

January 1, 2017



"Making Promises We Want to Keep"

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

We have a really big nativity scene at our house. I started collecting the figures years and years ago when I was an exchange student living in the south of France. The custom there is that, in addition to Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, and the angels and shepherds and animals in the stable, all of the people in the village are also part of the scene, bringing the baby Jesus their gifts as well. Now, the custom is that the Three Wise Men and their camels are on their way to Bethlehem from a far away country. They're making a long journey following the light of that special star. So we start them out across the room from the manger scene a few weeks before Christmas and they gradually move around the room until they finally arrive at the place where the baby Jesus has been born. In the church calendar, they arrive on January 6th, the Day of the Epiphany.

All this works its way out in a very special way this year when New Year's Day falls on a Sunday. Today we are celebrating both the Epiphany, which means "the revelation of Jesus" to all the world symbolized by the three wise men who have come from a far off land, and also the beginning of a new year, the Year of our Lord, 2017.

Now, the story of the Magi does not end with them at the manger. The bible story about them adds a very interesting note. Apparently, because they were concerned about what King Herod might be up to, when they had given their gifts and honored the baby Jesus, they didn't just turn around and go back home the way they had come. It says that they set out by another route, on another road. They went another way. They met Jesus and then they turned their lives around.

That, it seems to me, is perhaps the life-giving tie-in for us as well on this first morning of the New Year. What if we, having met the baby Jesus anew, turn our life around?

I'm talking more than the resolutions we typically make about how we're going to live our lives differently in this new year. Usually those resolutions or promises have to do with things like diet and exercise, or spending less time on social media, or just being nicer to our family and friends. All good and healthy things, to be sure.

But John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, suggested something similar yet far deeper for our New Year's worship. Wesley wrote a worship service of Covenant Renewal for the start of the year. This should be a time, he taught, for us to renew our covenant with God, the promises we make to God. A time to start afresh with God—to heal any brokenness within us, to ask forgiveness as needed, and to promise to walk the path of God's way of love and righteousness and peace in this new year.

Wesley knew that once we open our hearts and minds to God's amazing gift of love in the baby Jesus, when we have knelt at that manger ourselves, we find there a God keeping all God's promises to us, our God keeping covenant with us. And we, in turn, are inspired to renew our covenant with God.

How do we do this? Wesley said that this requires five things of us. First, we confide in God. That is, we try to be as honest with God as we can possibly be, about who we really are, how we have lived during this past year, and how we have used or misused the many gifts God has given to us. And where needed, we ask for forgiveness and for the opportunity to start the new year on another path, a new road.

And then we "compose our spirits," that is we get focused and serious about committing ourselves to God. That is spiritual hard work and so, Wesley says, we should claim the covenant. That is, he urges us to grab hold of God's covenant, all God's promises to us. Trust that God will be faithful with all the grace and strength we need in order to keep our promises.

And then he urges us to choose faithfulness, to resolve to be faithful. Once we've thought it all through and committed our minds and hearts to keeping our promises with God, then, Wesley says in effect—get going. Don't go back to the way you were, but having been healed and made new by the love of God, head on out on the new road.

And finally, because we're going to need sustenance for the journey, Wesley says to stay in prayer with God. Keep the channels of communication open between our covenant-making God and the promise-making convictions of our hearts. Trust in God. Rely on God. Return often to God to keep our promises fresh and true.

Covenant renewal goes deeper than the ordinary resolutions and promises we make this day. I'm glad that we can do so together, in worship, and especially in sharing together this holy sacrament which provides us with bread for the journey and the cup of salvation. Let's ask ourselves: How do we want to live out, or live into, our faith this year? Where do we feel God's call on our lives? How might we more deeply love God and love neighbor? What kind of person do we want to be? What does the creation need of us this year? What gift might we offer to the world? Who will we become as we walk down a new path with God in this new year?

To help us stay in close communication with God through prayer, let me close this morning with the prayer of Thanksgiving as found in the Covenant Renewal service for this day:

O God, our Covenant Friend, you have been gracious to us through all the years of our lives. We thank you for your loving care, which has filled our days and brought us to this time and place.

You have given us life and reason, and set us in a world filled with your glory.

You have comforted us with family and friends, and ministered to us through the hands of our sisters and brothers.

You have filled our hearts with a hunger after you, and have given us your peace.

You have redeemed us, and called us to a high calling in Christ Jesus.

You have given us a place in the fellowship of your Spirit and the witness of your Church.

You have been our light in darkness and a rock of strength in adversity and temptation.

You have been the very Spirit of joy in our joys and the all-sufficient reward in all our labors.

You remembered us when we forgot you. You followed us even when we tried to flee from you. You met us with forgiveness when we returned to you.

For all your patience and overflowing grace, we praise your holy name, O God. Amen.

And so, may God, our Covenant Friend, bless us with new beginnings, and the strength and grace we need to keep our promises, and to walk this year with God in a new path of joy, hope, and peace.

Amen.