

“Resolved to Seek”

Matthew 2:1-12

January 5, 2020

The beginning of a new calendar year is a time of unlimited potential: fresh starts, new beginnings, promised changes in lifestyle, habit, or outlook. New Year’s Resolutions. If you need help, one website offered the top ten New Year’s Resolutions for 2020. You all could recite most of them along with me, very few surprises. Quit smoking. Get in better shape. Eat healthier. Save more and spend less. Reduce stress at work or at home. Get organized. But, at the bottom of the list, barely hanging on to its spot on the top ten, there was one resolution that stood out for me, like a bright light. It was different somehow. *Be kinder.* What sets this simple goal apart is what it does *not* seek. It is not about self-improvement or advancement, not about the best way to get ahead. This resolution, alone among those on the list, is not self-centered, not about an individual might get more out of life this year. Its focus is on how we can contribute to the wellbeing of others. It is a reminder that we belong to a wider circle than the narrow universe of me, myself, and I. I found the resolution hopeful in its orientation and laudable in its intention. What if we were all a little kinder to others in 2020? We could change the world, I thought!

And then, reality came crashing down upon me like the second morning of a 5 a.m. workout routine. I remembered how exceedingly rare it is for us to keep any of our new year’s resolutions. According to one estimate, just eight-percent of resolution-makers are successful in achieving their goals. What’s more humbling—less than half of us make it past the first month with our resolutions still intact. Not all that surprising, really. Most of us are very good at setting unrealistic goals. We can be swept up in the optimism of a fresh new page and overreach in our expectations. So, experts (how does one become an expert in

resolution-making?) have helpfully offered advice for those of us who want to make resolutions we can keep. Suggestions include these three: believe you can do it, make it tangible, and ask others to help you.

This morning, as we begin a new year of worship and ministry together at Second, I think this advice could apply to us as well. You may have noticed that our January sermon series is titled, “Belonging to Others.” It represents the next stage of the journey of belonging that we began way back in September. It signifies an outward turn and an external orientation. Its focus is the same as that one lonely resolution—be kinder. You may be wondering about my timing here. After all, we live in an increasingly divisive and hostile era, a time when belonging to anyone beyond our immediate tribe is challenging at best. Be kinder. Belong to others. Have you seen the world lately? Filled with hatred and violence, systems and forces far beyond our control, more complex and fearful than ever. And we can’t even keep self-serving resolutions beyond thirty days. How can we truly belong to others? I think we begin by believing it is possible, with God’s help. It is, I think, a first step toward living as if we all belong to God. Oh, we say it all the time in the church. You’ve already heard it multiple times this morning. All are welcome here. All belong to God. But our actions reveal our core beliefs and by that standard, I wonder if we do believe that all of us belong to God. What if we made a resolution to try (really try) to live like that’s true? It’s a start.

The next step, according to those experts, is to make our resolutions tangible. This is precisely where the words of the Old Testament prophets become most valuable for us. Their words are clear, not abstractions but concrete commands. Listen again to Micah’s distillation of what God requires of us: Do Justice. Love Kindness. Walk Humbly.

The tangible actions prescribed in the prophet's speech stand at the very heart of who we are and how we are to live. They present a clear case that faith is lived, not just spoken or felt. They offer simple resolutions to keep this year. Justice. Kindness. Humility.

Finally, the experts suggest that we ask others to help us. This brings me to this particular day. Today, as our calendars move past the joy of the holidays, as we muster the strength to return to real life after the parties, the food and drink, the more relaxed schedules, the church insists on one more celebration. Epiphany. The word describes a striking revelation or sudden insight. I have always been grateful that I was ordained on Epiphany, twelve years ago tomorrow. Each year, I pause to recall the gifts of that day. You may know that one of the traditions in our ordination service for deacons, elders, and ministers is the laying on of hands. I remember Sara praying my ordination prayer as I felt the warmth and the weight of hands upon me. A tangible, palpable sign that this journey is never undertaken alone. On Epiphany, we hear again the story of those three seekers, magi, or kings, or wise men, who traveled from afar following a star to the place where the Christ child was. It is a beautiful and compelling story. The vision. The prophecy. The political intrigue. The journey. The star. The treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Epiphany is a testament to the church's conviction that the story of our faith must not end in a stable in Bethlehem or in the sentimental celebrations of the cherubic Christ child. No, this day reminds us that we, like the wise men, are still searching, that we are committed to the journey, resolved to seek.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, they missed it. They were still many miles and months away. They were duped by King Herod and surely dealt with all the complications and difficulties of holiday travel. How many of us can relate? How many of us longed to experience the joy of Christmas but for some reason were not fully present in the moment? How many of us need another shot at meaning? The week before Christmas, one member of the church stopped by

the church office; as we talked, he mentioned that his celebration of Christmas may have to wait until April; just too busy right now. I think many of us can relate. Surely the wise men could.

Their story gives us this welcomed promise: it is not too late. What distinguishes these three is not their punctuality but their persistence. They didn't give up. They journeyed on. And in seeking, they found the source of truth.

This week, I've been thinking about how the stories we tell this time of year are all centered on the truth that we belong to one another. The stories of the angelic chorus, the band of shepherds, the three magi, they remind us that we do not find God as the result of a purely personal journey. Faith is not just another self-improvement resolution or effort in self-advancement. We go together. Our epiphanies occur in community. Our resolutions are made possible by the support we find in one another. The warmth and the weight of the hands that rest on our shoulders.

When the magi finally make their way to the child, when their Christmas moment finally arrives, they do not miss it. They kneel before the one whom they have been seeking for those many months. They offer the best they have, the gifts they bring, to Jesus. And then, together, they make their way toward home by another way.

You see, their seeking does not end when they find the Christ child. There is more to be done, more to find, more to discover. And so this travel-weary trio, renewed by their moment of epiphany, changed by their encounter with the sacred, sets out again.

And this brings us back to our expert advice on keeping resolutions. First, we have to believe that what we seek is truly possible. Next, we should keep our goals tangible and practical—justice, kindness, humility. And, finally, we must ask others to help us. The kind of ministry we are called to undertake simply cannot be accomplished alone. We need support. We need accountability. We need each other. **Together**, we are called to renew the world and serve the kingdom through the power of the gospel.

As we begin to explore what it means to say that we belong to one another, I want to share my resolution with you: in the year ahead, I am committed to the journey we will take together, as a community of faith. I am committed to seeking the meaning of faith in a complex world, a divided age, a time when the courageous voice of the Christian church is both sorely needed and often absent. I am committed to a faith that can have an impact on the lives of those around us. I am committed to living like we all belong to God. And I'm committed to doing it as a united part of Christ's Body.

On Christmas Day, I re-read an editorial titled, "Moments of Grace in a Grim World." The piece ended with words that challenge and inspire us all: "Evil is everywhere, and anger and hatred are loud. The shouting drowns out the quiet; tragedy and disaster block the view of the good. Yet there are always signs of progress toward a better future. Look, or you may miss them."ⁱ

The magi kept looking. They were resolved to seek the presence of God in a grim world. They were resolved to go together in search of the sacred. This year, let's do more than look. Let's help create the kind of world in which we want to live. No act is too small, no challenge is too great. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly... together. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/25/opinion/moments-of-grace-in-a-grim-year.html>