

CHRISTMAS 2 2010 – NEW YEAR’S

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

NEW WAYS FOR NEW DAYS

New Year’s always brings resolutions to do new things ---

- sometimes in new ways.

Apparently, the Babylonians were the first people to observe “New Year’s Day” – and they were the first to begin the practice of making New Year Resolutions.

About 4000 years ago, the most popular ones was the return of borrowed farm equipment. Back then, the New Year coincided with the first day of spring – a time of new beginnings – thus the return of farm equipment was important.

But in 46 B.C., Julius Caesar started a new ordering of years in a calendar he humbly named after himself – the Julian Calendar – and arbitrarily chose January 1 as the first day of the year.

Be that as it may –

Whether a springtime or winter observance, the start of a new year has always been a occasion for **NEW WAYS IN NEW DAYS**.

In our day – there tends to be a list of new year resolutions that jockey for the #1 position on the Top Ten List. You may just find your own among them:

- Spend more time with family and friends
- Get fit
- Lose the bulge
- Quit smoking
- Enjoy life more
- Get out of debt
- Quit heavy drinking
- Learn something new
- Help others
- Get organized.

On Wednesday – January 6 – it will be the 12th day of Christmas. It is also the day we recall the visit of the Magi from Persia – current day Iraq, and coincidentally the location of ancient Babylon.

The date of December 25 was an arbitrary date for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. (*church chose it in the mid 4th century*) It was meant to coincide with the first day of winter, when in the longest day of darkness “a light shall shine.”

Yet, many scholars point to the fact that shepherds were out in the fields watching their sheep as an indication that the birth of Jesus probably took place in the spring rather than winter.

If so, we have men from ancient Babylon presenting gifts to Jesus and taking a new route home at the beginning of what was for them, a new year.

The simple lesson we can make here is that once you have been to the manger, whatever the date, it is hard to go back to the same things in the same way. For us – as believers – it’s not so much the new year that changes our path – but the new life; the life of the Savior-baby that changes everything.

Back in 1988, James Taylor released an album called “Never Die Young.” On it was a song about the Magi entitled “Home by Another Way.”

HOME BY ANOTHER WAY

Words & Music by Timothy Mayer and James Taylor / CBS Records Inc.

Those magic men the Magi
Some people call them wise
Or oriental, even kings
Well anyway, those guys;
They visited with Jesus
They sure enjoyed their stay
Then warned in a dream of King Herod’s scheme
They went home by another way.

Yes, they went home by another way
Home by another way
Maybe me and you can be wise guys too
And go home by another way
We can make it another way
Safe home as they used to say
Keep a weather eye to the chart on high
And go home another way.

Steer clear of royal welcomes
Avoid a big “to-do”
A king who would slaughter the innocents
Will not cut a deal for you.
He really, really wants those presents
He’ll comb your camel’s fur
Until his boys announce they’ve found trace amounts

Of your frankincense, gold and myrrh.

Time to go home by another way
Home by another way
You have to figure the gods saying, "play the odds"
And go home another way.
We can make it another way
Safe home as they used to say
Keep a weather eye to the chart on high
And go home another way

Home is where they want you now
You can more or less assume that you'll be welcome in the end.
Mustn't let King Herod haunt you so
Or fantasize his features when you're looking at a friend.
Well, it pleases me to be here
And to sing this song tonight
They tell me that life is a miracle
And I figure that they're right.
But Herod's always out there.
He's got our cards on file.
It's a lead pipe cinch, if we give an inch,
Old Herod likes to take a mile.

It's best to go home by another way
We got this far to a lucky star
But tomorrow is another day.
We can make it another way
Safe home as they used to say.
Keep a weather eye to the chart on high
And go home another way.

James Taylor sang,

***"Maybe me and you can be wise guys too,
and go home by another way."***

That's what I want you to think about – and pray about today...

...as you come to Communion,

...and then renew your covenant – your promise – to offer yourself completely to God.

What is that *other way* home that affirms that something about loving the child in the manger has changed us?

I've actually been giving this a lot of thought, lately....

...well, at least since we began re-evaluating our priorities in life, and realigning them with our faith in Christ -

- back during our stewardship series, *ENOUGH*,
- and just this past month with our Advent challenge to *worship fully, spend less, give more and love all.*

And all that was triggered by my reading of the huge survey and inventory I told you about –done by the folks at Willow Creek Community Church – and hundreds of other churches. They called it REVEAL – because the findings were quite a revelation about the life of faith and discipleship.

It has been a challenge for me, both personally and as a pastor and spiritual leader.

At this point, I am not sure how we might make use of this across our congregation, but I do feel led to share with you today four descriptions of discipleship.

Think about them –

- figure out which one describes you
- and then begin to think about making a commitment to move to the next level of commitment in your relationship to Jesus Christ, and his church.

The first is *THE DISTANT DISCIPLE.*

If you are a distant disciple, you are someone who has made a commitment to Jesus as your Savior, your Lord.

You have been baptized, joined a church, probably were initially involved with some enthusiasm,...

... but for some reasons you can identify and some you cannot, you have become distant from God's claim on your life:

You worship sporadically.

You do not serve in any way that helps build the Kingdom.

You are not engaged in any regular Bible study or group.

And would never think about filling out one of those annual pledge cards.

You know you love Jesus, and want to love him more,...

...but you keep your distance.

The second level of commitment is *THE DEDICATED DISCIPLE.*

(This is where you were before you became distant!)

This is where you are when you make that excited and hopeful dedication of your life to Jesus:

You want to serve.

You want to grow spiritually.

You have answered affirmatively to the membership vows to support the church – Christ’s body –

-by your prayers, your presence, your gifts,
your service and your witness.

In short, you have dedicated your life, as scripture and the communion liturgy state = “*as a living sacrifice*” to God.

If you do not act on your dedication, you become distant...

**But if you decide to move forward in your commitment,
you become *THE DETERMINED DISCIPLE*.**

The Determined Disciple embraces a thoughtful, intentional spiritual path, surrounded by God’s grace, which will lead you to complete devotion to Christ.

The Determined Disciple worships regularly –

- even if there’s a guest preacher
- even if they have to sing “In the Bleak Midwinter”
- even if it is too cold or too hot where they sit.

The Determined Disciple – at least here at Divine Street – attends Sunday school regularly – or at least a Bible study with others.

The Determined Disciple is learning that prayer is more than talking to God – it is thoughtful reflection and listening for God’s direction.

The Determined Disciple welcomes the discipline of giving, makes an annual financial commitment, and is on the path to tithing by giving proportionally.

The Determined Disciple knows his/her spiritual gifts, and uses them by serving in meaningful, Kingdom-building ministry

– both in and through the church, and in the community.

This path of growth leads to what I believe is God’s desire for each one of us: *THE DEVOTED DISCIPLE*.

If you are a devoted disciple:

You are in **worship weekly** unless illness or travel takes you away.

You are **delving deeper into the vast riches of the scripture** by continuing to study
– even on your own.

Perhaps, you have answered a call to lead or teach..

...(which by the way, is how you really learn).

If you are a Devoted Disciple, you experience great joy in giving. You understand that everything you have is really God's – and you want to give to the Church – the body of Christ in this world – each year.

You have a rich and deepening spiritual life, and you are serving Christ in the world, claiming the reality of God's Kingdom as your vision for doing so.

CLOSING:

Some people don't like to ask for directions.

Apparently, the Magi were able to swallow their pride and do just that. Herod's experts pointed the way to Bethlehem.

But after they have been to see the child and present their gifts, they went back another way.

It was a new day, so it demanded a new way.

Maybe you don't like to ask for directions, either.

In fact – a lot of us church folks prefer to give others our own directions...

But the challenge for you and me is to use a little GPS:

God's Positioning System.

Where are we?...

The Devoted Disciple?

The Determined Disciple?

The Dedicated Disciple?

The Distant Disciple?

Figure out where you are, and get moving.

If you are at a bit of a distance right now – and many of us probably are – I remind you of the words of James, we find in the New Testament: ***Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.***

You see – not one part of this journey of discipleship is left for you to make alone.

Remember Heaven's name for the baby?

Emmanuel = God is with us!

And remember what they named the child?

Jesus = God saves!

When we come to accept that truth as reality for our lives....

....then it is a New Day....

...and that calls for a New Way.