

## **Matthew 2:7-12**

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.

### **“What Will Not Happen in 2010?”**

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**January 3, 2010**

Our daughter had a baby in June. Some of you have seen pictures of that baby, because I've shown that picture to people who have asked to see him, and I've shown that picture to some who didn't particularly ask. Today you see a picture of a baby on the front of the bulletin. Some may speculate, in fact some have actually speculated, suggested that the picture of the baby on the front of the bulletin is the picture of our grandson. Such a move on my part would represent an act of extreme self-centeredness bordering on an act of hubris, or pride, that could best be defined as a sin, and maybe original. The picture of the baby on the front of the bulletin is not our grandson. Our grandson is much cuter than the picture on the front of the bulletin. And I do have a picture to prove it. But it's appropriate to begin the new year with the thought of a baby. Christmas, New Year's.

I read a story about a Sunday School teacher who was telling her class the Christmas story. I have great respect for Sunday School teachers. I don't think there's any time in your life when you learn as much as when you're trying to teach children or youth. This teacher was telling the class about the Christmas story and how Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem, and how Jesus was born to them, and the teacher asked, "Who do you think is the most important woman in the Bible?" expecting the answer to be Mary. One kid raised his hand and said, "Eve. Eve is the most important woman in the Bible because they named two days after her, you know, Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve." Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve, now the Sunday after. We look at the new year.

The new year - what will happen? People are making predictions. They are predicting economic recovery. I hope they're right. They are predicting the end of the world. I hope they are wrong. They are predicting contact with space aliens. I hope they're right. Sort of. They are predicting medical cures for catastrophic diseases, and some are predicting pandemic. What will happen in 2010? Will it be like the sign in the store window that said, "Any faulty merchandise will be cheerfully replaced with merchandise of equal quality."? Or will it be like the sign on the desk of the airline executive in Chicago that said, "Don't bother agreeing with me, I've already changed my mind." What will happen in 2010? I don't know. Faulty merchandise, new faulty merchandise, but I suspect, I hope

and I pray, 2010 will not be a repeat of 2009. I hope people change their minds. In fact, the inspiration for this sermon comes from that obscure part of one of the most interesting and famous texts we have in the Bible, the Epiphany story, the wise men, the Magi, their visit to the Christ child. At the end of the story, that part of the story having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

If you're going back tomorrow, back to work, back to school, back to life, back to the grind, back to Boulder, back to Fort Collins, back home, if we're going back, from 2009 to 2010, let's go back a different way. Let's make sure the new year will be new. That life will not be more of the same to the point that's it's just a continuation of what was. That the prognosticators cannot predict the future for us, because we have decided to go back a different way, because life, and we, have changed our minds. Two things we want to do. First of all: to go back a different way. Let's get it said. Tell it like it is. There are things we don't like, and things we do. Let's get it said. If we go back a different way, we can get it said.

My grandmother was married to my grandfather two months when her mother-in-law pointed out that there was a button on his shirt that was hanging by a thread, and she may want to sew it back. My grandmother said to my grandfather's mother, "Yes, I think you're right, but I expect that button was the way it is before I married him." Get it said. James Moore tells about a young man, newly married, not very bright, who said to his new wife of several weeks, "Why don't you make pie crust like my mother made?" Don't ever say that. And she said to him, "Maybe I could if you made dough like my daddy makes." Sometimes, the most important thing we do is to put words to our thoughts, tell it like it is, get it said. Eugene Lowerbach tells the story of a doctor in a Midwestern state who examined a plain, middle-aged woman who had been brought in for help by her husband. Nothing much wrong, except she had become dull and listless. She seemed to have lost her will to live and her zest for life. In the examination they could find nothing physical, no physical problems. The doctor was about to give up on her, but then on an impulse he walked over to her and he gave her a big hug and he told her she was a beautiful person, and everybody was surprised at that, and there was a brightness that came back to her eyes, a vitality in her whole demeanor, and the doctor said, "Let me prescribe something for her. Your wife needs to be hugged and kissed like that every day, and you need to tell her that she is a wonderful human being, and you need to do this every day for the next month." The husband looked at the doctor and said, "That sounds really strange to me, Doc, but if you think that will work, I'll do it. I'll bring her in here every day so you can tell her."

We've got to get it said. We've got to tell it like it is, and if you've got any loved ones or any friends you haven't, you know, expressed your gratitude, we say it, good or bad. Too long we've tied our tongues to silence. Too long we've been quiet when we had things to say. If the year has not been a good one, we say it. If our loved ones have gone without being told how much they mean to us, we put words to it. Paul said, "Let your yes be a yes and your no be a no." And the wise men, the Magi, they knelt down, they paid him homage. I'm sure they said something like, "We are not of your faith, but we see something in you that resonates with what we believe." Wise men and wise women

always get it said, always put it out where it can be heard. "This is the day that the Lord has made, we rejoice and be glad in it." This past year, it wasn't what it should have been, and it isn't what it's going to be. We need to get it said. If last year was a bad year, if things happened we wish wouldn't happen, if it's like Oscar Romero the bishop pointed out, "We are Easter Christians living in a Good Friday world," if that's the case, or if Dominic Crosson who put it a little different when he said, "We are called to be Christmas Christians in a world that still descends into darkness." There's something therapeutic in telling it like it is. But more than that, it's the statement we make to take the worst that has been and to do something to make it better.

Don Messer, former president of Iliff School of Theology, now involved in an organization trying to confront the world-wide AIDS epidemic. One evening he was at a meeting in Uruguay, and one evening he asked everyone in the group, Methodists from all over the world, if the group of United States Methodists would do something that would be indicative of the culture. Those of us, he said, from the United States were puzzled what to do. We have no colorful clothing that we could share a common heritage, we had no particular folk dance, no unique musical instrument. Finally we decided to sing two songs. The first song, "Old McDonald Had a Farm." They laughed with us and, frankly, at us. And then we sang that great African-American spiritual, "We Shall Overcome," the great anthem of the civil rights movement. And spontaneously, as we were singing it, everyone stood and held our hands and sung along with us. "Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day." As I stood arm in arm with a woman from Cuba, I realized Martin Luther King's legacy and challenge was not just for today, not just for the United States, it was worldwide, it was a part of who I am.

First of all we get it said, we tell it like it is. Elie Wiesel was right when he said, "Words can sometimes, in moments of grace, attain the quality of deeds." We get it said. This has been a good year, we look at what could have been better. If this has been a bad year, we look to make it good. We get it said. Secondly, we go back a different way. We get it shed. We throw it where it needs to go. We get rid of our baggage. We look at our lives, and what we don't like, and we shed it. I mean, they did it in New York, in Times Square, a fresh start to the new year. People in New York City came and put their bad memories in the shredder. It was the third annual Good Riddance Day. We all need a Good Riddance Day. Ben Winneck of Connecticut shredded the newspaper story about the 41-9 loss of the New York Giants to the Carolina Panthers. We've got a few of those we could throw in.

What would you like to shed, or shred? Is it a negative attitude that seems to try to lift yourself up by putting other people down? Is that it? Is it the way you listen to the loud voice that is always the critic but never strives to help? Is it the commentary that defeats will come, assuming loss before the game begins? What do we shed? There's a town in Italy, on December 31<sup>st</sup> you don't want to go out into the street New Year's Eve the streets are empty. It's not safe to go to the streets on New Year's Eve because, not that you're going to be robbed or mugged, that's not it. You're going to get hit on the head by heavy things flying out of windows. People dump things out onto the street from the windows of their apartments on December 31<sup>st</sup>. You don't want to be out on the street

when that happens. People are getting out of their lives what they don't need. People are throwing off what is weighing them down. It's a purge from the past. You can't go back a different way if you're carrying the baggage that you've carried. Moses would still be in Egypt and the Israelites would still be worshipping the sun god, if they hadn't been told to leave everything behind and don't worry about the bread that's not rising. And the Magi were wise to ignore Herod's GPS and return the slower route, not back to Rome.

One of the major themes in country-Western music is how to shed relationships that are toxic to us. The songs say it. "How can I miss you if you don't go away?" Or, "I keep forgetting I forgot about you." Or "If the phone don't ring, Baby, you'll know it's me." Or, my favorite, "I'm so miserable without you, it's like having you here." But that, you see, applies to toxic aspects of our lives. A friend called us from Atlanta Friday. Mike reminded me that he had kicked his addiction to gambling for 42 years. One day, a twelve-step process, he shed it, he purged it. Sometimes, that's what we've got to do. There may come a time when the past will not predict the future, because you will take control of it. We will shed our old identities, we will purge our old baggage. Old habits are hard to break, but if we break them, then we can become, sometimes, fully ourselves. Maybe it's an attitude that says we can't, to which we prove we can. Maybe it's the fear we're afraid to confront, but once we confront it, we erase it for good. Maybe it's a weakness that we've never had the tenacity to address, and once we're free of it, we can fix it. Maybe it's the voice from the past that we've never been able to push aside by pushing the mute button, but if we can push the mute button we never have to hear it again. Let's push it.

It's a great book, *Blindside*. It's a great movie, I'm told, have not seen the movie. True story, *Blindside*. Michael Orr, a homeless black kid, adopted by a white family. A football player, University of Mississippi. A first-round draft pick, Baltimore Ravens. Shed his past. The story will bring tears to your eyes, to which Michael would say, "I don't know why people are crying over me. Don't they know this has a happy ending?" Our book has a happy ending, even if the year has been hard. Next year will be better. Even if we wonder how we will make it through the night, we know that we can. We live through tough times, to glory, because our tombs are empty, because our crosses were carried by the Man who showed us where to pick them up. If we shed out baggage, if we look to tomorrow without looking back to the dark places of yesterday, if we shed it, if we shred it, if we get it said, if we tell it like it is, purge it from the past, we go back a different way.

So we come to the table, on the first Sunday of the year. There's a picture of a baby on the cover of our bulletin, a newborn. A new year, a Christ child, and we're Christians in covenant with God. What does that mean? It means this. A woman walked into a jewelry store looking for a necklace. She said, "I'd like a gold cross." The man behind the counter looked at the stock that he had in the display case and he said, "Do you want a plain one or do you want one with the little man on it?" Our cross is empty, but it wouldn't matter. The little man meets us at the table, and when we meet him at the table, he reminds us our job, with God's help, build the future like it never was, but should have been. Doing

what the little man on the cross would have done, saying what he would have said, being what he was, in a world that would rather be predictable.