

“Making This Year Different” SHINE LIGHT! Sermon Series

Homily by Rev. Larry Young



Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

In one of the readings at our choir’s Christmas concert last month, Rev. Patricia quoted the line “This Christmas will be different.” I couldn’t help but think how fitting it would be to apply that thought to this Sunday’s message: “this year will be different.” As we begin a new year, we’re very aware of how much we need to make 2019 different from the past few years. Issues like climate change, income inequality, our polarized society, and ongoing discrimination of various types, to name only a few, cry out for our attention. And chances are, most of us can think of some changes we would do well to make in our own lives—ways we hope 2019 will be different in us. So this Sunday as we move from Christmas, the celebration of Christ’s incarnation, to Epiphany, the celebration of Christ’s light shining out into the world, it is fitting for us to consider how we can help make this a different year. How can we make light shine on our world, and on our lives?

The story of the Magi coming to Bethlehem is the scripture for Epiphany Sunday. Because they made this pilgrimage, we know their new year was different. Matthew tells us that as they departed they “left for their own country by another road,” which not only indicates they were evading King Herod but also that they went out with a new revelation of God. They returned home to “shine light” where they lived.

But why did the Magi bother to make the long and arduous journey to Bethlehem in the first place? We know the star they sighted was a sign to them of a potentially significant event—perhaps the birth of a great person. And as astrologers it was their business to call attention to significant heavenly signs. Somehow they knew that this star was one they could not ignore if they were to remain faithful to their vocation. They needed to know what cosmic knowledge and meaning it was pointing to. So they made the long journey to Bethlehem where they witnessed God’s new revelation in the birth of the Christ child. They realized then that divine light had shined on them, and now they were bearers of that light as they departed.

The problem with the Christmas good news of Christ’s coming is that most of us are too familiar with it. We don’t bow in awe and wonder at the manger like the shepherds and magi because we’ve been there year after year for as long as we’ve been alive. We still may see it as a meaningful story. But after so many Christmases it has lost its cutting edge and can fall into a taken-for-granted category. We don’t bow and worship because we’re past all that now. So we are no longer grabbed by the realization of what Christ’s coming means as the God of all creation has chosen to be revealed in human form alongside of us. In Christ we learn how much we are loved, in the face of what the world tells us. In Him we are given the pattern for living that will bring us true joy and meaning. We learn that our lives are meant to matter, and that we are called to help carry out God’s will for our world. Light has shined on us, and we in turn are commissioned to be light-bearers. That is meaning that should touch us deeply and shape our lives.

To be sure, we cannot come to all this cosmic awareness as freshly as the Magi. But we would do well to try to put ourselves in their shoes and ask that God would deepen our sense of who we are as those who take the name Christian. What does it mean for us to be God’s beloved, those on whom light has shined, and those called to make a difference in our world in God’s name?

Now in this season of resolutions we may conclude that we just need to resolve to live out our faith more intentionally. And yes, there can be value in setting goals for doing this. Last Sunday’s Covenant Renewal service may have provided this opportunity for you. But you know the problem with new years resolutions: too quickly they get lost in the ongoing busyness of living. If we are going to make this year different, I believe it

will happen because we are different in some ways. When we go deeper into what Christ's light means for us, that will be reflected in how we choose to think and act.

Some of you know I was afflicted with a bout of sciatica this past August and September. I had always enjoyed good health and saw myself as in good shape physically, until one day, out of the blue, I felt those debilitating pains running down one leg. Obviously, something was amiss, and my status-quo image of my physical shape was called into question. I'm glad to report that several weeks of physical therapy sessions managed to put things right again. But now the changes that the therapy produced in my body have to be maintained if I want to stay pain free. In my last session with my therapist I asked her how long I would need to continue the physical exercises for my therapy at home; and her answer was, "For the rest of your life."

In a similar vein, if we want the way we live out our faith to be different, some changes in our spiritual condition are likely going to be needed—changes that endure. Rather than seeing Jesus' example and teachings as a nice ideal, we will need to grow to the point where they give real meaning and guidance to our lives. Instead of wondering whether we matter as persons, we need to grow in our sense of being God's beloved sons and daughters. We will need to deepen our sense that God really has called us personally to make a difference through our lives.

Here I think the magi point the way. It was their hunger for a deeper sense of divine meaning that moved them to follow the star, without knowing what they would find. The point was they were willing to make the journey; and their lives were changed as a result.

So the matter before us is not only how we will resolve to make this year different, but what will we do to deepen our spiritual lives that will undergird any difference we will make. What will that mean for you? Do you need to give a higher priority to worship? to Bible reading? to getting more involved in service activities? to finding other spiritual growth opportunities? to even spending more time just meditating on what your faith means to you? Perhaps your first New Year's resolution will be to give thought to where you will choose to begin.

We begin a new year with the sacrament of Communion because it reminds us how fully and lovingly the light of Christ has shined on us. Facing his own crucifixion, Jesus offered us the gift of himself to sustain and strengthen us in shining light where we live. As you come to the table, then, let this sacrament inspire and encourage you to make this a different New Year. Amen.