

Pastor Karen's Message – 1/7/2015

New Year's Resolutions 2015

Happy New Year! Have you made any New Year's resolutions yet? Better yet - do you remember any of last year's resolutions? I've discovered that when it comes to New Year's resolutions we can get quite creative and even funny. Here a few good ones I have come across:

1. I resolve to stop procrastinating ... soon!
2. I will use my treadmill for something other than a place to hang my jacket.
3. I will not sit at the kitchen table in my PJ's all day. Instead, I will move my computer to my bedroom.
4. I will drive by a fitness center at least once a week.
5. I will give up smoking and chocolate and a bunch of other words.

These amusing New Year's resolution tickle our funny bone because they express the tension between the very real and very deep longing of the human heart to embrace a new beginning and to experience a positive change with how absolutely difficult it is to do so.

As we begin the New Year, as we hope for a time of transformation, let's walk through the story of the visit of the Wise Men to see if they have any unexpected gifts for us that might inspire meaningful resolutions that lead to real change.

It seems to me that the first gift of the Wise Men for us is that God broke into their world through their everyday life. Most scholars agree that the Magi were astrologers. They searched the heavens for a living. It was their vocation and as they searched the heavens they saw a 'star at its rising' which to them was a sign of the birth of a new ruler.

Isn't it good news that God meets us where we are – in our own context? The Magi didn't have to do something strange or perform unusual rituals; they just had to pay attention.

You know, Moses that towering figure from the Old Testament was just going about his regular job watching his father-in-law's sheep when he saw the burning bush, but he was paying attention.

One of my all time favorite quotes is from Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "Earth is crammed with heaven. Every bush is aflame with the fire of God, but only those who see take off their shoes. The rest just pick the berries." God met the Wise Men in the context of their day to day life. We can be sure that God will meet us in the context of our everyday life. Here is our first resolution from the Wise Men for 2015 CULTIVATE EYES THAT SEE GOD'S PRESENCE IN OUR LIVES.

Another unexpected gift from the Magi is the reminder that perceiving God's presence results in some kind of journey. And so often this journey takes us from the familiar and comfortable into the unknown and uncomfortable.

For the Wise Men it was up on camels headed west; for Moses it was a journey that covered many miles but it also required him to face his past.

In 1981, Karen Olson was a marketing executive who developed promotional campaigns for consumer products. One morning, on her way to a meeting, she saw a homeless woman, someone she'd seen over and over again on her way to work.

She decided to buy a sandwich for the woman. The stranger accepted the sandwich but asked for something else - a moment to be heard, to be comforted, and to be considered as more than a mere statistic on a cold street corner.

Soon, Karen and her two young sons began frequent trips to New York to hand out sandwiches to the homeless. As she came to know some of the city's homeless people, she began to understand the profound loss and disconnection that homelessness causes. That understanding turned into an enduring commitment.

The First Interfaith Hospitality Network

Olson learned that there were hundreds of homeless people, including families, in her home community of Union County, New Jersey.

She turned to the religious community for help, convinced that there were many who shared her concern and that together they could do what they couldn't do alone. Within ten months, eleven area congregations came forward to provide hospitality space within their buildings. The local YMCA agreed to provide showers and a day center for families. A car dealer discounted a van.

RESOLUTION # 2 NURTURE AN APPETITE FOR ADVENTURE!

This next gift of the Wise Men to our New Year we may not want to open. It is this: The God inspired journey frequently takes us through and comes out of some of the darkest times and events of our lives. King Herod, a ruthless tyrant, is mentioned five times in these twelve verses. The dark shadow of his reign tries to subvert the quest of the Magi to find the newborn king. Herod's jealousy and false friendship threaten their journey, the child and even their future.

All of the Gospels are clear about the reality of the darkness in the world. And I know that in one way or another we have all experienced the destructive powers that exist in the world and in our own hearts. Sometimes the darkness is external: broken relationships, a scary diagnosis, a death, betrayal of someone you thought a friend, economic reverses. All too often the darkness is internal in our own addictions, poor choices, or despair. But, the Good News of the Gospel is that as sure as the star led the Wise Men through the long nights, the darkness in this world does not overcome the light of God's goodness and grace.

Dark and dangerous forces are real, but God is greater and God's light will not be overcome. Not then. Not now. Not ever.

Many of you know that I was diagnosed with cancer 20 years ago while at seminary. I would not choose to go through that again. The path through that illness was dark and difficult but forged my identity as a Christian and a pastor. I believe God redeemed the darkness I experienced for good. These are words I speak with trembling lips because I know how easy it is to react to tragedy with careless platitudes: it is God's will or every cloud has a silver lining. I do not believe God wills bad things to happen, but I cling to the belief that God is at work to redeem and reconcile all the brokenness and pain in the world. It is after all the very work that the Christ Child comes to do on the cross. And we cannot forget as we travel dark paths that the Gospel of Matthew names the Christ Child "Emmanuel" God with us. The best news is that we do not travel dark paths alone.

Perhaps we can express the third New Year's resolution from the Wise Men this way: REPEAT AS OFTEN AS NECESSARY REJOICE! EMMANUEL IS WITH US!

The next gift from the Magi is that the culmination of the journey is an encounter with Christ. You know, they went first to the palace in Jerusalem. It is where they expected to find the great and powerful. It is where anyone would look for a baby king. Yet, their knowledge and expectations led them astray at this point. Why did they stop following the light of the star? Did

they see the lights of the city of Jerusalem and the grandeur of Herod's fortress? Did the gold plated gates to the Temple blind them? Here is a danger the Magi reveal in being distracted by the lesser lights of this world. I do not mean to suggest that wealth or power are always enemies of our sacred journey – not at all – I only point out that we must never mistake any lesser light for God's guidance. The journey of the Magi was not to culminate in a mansion but in a manger. The newborn king they sought was not in the big city but in the small town, not among the wealthy but born to a poor young couple.

I have so many questions about the Magi. Did they think to garner influence with this rising star of a ruler? Did they think that finding this baby king would be a feather in their cap? What were their motivations or their hopes? The text is silent on that point. But we know this: they knelt down and paid the child homage. Homage means reverence, honor, worship. It is telling that these men – evidently powerful, wealthy men in their own right did not pay King Herod homage and surely a man already a King would deserve or expect it. But in the presence of this baby, this child of poor parents, they kneel and worship and offer costly gifts – yet another thing they did not offer to King yet not so kingly Herod. Their actions tell us that journey's end was greater than they even imagined. One poet speaks about the Word of God – incarnate in a baby mute. Yet the silence of the Word of God is mighty enough to bring the Magi to their knees and the powerful king to cringe in his castle. An encounter with Christ will always amaze and surprise.

During my seminary training I interned in a Chaplaincy program. One day I visited with an elderly African-American woman who was soon to die. She shared her life's story with me about how she grew up in the rural south a child of poor share-croppers. She did not receive much education but she did travel much of the south with a group of gospel singers and now she was getting ready to go home to Jesus. I asked her if I could pray and she said yes, so I took a deep breath – getting ready I suppose to impress her with my eloquence or spirituality – but before I could begin to speak, she was already praying, and oh, did she pray. She thanked God for my life and prayed for the people I would pastor. She prayed and prayed and glory was all around. The weird thing is this: in my memory it is as if I am kneeling on the floor with my head in her lap and her hands on my head. I never knelt in anyone's room on the hospital floor. I would never have put my head in a patient's lap – but that is my memory – because somehow when I encountered her, I encountered Jesus and in Jesus' presence it is right to be kneeling.

The fourth New Year's resolution from the Magi: BE WILLING TO LOOK FOR CHRIST IN THE UNLIKELIEST OF PLACES.

At the end of the text for today we are told that the Wise Men left for their own country by another road. This gift from the Wise Men reminds us that an encounter with Christ leads to transformation.

An encounter with the living God transformed Moses from a fugitive from justice to God's agent of liberation. An encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus transformed Saul into Paul and changed him from passionately persecuting Christians to passionately preaching the Gospel of Christ. Not all of us have such dramatic stories, but God is still in the business of transforming lives.

Most of you know that I had planned on an advance degree in Biology and a career in science. An encounter with Christ at a Women's retreat in the hill country of Texas changed the course of my life. The retreat broke open deep hurts that I had buried and cemented over. The grace I received from the prayers of God's people started a healing process that resulted in my being able to say yes to a call to ministry.

Where do you desire to experience God's grace and transformation this year? Don't we long for a New Year of blessings, a New Year where long held hurts are healed and all our relationships reconciled?

A fifth Wise Men inspired New Year's resolution: EMBRACE GOD'S TRANSFORMATION IN OUR LIVES.

As you anticipate the year ahead remember the Good News of the Gospel, the proclamation of this very season: Emmanuel, God with us, is with us. We do not travel alone and God provides.

In the ancient church, believers sometimes called the Lord's Supper 'food for the journey.' So come to the Table and receive strength for the New Year, come to the Table and receive sustenance for your journey, come to the Table encounter Christ and be transformed.