

Sermon
The Epiphany
St. Andrew's, Methuen
January 2, 2022
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Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7,10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

Early January is the time our culture encourages us to make Resolutions for the New Year—to figure out how we want 2022 to better reflect our hopes and dreams.

But here's the thing: it's hard for the same old me to create a different new me. Sure, I want to be more loving and peaceful in 2022—but how does the old me summon up the courage and discipline it will take to grow in new directions?

Maybe you've noticed the recent TV commercial with Matt Damon who reminds us of the ancient saying: "**Fortune favors the brave**".

But if we are too afraid to undergo the necessary inner change then we should not expect to see much meaningful outer change. Instead, we'll use our energy, not to evolve our lives, but to protect them.

And what's true of us as individuals is what becomes true of us as a church.

You'll remember my account of leading a vestry retreat years ago in which we ran into this same fundamental problem. We all agreed we wanted to be agents of change and help our church to grow—to grow in size, yes, but also to grow in faithfulness and involvement in the world.

Yet, we also had to admit we don't want our church to change, because we like it just the way it is—problems and all.

After all, it doesn't take a genius to know that when strangers start sitting in MY pew and telling us how they used to do church in Boston, the church I love will change into something I may not love nearly as much.

It's easier to live trapped in the past with a shrunken vision of the Realm of God, because it demands nothing new of us.

Therefore, our resolutions are often DOA—dead on arrival—as we settle for living the same old tired life we've always lived.

We notice today a different example we are given by the Wise Men.

When they see a new stellar configuration in the western sky portending the birth of a royal baby, they willingly step out of their comfort and safety to journey to Jerusalem, to the palace of the King. And after conferring with Herod, he orders them to return to him to pass on whatever they've learned about this so-called royal child.

But after their experience of worshipping and giving their gifts to the Christ Child, they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they leave for their own country by another road."

Having been transformed on the inside by their encounter with the New Order in Jesus, they can now resist on the outside the old order of Herod.

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Novelist William Faulkner famously said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

This is true as long as we spend most of our mental energy ruminating on the past—both the bad and the good things. How much time do we spend every day re-wounding ourselves for things we did in the past and hating others for things they did to us in the past?

It is also not helpful to spend a lot of time thinking about the good things we imagine we did in the past, because it keeps us locked up in the past with our proud ego.

The truth is we are not competent enough to judge ourselves, just as we are not competent to judge others. **To spend our time judging others and ourselves is proof that we are still sucking the poison from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. That's why Jesus says to us, "Do not judge" and models for us what a non-judgmental life looks like.**

He doesn't condemn the woman taken in adultery or the tax collector who has oppressed the people, but instead invites them into a new future of freedom and service, living inside the mercy of God.

That's why I suggested on Christmas Eve that we experiment with the **practice of consigning our past to the mercy of God**. Let God sort out what really happened and what responsibility we and others bear for what happened.

If we are to let God to do a new thing in our lives in 2022, we must consign 2021 and every year before, to the mercy of God.

So when you catch yourself caught in a familiar negative feedback loop about the past, gently say to yourself, **"I consign my past to the mercy of God"**, and then turn your attention to what is happening right in front of you in that moment. See, hear, smell, taste, and touch what is happening now and love what is.

First letter of John says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love."

Then Apostle Paul says, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself."

1 Peter 1:3 says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

When we consign the past to the mercy of God, we are free to follow Christ into our future in God.

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The Christmas card says "Wise men still seek him". What Jesus manifests is an even deeper truth: In Christ God is still seeking us who are tired and heavy laden—tired and heavy laden with the burden of our past that hold us in bondage.

Here is the promise of the Good News: As we allow Christ to set us free from the past on the inside, we will experience a new world on the outside—even in the midst of pandemic and economic and social uncertainty.

In as much as our hearts are kept open to living now inside the mercy of God, then God will see to it that this year will really be NEW.

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