**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Eric Howell

*“Standing on the Edge of the Unknown”*

Matthew 2

January 7, 2018

The start of a new year brings all kinds of possibilities with it. New Year’s resolutions may not be reliable guides to what will truly be, but one thing we know, time is moving on, whether we like it or not.

You hear that in the way we talk: Can you believe it’s 2018 already? Do you realize that high school graduates this year will have never seen the 1990s? September 11 is a chapter in their fraying history books, or their levitating holographic brain massagers, depending on which school district they’re in. Time moves on. That’s the way it feels. I suppose there’s a philosophical argument about whether time actually moves anywhere, what kind of human construct the notion of time is, and whether time is linear or circular. Those are interesting discussions, but for those of us living in this new year, by the Gregorian calendar which says it’s January 7, or by the liturgical calendar which says it’s the First Sunday after the Epiphany, we know what it feels like. It feels like time is moving faster than we can keep up.

Not all of that is bad, of course. Marking time like this gives us some impulse to set a new course:

You can read the Bible all the way through, this year.

You can pray this year like you’ve never prayed before.

You can save a little more money; you can give a little more away.

You can learn to play a new instrument, or sing in the choir.

You can hold your kids a little longer, laugh a little freer.

You can eat a little healthier and worry about your body’s image a little less.

We can resolve to do all kinds of things in a new year. The possibilities are endless. One thing we know is that we are on a journey somewhere other than where we are today. No matter how we feel about the past, the present, or the future, we are on a journey. Today is a gift just for this day, and we’ll not come back by this way again. And this year ahead of us holds in store challenges and experiences we might already know are coming, and some we can’t even imagine yet.

We are all on the road to a more personal communion with God and deeper communion with one another. We come into this new year as pilgrims, each on our own journey, and also collectively as a church. We come together as church regularly to renew our faith and be assured of God’s gracious mercy. We also come to be challenged to take the journey of faith more courageously. Some days, some years, we need it more than others.

We have heard today in the Gospel reading the journey of the Magi to Bethlehem. This story should encourage us and challenge us. The Magi departed on a journey to meet God, toward an unsure destination, to face obstacles they would not completely understand, for a purpose, even wise men could only partially know, and made decisions along the way that would alter their best laid plans.

In all of those ways, the Magi’s journey to Bethlehem echoes just about every other journey in scripture. In scripture, since they left the Garden of Eden, men and women were on the move. They move from place to place. They move from doubt to faith. They move from war to peace. They move from faithless to faithful and back and forth again. When we see Jesus as an itinerant preacher through Galilee and Judea, he and his disciples embody the spirit of all scripture, from Father Abraham to the Apostle Paul. People are always on the move, even if they are sitting still.

Does that make sense? I think it does. We are on the move, even if we are sitting still. The changing calendar tells us that. Time is moving; life is moving. Life is a journey; it’s a sacred pilgrimage if you’ll see it that way.

Seeing life as this journey, as pilgrimage, means that not everything will be easy; some of it will be hard. Not everything will be simple; some things will be pretty tough. Not everything will be pleasant; some of it will be painful. That’s life’s journey. It’s not a pessimistic outlook. A pessimistic outlook is that everything will be bad. A clear-eyed outlook is this: we stand today on the edge of the unknown. And we don’t know what this year will bring. We walk into it not fully knowing what we are walking into.

Those of us who are older, this is old news. You know this full well. You’ve been around the block a few times, so you know that Quoholeth’s wisdom has the ring of truth: there’s nothing new under the sun. But you’ve also been around long enough to know that life can change pretty quickly, whether you’re ready for it or not.

This is why along the way we have asked our young folks getting married to make serious promises to one another before we’ll say, “ok you’re married’, vows that cover the range of human experience: sickness and health, riches and poverty, good times and bad. It’s all there. There’s wisdom in those vows.

Life is a journey. Each year is a journey, and you don’t know what it will bring. And so what we would like to discover in these days is a kind of image of this pilgrimage to Bethlehem we hear this morning. Like the wise men from the east, we too are on a journey of both purpose and uncertainty and we need a spirituality big enough and deep enough to embrace it all as the path toward communion with God.

The one gift that sustains pilgrims on this way is the ability to trust God. Trusting God for what lies ahead is at the heart of how we will endure, embrace, whatever comes our way. Life’s journey is a pilgrimage of trust. If we are on a journey, then there will be change. There will always be change. Things do not stay the same.

When we got back to Waco on New Year’s afternoon, I went out to the store to acquire a ham, black-eyed peas, potato salad, green onions, greens . . .all the fix-ins for a proper New Year’s Day feast, the kind we had every year growing up watching the Cotton Bowl on New Year’s Day. This was serious business in my family. One year my Deep South parents were in Arizona for New Year’s at a restaurant of all forsaken realities. Mom asked the waiter if they had black-eyed peas. He said, “What’s a black-eyed pea?” They got up and left. They tried another restaurant. Same story. Finally, they gave into enchiladas for New Year’s. Black-eyed peas are serious business. As a kid, I never could stand them and only ate them because of something about getting a dollar for every pea you eat. But I’ve come around in the years since. So I got the peas and all the rest. Then I spotted one last can of candied yams on the shelf. My kids have never had candied yams in all their lives. They’d never heard of them. But, doggone it, they were having them this year.

So we had the classic Howell New Year’s meal. It was like it always was on this first day of the year, a delicious meal seasoned with nostalgia. That may be one of the last times this year it will be that way. Things are always changing. I’m pleased to announce today that our church music is changing this year. We’ve been pretty much traditional hymns with piano while other churches have gotten electric guitars and screens and drum kits. We don’t want to be left behind, so we’re changing. But being forward thinkers that we are, we’re leapfrogging the contemporary music phase, and pioneering the next great thing in Christian worship music: an all-bagpipe worship band. We might even mix in an accordion.

Ok, not everything changes, but a lot of things do, and many of those are out of our control. If there’s journey, there’s going to change. That’s true in every area of life, even church life, bagpipe worship bands notwithstanding. I think folks around here understood that intuitively and have said to one another from time to time, “we hold the church lightly.” I think that means we are careful not to squeeze the life out of it by trying to grip it too anxiously. We hold it lightly. That requires real trust. In one another, and certainly in God.

Church isn’t the only area of our lives in which we learn to trust God. Just think of what you might be facing this year. For some of you life looks different now than it did just recently, and this year will be different from any other before. Some of you are headed off to college. Some of you might just graduate this year if you don’t mess around. Some will get jobs this year; some may lose them. You may be offered a job away from here. What will you do? You may have a medical challenge you didn’t expect; some of you have a pretty good idea of what you’ll face, but you don’t know what to do about it. The truth is none of us know what we’ll encounter. That can either paralyze us or lead us deeper into trusting God.

We must remember that God doesn’t promise that everything will be easy or that we will always understand why we are going through what we are going through. Even though they were known as wise men, they headed toward Jerusalem, which made total sense, to look for a newborn king at the palace. When all the while Bethlehem was where they should go. They’d probably never heard of Bethlehem when they began their journey, but it was there they met God.

Once there, only then did they understood how they should change their plans. God gave them a vision to go home another way. Their wisdom was not in knowing all the answers ahead of time, but in their willingness to discern and adapt and trust the wisdom of God.

We will need that too, because if there is journey, there is change, and if there is change, there is disruption, even danger, and sometimes suffering. The story of the magi is not just a children’s story, not a sweet nativity tale. It is a story of political drama, violent suspicion, and the utter vulnerability of the holy family to the situation around them. Matthew tells a true, if difficult, picture of the world. It’s the story of all scripture. There is change, and with change comes both pain and opportunity to lean more fully into the Father’s arms. When we desire deeper communion with God and with one another, we move into trust. Trust in God in all things becomes the source of spirituality that can endure and embrace the future.

God is trustworthy. Psalm 40 is a wonderful song of trust:

I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry

He drew me up from the pit, out of the miry bog

And set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. . .

As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me.

You are my help and my deliverer, do not delay O my God.

It is with trust in God that we can hear with unstopped ears the good word: Arise, shine. You may have dwelt in deep darkness, you may still yet today, but the sun is dawning in splendor. The light of the living Word will be a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path as you walk on. And you’re not alone. We’ll walk together, side by side, holding one another, celebrating with one another, leaning into one another.

With experience as our teacher, and with brothers and sisters to help us, we learn to trust God. Thomas Merton penned an honest prayer for all people who stand on the brink of the unknown, as we all do at the beginning of every season of life. This prayer has meant a lot to a lot of people. We’ll close with it here, which is also a beginning of all that is to come:

MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

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