

“FRESH STARTS: I - CHOOSING A DIFFERENT WAY”

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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EPIPHANY SUNDAY

Matthew 2:1-12

A couple of weeks ago, we almost had a catastrophe around here. You know what happened? We couldn't find the nativity scene. It was time to put it out here in the sanctuary, and it was nowhere to be seen. I knew where it was supposed to be, and arrived here that Sunday morning all ready to set it out on the communion table. But despite help from many, many people, it could not be found - anywhere - and I mean anywhere . . . in closets, in Sunday School rooms, in the basement, the attic - anywhere. Then, just when I had resigned myself to the fact that there would be no nativity scene in our church for Christmas 2012, it was found! I'm almost embarrassed to tell you where it was found, because it was exactly where it should have been - but many people just didn't see it there.

Thank goodness the Wise Men had a bright star in the sky to guide them to what they were searching for on that first Christmas! And thank goodness they saw it, and headed straight in that direction. It was a long journey for these seekers, but make it they did.

Their first stop was Jerusalem and there they shared with others their search for the newborn King of the Jews. King Herod, who was on the throne at the time, caught wind of their search, and he, as the scripture says, “was frightened.” Why? Because this child was a threat to him and his power, and he wanted to gain control of the situation as fast as he could.

He learned from the scholars that the scriptures foretold that the baby would be born in Bethlehem of Judea, and after learning that, he called the wise men to appear before him. Acting like he was interested in the infant king and wanting to bow down before him as well, Herod told the wise men what he had heard about the location of the birth, and sent them on, instructing them to let him know when they found the baby, so that he then would go and worship him as well.

So, leaving Herod, the wise men continued on their journey, still following that star, until they arrived at the place where Jesus was, along with his mother. Then, with gratitude, awe, and thanksgiving, they laid their precious gifts before Him - gold, frankincense and myrrh.

It was an awe-inspiring moment in their lives. It's the event we celebrate on

Epiphany Sunday, because Epiphany means “appearing,” or “revelation,” or “beholding something in a new way.” On Epiphany we celebrate the revealing of Jesus as the Christ to these wise men, and their beholding something in a new way.

That moment with Jesus changed everything for these seekers of truth. One pastor speculated that when the wise men returned home everything look and felt different to them because of their encounter with the Christ child.

Well, one thing is for sure. They understood that this baby was indeed something very special, and they also figured out that Herod had been playing them for fools. He had no more intention of coming to worship Jesus than the man in the moon- no, he wanted to know where Jesus was so he could kill him, and remove any threat to his power.

So, getting up from their worship of the Holy Child, the three wise men went back home by another way.

Now clearly, when the scripture says that the wise men went home by another way, it was meant literally - they physically went home another way so as to avoid Herod and his henchmen.

But I want to suggest something else this morning - for you and for me - as we, figuratively at least, walk away from the manger of Bethlehem into a new year, back into life as usual. I want to suggest that, like the wise men, we stand at a crossroads. We have a choice to make. Do we go back the same way, business as usual, or do we let the Christ of Christmas, the baby of Bethlehem, lead us into newness of life?

The poet W. H. Auden in a time of World War years ago, wrote a long poem called “For the Time Being,” and in it he talked about how easily all of us seem to walk away from the manger after Christmas is over, and back into everyday life, as it was before. Here are a couple of sentences from that work -

“Well, so that is that . . . we’ve gotten through Christmas once again, perhaps in spite of ourselves . . . Once again, as in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed to do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility. So, it’s back to the old world we left behind for just a bit on Christmas Eve . . .”

(W. H. Auden, “For the Time Being,” 1941-42)

Sadly, Auden is right. We can go back to the old world we left behind for just a bit on Christmas, or like the wise men, we can choose to go a different way. And that, I think, is the invitation of Epiphany.

Having seen God’s love poured out for us in Jesus Christ, you and I can choose to live differently now in this new year. The secular world might call these

“new year’s resolutions” but those are largely based on willpower. What I’m talking about this morning, is a decision to live differently because of Jesus Christ’s power and love in our lives.

Think about it for a moment. How might God be calling you to live differently this year?

Perhaps God is calling you to go a different way on your faith journey. As John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was fond of asking, “How is it with your soul?” Right now? At this moment? Are you where you want to be in terms of growing closer to the Lord, stronger in the Word, more active in terms of sharing your faith and works?

If not, perhaps God is calling you to try a different way this year. Why not think about joining a Sunday School class, or a short-term study? Think about going to a Men’s Breakfast, or ManFood Man Talk. Consider going on the Women’s Retreat or Men’s Retreat - there are still spaces available.

Start a prayer journal, or a gratitude journal. Dedicate time each day to be quiet and alone with God. Find a spiritual mentor or friend. There are a million different ways to grow closer to God - but you must be the one to make that journey. No one can do it for you. As one wise person put it, “The star shines in the night sky. It is only a sign. Like the Magi, we have the choice to journey toward it or stay stuck wherever we are.” (On-line, “Lindy Nuggets,” DeJong)

My friends, please do not stay stuck in a stagnant faith relationship with your Lord and Savior. Follow where He leads you, take the opportunity and choose a different way this year.

So, for some, it will be a different way to faith, but perhaps for others, the different way might be health related. That surely fills the pages of many New Year’s resolutions, but would it make it different if you chose to do something for your health because you are sacred in the eyes of the God who created you, and who sent Jesus for you? Might it change the way you look at exercise, or weight loss, or trying to stop smoking or drinking, or looking for ways to lower your stress? Might remembering the love God poured on you in the Christ of Christmas enable you to live differently this year - remembering that you are God’s beloved as well?

And there may be others here who need to go a different way with their attitude this year. Maybe your life has been swept up in anger, or bitterness, or hopelessness, or fear. Maybe the ways of our world have got you down, and you’ve given up, because you think nothing’s ever going to change. Might remembering the God who broke through all the barriers that humankind could put up in Jesus the Christ enable you to believe that you can change - that life can be better?

Let Christmas infect your attitude - go a different way into this new year - go with confidence that things can get better, that nothing is impossible with God.

And I think there may be some people here this morning that need to go a different way this year with their relationships. A lot of people are struggling with relationships with spouses, children, employers, co-workers, neighbors. Life is hard sometimes, and human relationships are complicated and difficult at times, and sometimes they are so hard and difficult that they drain the life out of you.

Perhaps your prayer this year can be that God will light the way for you to live differently in your relationships with others. That God will make a way for reconciliation, and understanding, and peace. It's never too late to make changes and start over - look at what God did for us in Christ Jesus.

When, time and again, humanity turned its back on God, broke covenant after covenant, God, in the event that changed all of life, sent His only begotten Son into the world. It was, in a way, a starting over for us - a way to see how much God loves us, and how all things are possible with Him - even new beginnings.

My dear friends, in Christmas, we have experienced a miracle. We came to this place, and we worshiped, and hugged, and listened to the great story, and sang the great songs, and lit beautiful candles - and it was wonderful, and awe-inspiring and holy. Let's not let it go. Let's carry it with us into the new year, and let us let it make a difference in our lives.

Let's go from this place choosing a different way. Let's live differently because of His coming into our lives and into our world.

If you're not sure what to do or where to go, I have one final invitation for you - Ask him. Ask him, and He will surely guide you to the life He wants you to live. And He will walk with you every step of the way. Thanks be to God.

Amen.