

“Shining in the New Year!”

Matthew 2:1 – 12

Isaiah 60: 1 – 5

Rev. Dalene Vasbinder

Does this seem like just another Sunday to you? I suppose that in a way it is. The sun set yesterday as it normally does and rose this morning just the same. Just another day. And also? A new year, a new beginning!

I know, resolutions for the new year have gotten a bad rap lately. After all, why make resolutions that we’re just going to break in a month or two anyway or should have been doing all along in the first place?! It’s just another day. And yet, and yet for me there is something propelling about this New Year’s Day. Time to begin anew. A fresh new year, just like the new Golden Retriever Calendar I received as a Christmas gift, no marks on it yet, ready, waiting for what lies ahead.

“For what lies ahead”. I meant that in a hopeful sense, as in “for all of the possibilities of new beginnings!” and yet, I also realize that this year there is more than a normal amount of apprehension, anxiety, trepidation for this new year with the inauguration of a president, well, how to put it?....like no other. How do we step out into *this* New Year? Because stepping out we must, pulling the covers over our heads for four years is just not an option.

Luckily, people of faith, we have been given a couple of gifts this New Years Day to help guide us on our 2017 journey. The first is the gift of the age old story, the continuation of the Christmas story just read. The story of the three wise guys, the ancient visitors from another land bending down to pay homage to the baby Jesus. I know, I know, we read the story every year, we know it by heart, it’s certainly doesn’t feel like a new gift unwrapped, haven’t been given any new information. But what if we read it with New Year’s lenses? Is there anything about their journey that can guide us as we journey into this New Year? Is there anything that they took with them, that they carried, that could help us in this New Year?

Details about the wise men are sketchy, even what we’ve been given. Their lives before Matthew wrote them into the story are unknown. Still, I would imagine that they were comfortable, maybe even settled into daily routines, family lives, their place as astrologers set in the community. To step outside of the known would require more than a bit of curiosity. A sense of wonder, of marvel at what the world, what life holds had to be present, most likely a part of their profession in the first place. “Star gazers”. Curiosity was needed.

And what about courage? Oh yes, had to have some of that as well! To take that first step, to even think about taking that first step, courage had to be a part of the picture. It had to have been risky. But to not go on the journey, to not follow the star, seek the greater truth, that holds a risk as well, the risk of regret.

And so with curiosity and courage, off they went. “Honey, I’m leaving now. Off to follow a star. See you in a couple of years.” “OK, dear!”

Perseverance had to be present. Perseverance; steadfastness in doing something despite difficulty. I can imagine that there were some memorable days and nights when they knew for certain that they were on the right course, that they at times felt this indeed was the best decision to set out on a course unknown. And I can imagine that the opposite was true as well; ‘what were we thinking?’ Leaving the comfort and security of the known, sand in the eyes and nose and everywhere else, fear of bandits at night, doubting themselves and doubting each other...yet Matthew’s story lends for a good dose of perseverance, three wise men from a distant land, had to have traveled far and they made it, didn’t give up, didn’t turn back.

We know as well from one point in the story, the chapter that includes King Herod’s demand that they tell him when and where they find this infant ruler, and then the warning in a dream to not bow down to Herod’s command, we know from that part of the story that they had to possess a moral compass that guided them, to follow their intuition, what they thought right instead of the whims of one in power.

And perhaps along side of the moral compass, they had to believe in themselves. They each had to believe that the gift that they carried was of value, not to be set aside but to bring to the Light of the world! If they did not recognize that what they carried mattered, would they have been able to set out in the first place?

Curiosity. Courage. Perseverance. Moral strength. Believing in one’s self. I’m sure you could add to this list with your own. Let’s see, one more.....

Of course, through all of this, they had each other. They had each other to surround them on their journey, they had each other to offer and receive encouragement, to check out assumptions or theories, to carry the load when they wearied. No, we don’t really know the number of travelers from the east. The “We 3 Kings” comes from the 3 gifts given. What we do know is that the author of Matthew felt that ‘we’ instead of ‘me’ was important enough, that the gift bearers did not come alone.

It seems to me that the story of the wise men’s journey could indeed be of guidance as we journey into this New Year. To live our days with curiosity and wonder, to hold onto courage even in the face of fear, to persevere – keep on keeping on even when things get rough or don’t go our way, to hold onto what we have learned to be right, to believe in ourselves while at the same time surrounding ourselves with community so that we can check in, get our bearings, bounce ideas and direction off of others, not walk alone. Let’s hold onto this story as a gift for the New Year, a gift for each of us and a gift for us as church together as well!

But, wait! There’s one more! When I began, I mentioned two gifts we as people of faith have been given this New Year’s Day. One is the story of the wise men. The other, for me and I hope for you as well, are the words of not just assurance, not just comfort but words of mission and direction from the reading from Isaiah; “Arise, shine for your light has come!” Although Isaiah

was not referring to Jesus, when we hear these words, we think of the arrival of the Christ child; the light that shines in the darkness and that no darkness can overcome. Each and every new year we are gifted with this scripture in the season of Epiphany; that season when God's light shines fully in the world; when God's presence has been made manifest; felt, known in the birth of a baby born for the world!

But Isaiah's words proclaimed are not just a birth announcement. Did you notice that first word? "Arise!" and then followed by "Shine!" Active verbs! Orders to a community that had been dispersed and didn't quite know where they were headed or how they were to be as God's people. But the prophet Isaiah knew! Arise! Shine! Reflect the light that has come into the world! Not today, not tomorrow but now!

What a gift this is! We as Christ's followers have a task before us; to reflect the light that has come, to shine, to be radiant with the hope, peace, joy and love born into the world!

Now, I've been talking a lot about journeying, we've heard the story of the wise men and their travels, it might seem that I'm implying we need to plan a trip, go on a mission experience, move. But I came across a quote by the great theologian Anne Lamont that reminds us that staying put, shining our light from where we are, is OK. She wrote, "Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining."

Sometimes we try to run all over the island looking for boats to save. Something tells me this might be a year when that will be more than tempting and perhaps even needed at times from some. Yet, Anne's words are a good reminder to stay grounded, to shine always from where we are standing, where we are living, where we are working.

Are you ready for this New Year? I am! Because I know that we are walking out together, shining our light for the world to see. And it's beautiful. No matter what the days, the world, the political struggle ahead may throw our way, hold onto that...that we are together, here for each other, shining our light and it is beautiful!

Amen