

January 5, 2014
Epiphany 2014

My New Year's Resolution
Matthew 12:1-12

Opening words: Today, we begin a new liturgical season, Epiphany. It is one of those words that are only used by preachers and theologians. Epiphany means "manifestation." During this season, we celebrate the fact that Christ came for all people, both Jews and Gentiles. Sin has no exclusive hold on either group. All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. The symbol of the season is the Magi. Generally speaking, they were Gentiles who came to worship Jesus.

Tradition is rich in information about the Magi. The Bible never gives us an exact number of Magi. There was an old Orthodox tradition that said there were twelve of them. Today, it is universally accepted that there were three. Tradition tells us their names, descriptions and gifts. Melchior was an old gray-headed man with a long white beard. He brought the gold - the gift for a king. Caspar was young and beardless. He brought the frankincense - the gift for a priest. The myrrh, the gift for one who was going to die, was brought by Balthasar, who was swarthy. This traditional information leads us to this morning's Gospel lesson, Matthew 2:1-12. Let me call this message *My New Year's Resolution*.

Matthew 12:1-12¹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹²

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

What is your New Year's resolution? People have been asking that question for a long time. Did you know, the history of making New Year's resolutions is older than the faith itself? Many believe it can be traced back to the year 153 BC. Janus, a mythical king of early Rome, was placed at the head of the calendar. With two faces, Janus could look back on past events and forward to the future. The Romans made promises to Janus to make the future better than the past. By the way, the month of January is named after Janus.

What is your New Year's resolution? According to USA.gov, these are the ten most popular New Year's resolutions. Maybe you have made one of them?

1. Lose weight
2. Help others
3. Quit smoking
4. Get a better education
5. Get a better job
6. Save Money
7. Get fit
8. Eat healthy food
9. Manage stress
10. Manage debt

Don't feel bad if you didn't make a New Year's resolution. According to the University of Scranton, Journal of Clinical Psychology, only 45% of Americans make a New Year's resolution. Most New Year's resolutions are only maintained for one week.

I am not one who makes New Year's resolutions regularly. For years, people have asked me, "What is your New Year's solution?" Annually, I have given the same answer, "I just want to be a better person." I know my answer is vague, but has some merit. I always strive to be a better person. I try to learn something new every day. I try to become a better communicator every day. When I travel, I always select a place that is new to me. I try to maintain every relationship in my life. (I have some work to do with Dan Tucker!) However, this year was different. This year I made a New Year's resolution. This is it.

This year I am going to take my discipleship more seriously.

The reason is simple. God willing, this year our family is going to grow. I have always taken my parenting seriously, and I am going to take my grand-parenting seriously. My prayer is that she out-lives me. Listen to what I am about to say. My legacy is suddenly very important to me. I do not want my granddaughter to remember me as a silly old man. I want her to remember me as more.

I want to be remembered me as kind and loving. I want to be remembered as patient. But, most of all, I want her to remember me as a man of God. How do you want to be remembered? The message for today is for anyone who wants to take their discipleship more seriously. If you want to take your discipleship more seriously, say, "**Amen!**"

On this Epiphany Sunday, we find ourselves in the second chapter of Matthew. The characters in the story are not strangers. You know the Biblical story and you know the song. Their arrival does not just signal the end of Christmas, a time to take down the tree. Their arrival reminds us that Jesus came to save all people, both Jews and Gentiles. In other words, Jesus came to save us! There wasn't an ounce of Jewish blood in their bodies. This year, when I read their story, I saw something new. This year, when I looked at their story, I saw a model of true discipleship. Look at their actions. First, **they bowed down**. In other words, they humbled themselves. Second, **they opened up** their gifts. Those gifts were not cheap. They were expensive. In other words, they brought their very best to God. Third, **they changed** their route home. The faith was changing the way they had normally done things. Their story is the story of true discipleship. It is those three things I want to look at today before we go to the Communion table. So if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

I love this story: Shortly after Booker T. Washington took over the presidency of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, he was walking in an exclusive section of town when he was stopped by a wealthy white woman. Not knowing the famous Mr. Washington by sight, she asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping wood for her. Because he had no pressing business at the moment, Professor Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded to do the humble chore she had requested. When he was finished, he carried the logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace. A little girl recognized him, and later revealed his identity to the lady. The next morning, the embarrassed woman went to see Mr. Washington in his office at the Institute and apologized profusely. "It's perfectly all right, Madam," he replied. "Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it's always a delight to do something for a friend." She shook his hand warmly and assured him that his meek and gracious attitude had endeared him and his work to her heart. Not long afterward she showed her admiration by persuading some wealthy acquaintances to join her in donating large sums of money to the Tuskegee Institute. Isn't it amazing how God can use a humble person? Do the people in your life consider you humble?

They bowed down

First, the Magi bowed down. Look at the text with me. The entire story revolves around a group of tired travelers, the Magi. Who are the Magi? Many have been trying to answer that question for years. It will have to suffice to say they were spiritual astrologers. By studying the stars, they had discovered that the king of the Jews had been born. Their knowledge of the stars is impressive, but their understanding of the scriptures is limited. They assumed the king would be born in the capital, Jerusalem. The scriptures tell us he would be born in Bethlehem.

That single mistake ignited the insecurities of the present king, Herod. However, it is Herod who sends them to the Christ child. When they arrive, we are told they bowed down and worshipped Jesus. (Verse 11) What does it mean to bow down? It means the Magi, with all their worldly influence and power, were humbling themselves before Christ. If you want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, then you must humble yourself before him. How humble are you? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Money is always a challenge in the life of the church. We are no exception. Because money comes in unequally, we never know where we stand until the end of the year. I am convinced churches like to cry 'poor' because churches generally don't want to do anything. I am so pleased we met the budget. In other words, all the bills are paid. I am so pleased we paid all of our district and conference apportions in 2013. They totaled \$57,860. However, in my opinion, the best part of the report is the fact they we raised \$5017 extra for missions. Generosity is the sign of a growing church. (Don't get too excited. We started over again on New Year's Day at zero.) Do the people in your life consider you a generous person?

They opened up

Second, the Magi opened up. Look at the text with me again. The Magi didn't just bow down. They also offered him gifts. You know the gifts. There was gold, frankincense and myrrh. Each one of the gifts reveals something about the life that Jesus is going to live. The gold was a gift for a king. The frankincense was a gift for a priest. The myrrh was a gift for one who was going to die. The gifts reveal the Magi's insight, but the gifts also reveal the Magi's generosity. One of the great secrets of the Bible is, what happened to the gifts? Many believed they were sold to pay for life, because life has always been expensive. The Magi gave their very best. If you want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, then you must give him your very best. How much of your life are you giving? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

They changed

Third and finally, the Magi changed. Look at the text with me one final time. The time came for the Magi to go home. They had experienced the king of the Jews and were ready to go home. They were prepared to go home in the same way that they came. There is no reason to believe they would have changed their itinerary, but they have a dream that warns them to go home a different way. Verse 12 says, "*They returned home by another route.*" Jesus had changed their normal way, and they tried a new way. How much is Jesus changing your life? Are you willing to try something new?

On New Year's Eve day, a friend texted me something call "*10 Ways to Good Health.*" May be she was trying to tell me something? They come from Tesh.com. You can take them as New Year's resolutions.

- 1. Less alcohol, more tea**
- 2. Less processed, more fresh**
- 3. Less salt, more vinegar**

4. **Less sugar, more fruit**
5. **Less eating, more chewing**
6. **Less words, more actions**
7. **Less greed, more giving**
8. **Less worry, more sleep**
9. **Less driving, more walking**
10. **Less anger, more laughter**

I appreciate her passing those things on to me, because I want to live a long time. However, I am not just planning on living a long time in this world. I am planning on living for eternity in heaven! As a matter of fact, I am going to start doing today what I am going to be doing in eternity. This year, I am going to do three things. First, I am going to **bow down!** I am going to make Jesus the top priority in my life. Second, I am going to **open up!** Jesus deserves my very best. Third and finally, I am going to **change** my ways. I am going to let the faith alter my life. Maybe God wants me to do something new? Jonathan Edwards once wrote, "*Resolution One: I will live for God. Resolution Two: If no one else does, I still will.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"