

“Turning Over a New Life”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Epiphany Sunday
Edina Morningside Community Church; January 1, 2017

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.

Luke 2:21-38

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When was the last time you went someplace entirely new, where you had no idea what to expect? I had one of those moments this past week—at Cabela’s. I’ve never been to a Cabela’s before. Since I don’t hunt, fish or use firearms, there has been no need for me to go. But Javen received a pair of slippers from

there as a Christmas gift, and since they were the wrong size we went to get them exchanged. I had *some* sense of what to expect in an outdoor store. After all, I grew up in the country and had been to Fleet Farm! Except, that did *nothing* to prepare me for the culture shock of stepping into the cathedral of outdoor sportsmanship that is the Cabela's superstore just off 94 in Rogers. My sense of being out of place started in the parking lot, with people wearing political slogans you don't usually see in the core Twin Cities. It grew more strange as I walked in the front doors and was greeted by a guy at a little desk, where you're supposed to check your *gun* before continuing inside. The interior decorating budget of this place must be in the millions, and its chief guiding principle must be showing as many stuffed animals as possible. Two, three, and four stories up, what look like rocky cliffs are dotted with bighorn sheep, antelope, and bear, while a flock of geese hung suspended from the ceiling over at least one taxidermied moose. Walking around what I thought was a sporting goods store, I saw one strange thing after another: a fish tank larger than some zoos, half the people wearing camouflage, and enough military hardware to set up an independent state. Walking out, I spoke to the imaginary dog under my arm: "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

As we start the New Year, I wonder if you can relate to that feeling of being on strange soil. 2017 is more than a date change; for some of us it feels like the end or the start of an era. "The first full year after a spouse has died." "The year our last child moves out and starts college." "The year we learn how bad Mom's diagnosis will get." "The year I'm going to retire." And those are just the personal things we *know* about.

2017 will also be a pivotal year for our country. This last year revealed to the wider country a whole culture of Cabela's folks with the power to sway an election. This year we will see a new president inaugurated, as different from the last one as day is from night. What will the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats be in this new era? Right now, it's still anyone's guess—we've never been here before.

Others have though, at least in the sense of starting an entirely new era. We have their stories in Scripture. Both accounts today come at a massive hinge point in human history. Even time itself is measured before and after Jesus' birth! And these characters we have just heard about show us what it looks like to live into a new era. We could focus on many possibilities, but let me suggest three things they show us. Think of them as resolutions for the new era, if that helps.

First, seek wisdom beyond the usual places, as the Wise Men demonstrate. All their collected wisdom, all their learning was not enough; we find them this morning searching for something else. Evidently the Wise Men had a large budget and freedom to roam. Because they've been on the road for months, or maybe even years, doing what passes for science in their time—following the stars to discover destiny. They get to Jerusalem, and then find directions for the last leg of the journey. To tiny Bethlehem, to a young Jewish boy, and to his peasant mother Mary. It is the last place they expected, yet the travelers are "overwhelmed with joy". Where are the unlikely places we will find wisdom in this new year? Beyond the pundits and political posturing—perhaps in the voices of children, or the sick, or others who are seldom heard? When we find ourselves in uncommon company—at Cabela's or somewhere else equally foreign—may God give us grace to seek wisdom there especially this year.

Second, we might need to follow the Wise Men by showing holy disobedience now and then. Such sages could travel all over the world only by following the rules, keeping powerful people happy, and rarely stepping out of line. Yet when they learn that Herod has it in for this child, they disobey his order to reveal Jesus' whereabouts and go home by another way. They value innocent life and wisdom more than the orders of a tyrant. Their holy disobedience is not just for show; it comes from a deeper loyalty to love God encased in vulnerable human flesh. If there is conflict in the year ahead, may we have the wisdom as people of faith to know when holy *disobedience* is required for the sake of obedience to Jesus

the table-turning prophet, even when it lets down powerful people or reveals painful truths in the service of love.

Third, we learn from Simeon and Anna in the temple the importance of steadfast faith throughout every season. They've been waiting their whole lives for the dawning of this new era, trusting that it will come even in all the years of Roman occupation when it seemed least likely. They show up—daily, weekly, regularly—in the place of worship and community, looking forward with anticipation, praising God and giving testimony of where life and society is being transformed. That way when Mary and Joseph (two more examples of faithful living) arrive, they are in place to welcome Christ and celebrate the dawning of this new era. When opportunities for faithful community arise in *this* new year, here on Sundays, in your own prayer life, around tables for meals, or any other time when people of faith gather, may we find ourselves present and steadfast in faith waiting patiently to glimpse God among ordinary people no matter the season.

Now, if there's anything we know about New Year's resolutions, it's that most of them fail. They are made with good intentions, when the year is fresh and everything seems possible. Life coaches and others who study how human beings make lasting change suggest that we can increase our success by making a detailed plan, and getting others involved. That's why I included "steadfast faith" after "holy disobedience" and "seeking unexpected wisdom". We will be better at following Christ in this new era when we regularly share in supportive community with each other. So here's the plan: let's do this again, week by week, gathering together with Simeon and Anna, Mary and Joseph, the Wise Ones, and all who wait expectantly for the Spirit of Christ in this new era of the world. This is how Resolutions become revolutions, in a turn of phrase that Elaine taught me. This is how good intentions grow into new practices of life with patience, encouragement, and forgiveness of self and others when we fall short. Instead of resolving to turn over a new leaf, let's turn over a new *life* in 2017. Turn over to God your life individually, and our life collectively, trusting that we will be made new in the presence of one another by the power of Christ who is light for all the world. Turn over a new life in this new era, counting on God to reveal wisdom in unexpected places and people. Turn over a new life, with such loyalty to God's love that we recognize when holy disobedience to this world's powers is the path of faith. Turn over a new life, counting on God with steadfast faith to wash away our failings and feed us forever at the table of grace. Turn over a new life to God this year, because the life we lead is now the Body of Christ.

Let us pray: "Glory of Israel, give us eyes to see your miraculous spirit moving in this church and in this world. Teach us to be proclaimers of your love to the nations, for the sake of the one whose name is redemption for the peoples, Jesus Christ our salvation. Amen." ([from WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org))