you find that the way is unclear and you find it hard to move forward through confusion, uncertainty or fear?

Remember that "Jesus is a lamp before my feet and a light for my journey. (Ps 119:105)

Bring your concerns to God in prayer.

God promises to enlighten the way, to guide your feet, so that you can live a life of abundance.

As we begin a new year – a new decade – seek God's direction as to how you are to live your life. Turn to God in prayer for the big decisions and the small ones.

We are then called to share this guiding light of Christ with others.

It could be a simple word of wisdom or a gentle gesture of love, a kind word of encouragement or a hug. It may be lending a listening ear to someone who needs to talk. Any way that we can relieve someone of their burdens will reveal the work of the light of God – because this light saves.

This light is a gift for us, and any aspect of this light we can share with another will also be a gift.

Let us be like a sunflower..

Let us follow the light

Let us be sustained by the Sun (Son) who gives us energy, helps us to grow and warms us.

Let us follow the Sun as he leads us in life.

Let us then share this life-sustaining joy with others, so that others may come to know the light of Jesus in their life - and flourish too.

This year I want to introduce something new: star words.

In remembering that night long ago when God used a star to reveal the newborn Christ to the world, to the wisemen and to all of us, you will each receive your own star out of this basket as it is passed around. Each star has a different word. Each of you will be invited to journey with that star, with that word all year long- to see where the word moves you in prayer, pushes or pulls you in faith, and how it opens your hearts to God's call on your life. I hope you will take your star home, put it in your bag, on your fridge, bathroom mirror or computer monitor. I hope that you'll keep that word with you throughout the year, seeing if you can incorporate it into your conversation with God.

You will then be invited to pray with this word often.

to listen and look for it in our community.

And we will keep looking to the stars, all the stars, all the light, that God sends to pull us closer to Christ, at Epiphany and all year long.

As the basket is passed around, we will sing a Taize song: The Lord is my light.. a simple song that is repeated over and over, a way of leading us into prayer and focussing on God.

So when the basket reaches you, reach in, without looking, if you can and grab a star. Don't go picking a word you really like – just grab a random star and pass on the basket.

Please remain seated.

Let's sing..

**The Lord is my light,  
My light and salvation:  
In God I trust,  
in God I trust.**

You all should have a star word now.

Some of you may be delighted, some intrigued, some disappointed. I want to invite you to let God speak to you through this word. ponder what significance this word might have in your life, and how God might be speaking to you through it. Expect to be challenged, stretched. Expect God to lead you to places you never expected through this word!

Let's pray:

God, we acknowledge that we are not always ready to receive your gifts for us.

You have given us a star word to help our searching bring us closer to you.

Help us to be open to the gift that you offer us now through our star word.

We acknowledge that we do not fully understand what this word might mean for our prayer life and our walk with you, but we receive it from you with gratitude and pray that your Spirit will enable us to live into our word with intention and faithfulness.

Amen.