

Genesis 1:1-5
Mark 1:1-15
“New Year. Some New People. New Ministry?”

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This particular Sunday of the year is always a bit of a mash-up for preachers. On the one hand we have Epiphany. Epiphany, meaning a sudden realization, always falls on the 12th day after Christmas, which was yesterday. On Epiphany we hear the celebrated story of the magi—more famously called the 3 wise men—who saw a star in the east and knew well enough to know they’d probably never see another one like it in their lifetime. “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” they asked King Herod. “We saw his star and have come to worship him.” Matthew records that their question cut Herod to the quick. His face fell white as he realized he wasn’t the only king. These rich travelers had come to his doorstep but only to ask if he could point them in the direction of the other king.

“I don’t know,” Herod tells them, “but when you find him, come and tell me where he is so that I can go and worship him, too.” Something Herod had no intention of ever doing. For Herod, the only option was to find the child and kill him, to eliminate the competition. For the magi the only option was to find the child and worship him, and when they do, we’re told they have a dream, and in their dream they are warned not to return to Herod but to leave for their own country by another road.

In his poem, *The Journey of the Magi*, T.S. Eliot imagines what it must have been like for the magi many years later, long after they have returned home from meeting Jesus. Was their journey to meet the child who had been born a king everything they thought it would be? Was it worthy of a star?

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

We are so used to hearing the story of the magi as a story about birth that we probably don't think of it as also being a story about death, but ask anyone who has ever had a baby or welcomed a baby into their lives and they'll tell you that it can feel like death. You can't just go out whenever you want to anymore, and even when you do go out you have to take half the living room with you. You have to let go of old habits and give up personal space. Literally, if you are the mother, your body morphs into a different shape and image. Sure, like birth, death brings the hope of new possibilities and relationships, but it also brings the pain of losing relationships and the fear of never being the same again. Ask anyone who is leaving the hospital with a newborn or anyone who is leaving the funeral home alone and they'll both tell you, it's impossible to go back out the same way you went in. But if Herod is paranoid and afraid of what he does not know, the magi are curious and humbled by it. If Herod refuses to be influenced and changed by the presence of something new, the magi are completely changed by the sight of this king who is but a poor child.

But the magi are not the only story of the day. Today, on the 13th day after Christmas, we also hear the story of Jesus and his baptism in the River Jordan at the hands of John. All of the gospel writers record this story. Today we have heard Mark's version. Mark's version is, by far, the shortest and least detailed, and this is true not only in how he tells the story of Jesus's baptism but also in how he tells the story of Jesus period. Unlike Matthew, Luke, and John, who all start out talking about Jesus and his birth, Mark makes no mention of Mary or Joseph. He doesn't wrestle with the reality of a pregnant virgin. There is no journey to Bethlehem, no angels in the sky overhead, no shepherds in the fields, no magi. Rather, Mark starts out with what sounds like a summary statement: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." In other words, Mark wants to make clear that what follows is good news. Whether we as readers will agree with Mark, we'll have to read on and decide for ourselves. It's a bit like deciding to go see the movie based on the trailer and the reviews. It looks good, but what if it's not? For Mark, it's already been decided. It's good news. What is so striking, however, is that, having established his opening line, Mark then proceeds to say nothing about Jesus.

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

And then Mark proceeds to introduce the messenger to us, a guy named John. Again, not Jesus, but John. He is out in the wilderness, which makes sense. If you're going to make paths straight you have to start in a place where the paths are going every which way, or where there are maybe no paths at all. So, John is out in the wilderness, and he is calling upon anyone who will listen to repent of their sins, to get off their crooked path and on to a straight path. But how did John get there? Where was he before the wilderness? And who told John it was his job to get into the wilderness and preach change?

We know that John took some heat from the establishment on account of his message. That lots of people heard John's message and received it gladly, but the teachers of the land, who believed it was their job to decide the message, said, "Where do you get off telling us we need to change? Maybe you're the one who needs to change!" And John doesn't disagree. He says, "One who is more powerful than I is coming after me, and I am not worthy to untie his shoe laces. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

You see, it would be a great misconception on all our parts to think that the reason John is out in the wilderness preaching for straighter paths is because John knows how to make paths straight. When it may just be that John is out in the wilderness looking for a straight path himself, and hoping that someone will hear his message and join him in his search, and of course someone does—Jesus. Jesus finds John in the wilderness, John pours his baptism water over the head of Jesus as the Holy Spirit comes down and a voice speaks from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

I have titled this morning's sermon, "New Year. Some New People. New Ministry?" The first two parts are statements. It is a new year and among us there are some new people. I'm talking about us as a church. There are some new people here. Most of us have been here for a while. Generally speaking, churches don't change a whole lot from week to week and year to year. I think it's part of the reason we go to them. And yet, and yet, we'd be silly not to see that we have changed some. Some new people have come to join us in worship and membership here and they have brought new enthusiasm and fresh ideas. And even those of us who think we are the same, we're not. In the past year, we have known the loss of children going off to school, of friends and spouses passing away, of losing jobs or starting jobs again. We have known birth. We have endured long illnesses

and treatments that have changed the way we look and feel about life, family, and our future.

It is a new year and we ourselves are new. These are givens. What's not a given is whether there will be new ministry. John went out into the wilderness to preach his message. Same John. Same wilderness that had always been there, same message about those same crooked paths. What John didn't expect, though, was to find Jesus out in that wilderness, to find someone who shared his concern for the crooked paths and who was not afraid to do the hard and necessary work of making them straight again.

The magi left their country and journeyed across a desert in search of a baby who would be king. Same magi. Same country. They carried with them gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, probably because they figured this baby would be like every other king. But when they got there they discovered Jesus was nothing like every other king. He was poor, his parents were nobodies. In his poem, T.S. Eliot says, "it was all (you might say) satisfactory." And it completely changed their world, upended their thinking about wealth and power and who they wanted to be from now on. They couldn't return home the same way because they weren't the same people anymore.

In the coming weeks, I'm going to share with you a couple new ideas for ministry here at Four Corners in the coming year. One idea is already in motion. It's the remaking of our deacon ministry into one that focuses more on providing care and community to the sick and homebound. The other involves the creation of a whole new ministry of hospitality right here in worship on Sunday mornings, one that will invite all of us to play a part. I hope you'll stay tuned in the coming weeks. For now, let me leave us with this thought: John went into the wilderness not expecting to find Jesus, one powerful enough to make crooked paths and crooked hearts straight again, but he did. The magi went looking for a king and found Jesus, not the one they expected at all. And rather than say, you're not a king, they said, what now? How then can we who have celebrated Christmas and sung with the angels now leave here the same? We cannot. Amen.