

Home By Another Way
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12
January 1, 2006

Barrie Shepherd tells of a little boy attending his first-ever Epiphany service. He watched the three Magi lining up at the back of the church, getting ready to walk down the aisle, and nudged his mother. "Don't look now, but God just got here...only I'm not sure which one he is."

That little boy had an epiphany, an "aha" moment in which God appeared to him! His moment probably didn't last long, for undoubtedly his mother had to explain that the Magi were men looking for Jesus; none of them was God. The Magi did indeed find Jesus and meeting Jesus was an epiphany for them! They searched long and hard, traveling many miles from a foreign land. A child was probably not who they expected to find, for first they went to the royal city of Jerusalem, expecting a king to be born in the center of power. They were sent on nine miles south to the rural village of Bethlehem, the home of the powerless peasantry.

We don't know the content of the Magi's visit with Jesus, only that they gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We can surmise that the visit was a transforming experience for the Magi, for Matthew tells us that they chose not to return to King Herod to disclose the location of the new king, but to return home by another route. They chose not to participate in the deceptive tactics of the evil king, but to be loyal to the new king, a good child, a child of God. It must have been a mystical moment in which God was experienced in a new and powerful way. Meeting Jesus, even as a child, made a profound difference in their lives.

What difference has meeting Jesus met in our lives? When we have those occasional "aha" moments and glimpse God's light shining into our lives, how are we changed? As we daily take up the cross to follow Jesus, do our actions and words take a new shape because they are modeled after Jesus? Do we head home a new way, with changed hearts, because we have met Jesus?

It is a gift that our secular and liturgical calendars converge in a new year and the birth of the Christ child at the same time. The new year always begins on the eighth day of Christmas. It is a moment for us to consider anew how to keep the birth of Jesus kindled throughout the year. How will we stay true to the purposes of God as we return to our lives as they were, yet as people who have been reborn and changed because we have met Jesus again? What holy habits might this new year hold for us to keep the experience of Christ's love alive?

United Methodist Bishop Sally Dyck of the Minnesota Annual Conference has challenged United Methodist pastors and lay members of her state to indulge in healthy, holy living. Among those holy habits she suggests are eating 5 to 9 fruits and vegetables each day; walking 30 minutes a day; and reading the Bible and praying 30 minutes each day. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said that “the neglect of private prayer” is the most common cause of Christians losing their faith and ability to share faith and change the world. If we want spiritually vital churches, we need spiritually vital Christians.

John Wesley made it clear that Bible reading and prayer were not the ends in themselves; they are means of grace. These practices in themselves do not save us. However, they put us in the presence of God that we might be born anew and experience the love of God. Our lives are guided by a living relationship with God, rather than by impersonal laws and commands. Like the Magi, we are changed and we return home another way, as transformed and renewed people of God.

At a certain time in his life, Benjamin Franklin designed a plan of conduct for his life. It was a time of change in his life and he felt obliged to make certain resolutions and form a scheme of action. He developed four practical resolutions:

1. Be frugal so as to pay his debts.
2. Speak the truth in every instance.
3. Apply himself industriously to whatever business he undertakes.
4. Speak ill of no man, not even if it's the truth, but speak only good of others.

He then proceeded to identify thirteen cardinal virtues, with a definition of each. Among them are temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, and chastity. His original list stopped at a dozen, but a Quaker friend suggested that Franklin was often too prideful. Thus Franklin added a thirteenth virtue to his list, humility, which he described as imitating Jesus and Socrates.

Franklin then developed a program to master these virtues and integrate them into his life. Over a period of thirteen weeks, he concentrated on one virtue each week, daily evaluating his progress, or lack thereof. At the end of thirteen weeks, he would have mastered all the virtues, but to prevent backsliding, he would repeat the process. He shortly discovered that virtue was not so simply accomplished. Before the end of the first thirteen weeks, Franklin decided it was easier to embrace his imperfection and abandoned his regimen!¹

Instead of resolutions, John Wesley speaks of covenant renewal. A covenant is a partnership between God and humans. Covenant is one of the top ten themes of the Bible. God's covenant with God's people began early in history. From the Bible we remember the sign of the rainbow to remind us that God will not destroy the earth with a flood; the promise that Abraham's descendents would be a blessing to all nations; the call of Jeremiah to inscribe the covenant on our hearts. Jesus speaks of the new covenant, which is essentially a relationship of love with God and with one another. Jesus got it right when he said that the only resolution worthy of our continued attention is the vow to become magnificently loving.

Love God with your whole being, he said. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. If loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves is our only resolution, all other desires, wants, and goals will fall into their rightful place. When a loving partnership with God is the primary aim of life, our habits will be holy and lead us into a renewal and transformation of life. We will be led away from narcissistic self-concern into a way of relating to God, neighbor, and self that is both balanced and demanding—a way that has more to do with self-giving than self-improvement.

Nora Gallagher tells about a bishop who was leaving a monastery after a visit. A priest friend said, "Take care of yourself, Dan." The bishop turned and replied sternly, "I'm not going to take care of myself, I'm going to spend myself."

Having met the Christ child, the magi returned home by another way as different people. Let us cultivate holy habits that place us in the transforming presence of God, that we might spend our lives loving and giving, a way that differs from the ways of the world, the way of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

¹H.W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), pp. 96-100.

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