

## The Land of Beginning Again....

As we all said hello to a New Year earlier last week, I hope you took advantage of the yearly opportunity to do a little reconnaissance work on your coming life and times in 2008. Our year end “Festival of Consumption”, as Daniel Boorstin called it, is now over for another year. A friend of mine from Charleston told me that she could not wait to have everybody go back home, to take the decorations down and to get back to normal. I heard another lady say at Walmart that she was sick and sick and tired of hearing Christmas Carols. Poor thing. I could never join her in that. But much as I love Christmas, I understand what they were saying.

It was that way in the Bible too. In Chapter Two, the Christmas story in Matthew was just almost over, and the Wise Men were about to head home. They had come visiting from the East, following the Star which led them to Jesus. That was nice. When they saw the Christ-child in his manger, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. That was nicer, and it says they fell down and worshipped him! That was the nicest of all. But now it was time to head home.

But they had a problem: which way to go. I guess they were planning to take the same route by which they had come. No new map-quest needed, just reverse the directions. And wealthy Old King Herod had invited them to come back to visit him in his Palace at Jerusalem. Nobody in his right mind would turn down a command performance to visit the King!

But it was not that easy. God interfered with their plans. A friend recently sent me an old pithy saying: “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.” Matthew says: “And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.” (Mt. 2:12) Time to go home; time to go back to the routine

of things; time to tie up the loose ends which they had dropped the moment the star first appear; time to explain to their wives and children why they had hopped up on their camels and left without notice, to follow a star. Can't you hear the conversation: "Wait a minute Melchoir: you're kidding me, right? You are leaving me here with the children so you can you follow a star? Why did I ever marry a dreamer?"

How do you follow a star anyway? It must be a matter of "hints and guesses", as T.S. Eliot called it. Difficult business that of wandering after a little star-light up in the heavens, with the clouds and all the billions of stars up there. But, they managed it somehow: how but by the Grace of God could they come and see and believe? The little Christ-child conquered their hearts without saying a word, not even a little cry, according to Martin Luther anyway.

I often have pondered how and why they caught on. How did they know? They were most likely Persian Astronomers or philosophers, bright and knowledgeable! They rumbled around the finest and the best, and here they were kneeling beside a tiny little manger, in a tiny little cattle-shed, in tiny little Bethlehem, gazing at a tiny little Baby, and they believed. That's astounding; it upsets the fruit basket of all we think we know and how we come to know it. Oh, I know some say it is probably a legendary story; but it hints of the way God works with his children all through history, all around the globe.

Like, for example, I read in yesterday's Charlotte Observer about the Chinese scholar whom the World Bible Translation Center out in Texas hired to translate the Holy Bible into understandable everyday Chinese language. It was a job. They paid him a fee for his expertise. He was an atheist non-believer, even in his own religion, let alone Christianity. But, don't you know (Are you listening?), by the time he finished his translation, he converted to Christianity, and asked to be Baptized right there in his hotel room. He became a believer in Jesus Christ. No one ever

proselytized him; no one said a word, nada, nothing. He read the Bible carefully as he worked on his translation, and on his own he caught the drift, or maybe better, God caught on to him.

Whatever, back to the Wise Men, the Kings, whatever they understood as they stood under that great shining star, however it would or would not change them, in Matthew Two the time had come for them to head back to their everyday lives.

Like the poor young widow whose husband died suddenly in Florida last summer said to me the other day: “One more holiday to go. Since he died, I’ve had to get through his birthday, my birthday, our anniversary, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Christmas Morning: now New Year’s. When that’s over, I am going to try to find my way back to normalcy!” God bless her. Holidays can be tough...Too filled with memories and tension and disappointments.)

For sure, pleasant or sad as it was in 2007, it is time to say goodbye and head off into a new year. And just as the Wise Men, and wise women everywhere, it’s time to decide which way to go. At any and every crossroads of our lives, there is always the same question and the same opportunity: What shall I do next? Which way shall I go? And that depends on where you want to be when another 12 months have rolled away. Remember Alice and the Cheshire Cat in the Wonderland. Alice came up and asked, “Sir, how do I get out of here?” He said, “Where do you want to go?” She said: “It doesn’t matter I just want to get out of here.” He murmured, “Then it really does not matter which way you go, does it?” If all you want to do is get away from where you are, and then go any way you like.

If you do not have some kind of spiritual plan, a vision; if you have no destination

determined, you will blow around like a human wind-mill, wherever the passing winds of time and circumstance decide to take you. That's first: Anchor your life to something solid and then go and get there with all your might!

Herod and the people of the world around you always say: Come on back down here the way you used to be. Pick up the comfortable journey again, just exactly as you were when the star first appeared, just as if nothing important ever took place with your visit to Bethlehem. One reforming alcoholic friend of mine told me years ago that the first Sunday he went back to church after he joined AA, "All my friends tell me that I am no fun anymore." Come on back Charlie, we liked you the way you used to be.

But the Lord God says, "Go a notch higher. Improve yourself . Do something new, even if it is just a tiny departure from your norm. Take a different road home, a spiritual one. The world says, "Come back to the way you used to do it. Learn the ways of the world and you will get ahead. Learn how to compromise, how to make excuses, how to be real, without all that religious coating you flirted with through the Advent-Christmas Season. You got too near the Cradle; now it is time to step back. It was something you probably dreamed up anyway, some sentimental hankering after the nostalgic memories of the days of yore. But that does not matter out here in the world: come back, this way, our way, and the easy way. Come back to the Palace and have lunch with me!

But Christ says that something is wrong with going back the same old way. Something is missing without the presence of Jesus Christ in your life and in the world. On the road signs leading into the City of David (I have been there and seen them.) it reads, "Slow Down, Bethlehem ahead." And, on every roadway leading away from Bethlehem, I wish there were signs which read, "Go Home another Way!"

Now that you have seen the Christ-child face to face, you are or should be changed. Either something happened to you, or it didn't.

Do you make New Year's Resolutions? We always did at our house and we do it now. My Mother used to make us write them down and then she would keep them for another year. And we had to read them out loud come the next New Year's dinner. By my written resolutions, I have lost 25 pounds for 25 straight years. I wouldn't even be here. For the last half dozen years of his life, my father teased us and made a single resolution, "I resolve to be here come next New Year's Day.

It is no accident that the last line of our text reads: "Being warned of God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way."

So, talk to yourself for a minute: what do you want to change about you as you head out into 2008? Surely there is something you want to change and improve. I preached on a similar kind of theme one Sunday long ago, and the Clerk of session came up and said. "Good sermon, Reverend. I know at least a dozen people it applies to." I fired back, "Well, I know 13!"

And Billy Graham, who I was told preached here at Sharon one day long ago, Billy used to say that "The hardest thing for the Evangelist to do is to help make a Christian out of somebody who already thinks he is."

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In "The Land of Beginning Again", let me share a little three point sermon for you to remember: First, God will continue to change things in 2008. It was always that way in the Bible. Just when they began to settle in and get comfortable, God said "Up, everybody, up! It is time to move on!" My Dad used to tell me that "Life is what

happens when you are planning something else.” Change will come to the Nation, especially in the election of a new President. It will come to the City of Charlotte and to Mecklenburg County. And the Lord will send his guiding Spirit to change you and me in ways we could never anticipate as we start out. And, most importantly to us, as we begin this interim journey together, God has some changes in mind for this Congregation. And people do not like change.

I was called to a church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida in the early 1980s. I think they tricked us by inviting Peggy and me to come down to have a look in the middle of the coldest winter Pittsburgh has on record. It was the time that Ft. Lauderdale was just becoming a year-round city. We watched for the next dozen years as skyscrapers and huge condominiums grew up out of the ground. The quaint little traditional hotels were being torn down and the waterfront became a mini-Riviera. It had been a kind of sleepy little friendly town which work up for a few months when the rich Yankees came down and the quick buck artists soon followed, but then they all went home come spring. The locals could enjoy their town again.

About the time we arrived, the year-round population was growing like wild-fire. New businesses and industry were moving in. New professional sports teams barged their way into the center of the city. People of different nationalities and foreign religions came, some with no religion at all. And, you could guess, there were a lot of the good Christians in our congregation who did not like it, not one bit. They were tired of change. Our Church was growing too, but they did not like that either. The long time members could not find their seat.

I tried to figure out what to do. I began by visiting various members of the church, especially the old time members. I sure learned a lot. One of the visits I made was to a Miss Donaldson (that is not her name). Her father had been pastor of the congregation in the late 1920s and early 1930s. She stayed on as a single teacher after

her parents passed away. You would have loved her. She was tried and true and faithful. She became one of my dearest friends and supporters in all the time I was there.

I was talking to her about her father, how it had been back then, and all the changes which had taken place since. She ever gave me a few suggestion of how I could do it as her father did. That was nice. Remembering how the city used to be, she spoke softly of the changes. She finally said, “Oh, dear, do you think it will ever slow down?” I smiled and said I did not know, but I added that our God was a God of the future. “The Lord is in favor of progress.” She quickly replied: “Oh, I know the Lord is in favor of progress. I am in favor of progress too. It’s all these changes I can’t stand!” Then, realizing what she had said, she looked at me and began to laugh, and I joined her, and we never stopped laughing together until the day she died. First, God will change things around us in the New Year.

But secondly, you can be sure that God will challenge you and me in 2008. Great monumental movements to share the forgiving love of Jesus Christ with those around us are taking place on this big old spinning planet earth. I have been tremendously impressed with the grand and wonderful way you share the faith through and beyond Sharon Presbyterian Church. That is what we are supposed to do. New Testament Christians had excellence in a lot of things. They were faithful in prayer and worship and hymns and study and in their spiritual search. But they were not known for any of those. We sing the answer now in a hymn, “They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love.” We need to have many other skills and moments of devotion, but the one which should stand at the head of every list is Love.

Great things are taking place in the world around us today. I would not want you to miss out on any of them. Remember Washington Irving’s story of Rip Van Winkle? Poor Rip, he fell asleep and never woke up for twenty years. By then he had missed

the entire Revolutionary War. When he came to, the American Revolution was over and a new nation had been born. There are challenges aplenty for us to respond to. You can be sure that God will challenge us in the land of beginning again.

God will change us and challenge us in the New Year, but you can also be sure that he will comfort us. His love will guide and guard and hold and keep and lead us until the next year rolls around and through all the days and decades after that. I chose Isaiah 46 for our Old Testament lesson which was read in your hearing. “Bel bows down, Nebo stoops. Their idols are on beasts and cattle...” It is a parade. No one knows for sure what the opening verses really mean. There are more than a couple scholarly guesses. But I have my own. I think of it as a New Year’s Parade, like the Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena. Among the “floats” were representations of the gods of the Babylonians: one was Bel, another Nebo. And Isaiah is poking fun at them. “Hey, look at the gods. They stake their lives on the ones they have to carry around.

These gods are home-made. They took their gold and silver and hired a goldsmith and he made them the god they wanted. In the Parade, the gods were lifted up and carried around by the beasts and cattle and human beings. It is there for you to read in the chapter. Isaiah says, “They set it in its place and it stands there. Their gods cannot move of their own volition. And worse, when they cry to it, it does not answer.

Well, my dear friends listening today, you do not need a god to carry around; you need a God to carry you. One who will listen and answer when we call out our needs to him. We need a God who will care for us from birth to your “grey hairs.” Isaiah says that Jehovah is the God who will do that. “I have spoken it and I will bring it to pass.” This is a brilliantly crafted chapter. And it sets out the perfect contrast between home-made gods who are a burden, and One Creator God who carries us and our sorrow and our grief. Who protects us and the hopes we have for tomorrow. The road is often

rugged and steep, but we have a wonderful God and guide to carry us and lead us through.

Sometimes things go wrong. Sometimes the demands of life are tortuous. Who among us does not weep at the sorrows of the world, especially little children whose lives are stolen away by hunger disease and neglect? Hearts wait and break all around the globe. Robert Browning wrote, “Never morning wore to evening but that some heart did break.” It is so difficult I often wonder how others keep their faith.

To be more personal, the whys and wherefores sometimes bring a lonely journey when you are walking through the forests of your body, mind and soul. It hurts. Like, we heard from my wife’s Aunt Leona up in central Pennsylvania this past week. Her husband has been ailing with heart trouble for a while. Then she was told last week that her only son Roger had died from an accidental gunshot wound while hunting on his own farm. What a pity! But there is more: her only daughter Ronna finally succumbed to Lew Gehrig’s disease just five months ago after two years of a long and valiant battle. Ronna died believing, as did Roger I am sure. I wonder how they did it. Aunt Leona said, “Oh dear, someday I might understand, but I sure do not understand it now!” In that inner citadel which makes you you, I wonder what you might be facing now, and whether you have a handle on how to handle it. “Come unto me, all you who are weak and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Rest, and with it, a land of beginning again, in Jesus Christ our Lord, for now and forever more. Amen.

Dear Master for this coming year  
Just one request I bring.  
I do not pray for happiness,  
Or any earthly thing.  
There is just one thing I want to do  
To do the thing that pleases you.

I want to hear your guiding voice,  
To challenge me each day.  
Dear Master, make me swift to hear,  
And ready to obey.  
And thus the year we now begin  
A happy one will be.  
If I am seeking just to do,  
The thing that pleases you.

Amen.