

January 2, 2011

1 Kings 1:32-40

Matthew 2:1-12

"New Beginnings"

I love reading Science Fiction. Especially books that were written awhile back. It is always fun to open a book set in the far future and see that the futuristic year the author chose has already passed. I think we've all heard of the book 1984, and now we have passed both of Arthur Clarke's sci-fi staples 2001 and 2010. Science fiction like this is fun because you look at what the author dreamed up, and you can compare it to the world around you. I've read books where the technology was wildly off from where we are today; I mean we still don't have hover cars or colonies on the moon. And I've read books where I laughed when I realized that the high-tech super computer that this futuristic hero had was not as fast or versatile as my cell phone. One of the things that I enjoy about reading Science Fiction is that it makes me take a closer look at the world around us, at the science and the wonders that we have in our everyday lives. We live in an age of wonders, and yet, because it is all around us, we tend to forget the promise it holds.

The same can be said for the beginning of the New Year. Here we are just two days into the year, and the possibilities are endless. I mean anything could happen this year. Think about it, it is too early to say otherwise, but this could be

the year that the Cubs go all the way! This could be the year that scientists find a cure for cancer or the common cold. We never know what the New Year might bring. I mean think of the possibilities this new beginning holds, think of all we might accomplish. Do you realize that so far, not a single one of you here has missed a Sunday of Worship this entire year?! It is 2011, and everything is possible. Everything is New.

And as we enter into this New Year, we have two readings today. The first we heard was from our Grand Sweep readings, the story of Solomon's ascension to the throne of Israel. The second reading was the Epiphany reading of the Wise Men from the East, who followed the New Star and came to find the Baby Jesus and offer up their gifts to him. Both, readings of new things, new rulers and new beginnings.

Solomon, of course, was the son of King David. A king who, while a great military leader, had not exactly had a smooth and pleasant time as king. Under David's rule there had been wars and scandal. Civil war had torn the country apart, and though reunified under David once again, David's sons were still causing turmoil as the line of succession was not ever made clear. Factions were forming and the possibility of war within the kingdom was still a very real thing.

So when the people see not just the High Priest, Zadok, but also the prophet Nathan leading Solomon on David's own mule, they must have been filled with

hope. Now that may not mean much in a day and age where kids routinely borrow their parent's car, but back then, anything that belonged to the king belonged to the king alone! For David to let someone else ride the King's mule meant that he was saying I think this person, my son Solomon, is now the king! So when the people heard that Solomon had been anointed King and heard the trumpets call, the people knew that it was a new beginning for their kingdom, a new chapter in their lives had begun. David had finally settled the issue of succession, and rather than the throne passing hands in a civil war, he had abdicated in favor of one of his sons. And so all the people cried out "Long Live King Solomon!" and verse forty says " all the people went up following him, playing on pipes and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth quaked at their noise."

Compare this to the quieter, but no less exciting moment when the Wise Men arrive to pay homage to the Christ child. The men from the East had arrived in Bethlehem with little to no fanfare. No parade shook the ground or trumpets rang forth. This was a quiet moment, just the Wise Men, the baby Jesus and his parents. But when the Wise Men saw Jesus, and knew all that he represented, saw the wonder and promise, the hope and love of this new beginning, they were moved. The scripture says they were overwhelmed with joy!

Rejoicing with great joy...overwhelmed with joy...New beginnings! So many possibilities, so much to look forward to, so much hope and promise, so many wonders to come. Much like this new year.

Does this new year fill you with joy? Think about it, what does it mean to you really? Do you see this as the start of a brand new thing? A new chapter to your life? Or was the marking of a new year simply a chance to have a party and spend the day watching football? Is it a time to look ahead with wonder and hope, or is it simply a time to re-start that diet, or a time to make a goal to get more use out of that health club membership?

2011 is a new year, many would say the beginning of a new decade, and it is only two days old. What are our hopes for this year? For this decade? Think of it, this is a new beginning, and right now, we can set the goals. We can set the stage for whatever we wish to accomplish. We are only two days into the year, no goal is too high, no plan is impossible!

Think of all the ways we are called by God to go forth and change the world. We are called to love our neighbor, we are called to heal the sick, we are called to feed the hungry, clothe the poor, house the homeless, we are called to spread a message of love and hope, God's message, God's Word to the ends of the earth!

It is this last, Christ's great commission to his disciples that always gives us the most trouble, isn't it? Jesus told his disciples to go forth and spread the Good

News; a message of peace and forgiveness and love to all the nations of the Earth.

And that is exactly what the disciples did. They set out and spread the word.

Africa, Asia, the Middle East everywhere they could get they went and they spread the word to everyone they met. They didn't just talk about it to their friends or people whom they already knew to be believers, they talked to everyone...and the church spread and grew.

But, you could argue, that it was easier for them. They didn't have to deal with people's expectations or preconceived notions of what Christianity was. The disciples had a new message. They didn't have to worry about being affiliated with some crackpot in Westboro, or lumped into the same category as those we see every year at election time who are more worried about using their religion to score points off their opponent than they are for what their religion actually stands. We all have seen them, the Demagogues who get so much screen time on the news or whose blog postings are quoted again and again, not because they speak for the majority of Christianity, but because they make such very entertaining television. It could be argued that it was easy for those first disciples to openly talk about their faith. They didn't have to worry about being lumped in with them. They didn't have to worry about what people had heard before about "Christians".

Unfortunately, we don't have that luxury, do we? We live in a world where we worry what people's reactions will be when we tell them we are a Christian.

We belong to a global family that believes in love and helping those around us. An organization whose mission arm, UMCOR is one of the most respected relief organizations in the world. When there is a disaster, UMCOR is one of the first ones in, and usually stays to help long after organizations like the Red Cross have packed up their bags and left. And yet, we are embarrassed by what we believe, and we worry about what people will think.

A survey I read says that 70% of un-churched Americans feel that Christians are hypocrites. And all I can think when I read this stat is why don't these people know more Christians? Are they basing this belief about Christianity on the examples and friends that they have who are Christians, or are they basing it solely on what they see on the television or read about on-line?

This is a new year. A time of new beginnings and fresh starts, and it is time for us to forget what came before and focus on the hope and the promise of the new! We need to stop letting the media tell people what Christianity is. We need to stop letting politicians decide for us who the Real Christians are, and we need to stop waiting for someone else to speak up for us. WE are the church. We are the body of Christ in the world, and that means we are also his voice! We need to let the world know what Christianity truly means, what Christ truly taught, not just through our actions or by our example, but with our voices as well.

We need to remember the true message - That God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. That the WORLD might be saved. All the world. Not just the people who look like us, not just the people who think like us, not just the people who agree with us, but everyone, everywhere. This was the promise that the Wise Men of the East saw. This was the new beginning that changed the world, that shook the heavens to the point that a new star appeared in the sky. This was the joy that overwhelmed those men and caused them to bend their knees and pay homage to a newborn baby. This is the message that we need to share, with our friends and our families, with our classmates, with our neighbors and with our co-workers.

It is a new year, a new day, a new Beginning, and we live in an age of communication, an age of Wonders and we need to reach out and make use of it. How many of you use social networking like Facebook or Twitter? How hard would it be for you to talk about the church, to invite people to worship, to spread the Good News? How many people would you reach if once a week your status message talked about what you were doing at the church or even better invited them to join you there?

How many of you, when you go out to brunch on Sunday morning and your server asks how you are doing, instead of just saying fine, could use that as an opportunity to start a conversation? Even if it is just to say, "Well, we just came

from worship over at Baker Memorial church, and we are doing pretty well. How is your day going?"

We need to stop letting others represent Christianity for us, because I am sad to say that the wrong people seem to have been doing it. It is January second and the beginning of a new year, and the possibilities are endless. Let us make this a time to start a new chapter in our lives. Let us make this a time to teach the world what it means to be a Christian and say to the world, "God loves you! Happy New Year!" Amen.