

"New Year: Why Not a New You?"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, January 7, 2018

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Holy Scriptures: Matthew 12: 1-12; 2 Corinthians 12: 1-9

Matthew 2:1-12 (RSV) -- *The Visit of the Wise Men*

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ²"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'"

⁷Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; ⁸and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; ¹¹and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

¹²And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

2 Corinthians 12:1-9 (RSV) -- *Paul's Visions and Revelations*

I must boast; there is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶ Though if I wish to boast, I shall not be a fool, for I shall be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷ And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.

⁸ Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; ⁹ but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

"New Year: Why Not a New You?"

That's the lead article headline for the Living Section

of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution on January 1, 2015.

Hey, it's a new year, so why not a new you?

This is the lure and allure of the magical passing of *chronos* time:

the dawn of a new calendar year is the best time to change our fates.

So we make New Year's resolutions,

sign up for gym memberships,
determine to buy less bread, eat more vegetables,
open the Bible to Genesis and plow into Chapter One,

and resolve that this time we are going to stick with
whatever we didn't last year, last time, last set of good intentions.

It's a new moment,

so why not open our souls to see what changes God has in store for us?

"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God,"

which starts with something ending, a letting go, a distant footprint in the sand,

and a new beginning,

one that has the potential to change how you approach yourself,
your family and friends, your church, your work,
even your own sense of self in relationship to the world.

There is an aspect of our relationships

at work and church, in our families and communities
that has become a stumbling block, a thorn in our side,
a deep chasm and an intimidating, seemingly impervious wall.

We speak of disappointment.

On New Year's Day we saw Sony Michel of the UGA Dawgs

fumble the football in the fourth quarter with the score tied.

The Oklahoma Sooners returned his fumble for a go-ahead touchdown.

Sony Michel could have hung his head and quit.

Instead, he and his teammates hung in there, pushing on through, together.

In double overtime the game winning touchdown

was scored by none other than Sony Michel.

A New Year: Why Not a New You?

Resolve this week in your Christian journey

to bear your relationships through to the other side of disappointment.

What, you may ask, is on the other side?

Hold on; we'll get there together.

A New Year: Why Not a New You?

Today's Holy Scriptures tell the story of the three Magi and their three journeys.

First, they went to see King Herod in Jerusalem,

then to Bethlehem to worship the newborn Jesus Christ,
and third to go home by another way.

A couple years ago our Christmas Pageant focused on the Three Kings.

Our pageant title was "*Three Wise Men...Are You Serious?*"

We know so well the biblical story of the gifts of the Wise Men

that we can tell it with one hand tied behind our backs.

We know how they went to see King Herod

and received his guidance to reach Bethlehem.

In Bethlehem they encountered the newborn Christ child.

They dedicated to God gifts of gold, frankincense, myrrh,

and, most importantly, themselves.

Our faith informs us that the baby Jesus gave them gifts in return.

Christ doled out the gifts of a star in the East to guide them to Him,

a dream to live into,
courage for the journey, fortitude in friendship,
and commitment to stand up to the principalities and powers.

Next time their story is shared,

the tale could also be told of their personal disappointment.

Surely the three travelers felt disappointment in Herod,

who had been so nice and encouraging
yet turned out to be a practitioner of infanticide.

The Wise Men go home by another way, never to return to Jerusalem.

The Bible story is tied up in a neat bow, with Magi and readers moving on.

However, King Herod and the Three Kings are bereft of an even better ending.

They miss out on a golden opportunity

to experience growth, grace and another gift of God.

On the other side, just over the hill called Disappointment,

is the level field called Reconciliation.

Realistically, King Herod's threat of violence and intent to do harm

prevented the Magi from working out their differences with him.

Reconciling with someone intent on violence is extremely tough.

Yet the world would be a far worse place than we could imagine

if you and I did not stand on the shoulders of spiritual fore bearers
who approached the principalities and powers at great personal risk,
who intentionally sought to work through
fragmented, broken, disappointing relationships
to create wholeness, with the grace of God.

Practically speaking,

most of the souls within hearing of this Word
have ample opportunities without enduring bodily harm
to build bridges across the chasms sunk deep by disappointment.

Addressing those whom you are disappointed by or have lost faith in or been hurt by

is never easy nor to be taken lightly or slightly or blithely.

Such an endeavor takes courage and resolve, fortitude and faith,

and a spectacularly huge dose of grace.

A New Year: Why Not a New You?

The Good News is that God's grace is sufficient.

One day the Lord said to the Apostle Paul,

and today God's Word reaches you and me, saying,
*"My grace is sufficient for you,
for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

Plowing through the rough terrain of disappointment in a relationship takes grace.

In God we trust, right?

So, take a risk.

Let go, and let God's grace go to work and play.

Nadia Bolz-Weber said:

"God's grace is not defined as God being forgiving to us even though we sin.

Grace is when God is a source of wholeness,

which makes up for my failings.

My failings hurt me and others and even the planet,

*and God's grace to me is that my brokenness is not the final word
...it's that God makes beautiful things out of even my own shit [sinfulness].*

Grace isn't about God creating humans and flawed beings

*and then acting all hurt when we inevitably fail
and then stepping in like the hero to grant us grace
- like saying, "Oh, it's OK, I'll be the good guy and forgive you."*

It's God saying,

"I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word.

I am a God who makes all things new." [1]

Become channels for the power of God to be made perfect in our weakness,

in our imperfection, in our sinfulness and senseless pride,
in our flaws and mistakes and the errors of our ways.

Rather than allowing personal disappointment

to destroy or divide or disrupt the flow of our spirits,
we can choose to allow the grace of God to strengthen our coping skills.

Eliza Stephenson said,

*"Disappointment to a noble soul is what cold water is to burning metal;
it strengthens, tempers, intensifies, but never destroys it." [2]*

On the other side, Noble Souls,

just 'round the bend from disappointment, is reconciliation.

A New Year: Why Not a New You?

Nadia Bolz-Weber is the tattooed Lutheran pastor

of the House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver,
a church where a chocolate fountain, a blessing of the bicycles,
and serious liturgy come together.

She's a face of the Emerging Church,

redefining what church is, with deep reverence for tradition. [3]

In Krista Tippett's interview of Bolz-Weber, Tippett said,

"One thing I really like that you name and elaborate on in your book

*...is a real reality check about churches, even your church,
as a place that is going to disappoint people,
where people will get hurt,
because it's full of human beings.*

And we know that these things happen, and they take us by surprise

and they're so devastating because it's church.

You're very clear that this community will disappoint people.

[You write:] "It's a matter of when, not if.

We will let them down or I'll say something stupid and hurt their feelings."

Nadia Bolz-Weber replied, *"And experience has proved that this is true, yes.*

...I'm completely idealistic about God's ability to redeem our stuff and our mistakes,

*but I think if we aren't open about the fact that we've made them,
that can be a barrier to experiencing that forgiveness
and ...redemption and ... grace.*

So, I think in a way what might sound sort of cynical about

*...don't trust us, don't be idealistic about this community or about me,
to me that just opens a door for grace in a sense.*

Because what I say to people,

*...I'm glad you love it here, but...at some point,
I will disappoint you or the church will let you down.*

Please decide on this side of that happening

if, after it happens, you will still stick around.

Because if you leave, you will miss the way that God's grace comes in

and fills in the cracks of our brokenness.

And it's too beautiful to miss. Don't miss it.

A New Year: Why Not a New You?

Speaking personally as a Christian of 57 years

and professionally as a pastor for 32 years,

I resonate with Nadia Bolz-Weber faith journey
and in confessing that my congregation
"is not unfamiliar with me apologizing for being wrong.

And [you] have forgiven me many times for mistakes that I have made.

And I'm exceedingly grateful for that.

Also, I will say that I think that the fact that I don't find it a threat to my authority

*to say that I've made a bad call or that I've made a mistake,
I think that actually allows this population to let me have authority
for [the congregation and in the wider community].*

"By...pretending that we didn't [mess up]

*does not in any way keep other people from knowing
that we made a huge mistake.*

So, if you're somebody who just has that transparency,

*people tend to just trust you more
rather than resent you for making mistakes." [4]*

A New Year: Why Not a New You?

Lois Snow was a saint at East Dallas Christian Church.

She is no longer with us, yet I think of her often.

We served together as pastor and parish leader on ministries and service projects.

We shared a special fondness for working with inner-city children.

I have a 8 X 10 photo taken during an inner-city day camp

of Lois Snow and Virginia Garver
riding on an elephant around our church parking lot.

We were a mighty team, Lois and I, until a minor disagreement

grew into disappointment and took on a life of its own.

We said hurtful words to each other,

then complained to friends about the other.

Healing was nowhere in sight; disappointment ruled the day.

One Sunday morning I concluded that worship would be an experience of lip service.

What I needed was a change of heart.

I needed a re-connection with Lois Snow.

I needed the gift of grace provided by the God of forgiveness.

What I did not need were religious platitudes and words that ring hollow.

This Sunday I was neither preaching nor a liturgist.

Before communion began,

I left my church pew during the communion hymn,
and went to stand in the back with the deacons.

My intent was to avoid communion and my charade of false worship.

Suddenly the Chair of the Deacons informed me that a deacon was sick,
and asked whether I would serve.

What would you say?

I marched down the aisle with the deacons to receive the trays of Bread and Wine.

My head was down; my heart was in turmoil.

I looked up at the elder handing over the trays.

Lois Snow stood before me, offering the grace of God.

If taking communion that morning was to have any integrity, I had to take a risk.

I said in a whisper, "I am sorry."

She whispered back, "I am sorry, too. I forgive you."

"Thank you. I forgive you, too."

In the days and years to follow that Sunday,

Lois and I were so glad
that we journeyed over the Speedbump of Disappointment
and arrived together in the Land of Reconciliation.

That Sunday morning as I passed the trays to our congregation,

each one filled with the Bread of Life and the Cup of the New Covenant,
the sacrament took on a newer, deeper meaning,
one which I have retained and cherished
on this side of reconciliation.

Communion became more personal and powerful than ever before;

the spark set aglow that morning has remained lit and burning in my soul.

A New Year: Why Not a New You?

Noble Souls, come to the Lord's Table.

On the other side, just through the curtain called disappointment, is reconciliation.

Jesus Christ has gone on to the other side,

having given His life for us
that we might experience and receive God's gift of grace.

The presence of God does not mean that disappointment is vanquished;

it does mean that God's grace is sufficient
for this and every time of need.

"Please decide on this side of [disappointment and brokenness that]

if, after it happens, you will still stick around.

Because if you leave, you will miss the way that God's grace comes in

and fills in the cracks of our brokenness.

And it's too beautiful to miss.

Don't miss it." [5]

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Extra Material:

"On Being" Interview with Nadia Bolz-Weber, unedited:

"And experience has proved that this is true, yes. Yeah, I'm not idealistic about any kind of human project. I try and always keep that in check. I'm completely idealistic about God's ability to redeem our stuff and our mistakes, but I think if we aren't open about the fact that we've made them, that can be a barrier to experiencing that forgiveness and that redemption and that grace. So I think in a way what might sound sort of cynical about ...don't trust us, don't be idealistic about this community or about me, to me that just opens a door for grace in a sense. Because what I say to people, I mean, I literally say that as our welcome to house brunches — ...I'm glad you love it here, but...at some point, I will disappoint you or the church will let you down. Please decide on this side of that happening if, after it happens, you will still stick around. Because if you leave, you will miss the way that God's grace comes in and fills in the cracks of our brokenness. And it's too beautiful to miss. Don't miss it.

I can say that [my congregation is] not unfamiliar with me apologizing for being wrong. And they have forgiven me many times for mistakes that I have made. And I'm exceedingly grateful for that. Also, I will say that I think that the fact that I don't find it a threat to my authority to say that I've made a bad call or that I've made a mistake, I think that actually allows this population to let me have authority for them. If that makes sense, because I feel like there's a lot of defending and protecting of authority that keeps us from apologizing when we're wrong or admitting that we made a mistake and people see that.

Like here's the thing about admitting your mistakes: Other people see them, right? By like pretending that we didn't [mess up] does not in any way keep other people from knowing that we made a huge mistake. So, if you're somebody who just has that transparency, people tend to just trust you more rather than resent you for making mistakes.

I don't apologize for who I am. I am not self-apologetic. I always try to apologize for mistakes I've made. And I try not to think of everything that happens in the world as a mistake I've made as well." [6]

[1] Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*

[2] Eliza Tabor Stephenson

[3] "On Being" Krista Tippett, October 23, 2014, Interview of Nadia Bolz-Weber. —

"Seeing the Underside and Seeing God: Tattoos, Tradition, and Grace"

[4] "On Being" Ibid.

[5] "On Being" Ibid.

[6] "On Being" Ibid.