

"FINDING ANOTHER WAY HOME"

Isaiah 60:1-6 Matthew 2:1-12

January 3, 2021

York Center Church of the Brethren

Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Well, we made it. We may be battered and bruised but 2020 is behind us. 2021 awaits- filled with possibilities. On New Year's Eve I decided to have a little ritual of moving from one rather awful year to a new, hopefully better, one. I tore the monthly pages off of my wall calendar and then tore each month into several small pieces. I put them on a pile next to the fireplace. Later in the evening I had planned to burn the pile a few pieces at a time, letting go of the pain, sorrow, fear, and chaos of the old year, and giving thanks for the good things that **did** happen and then welcoming the new year with a blessing and a prayer. Half an hour later I walked past the fireplace and didn't see the pile of torn pages. I asked Marty if he had seen them. "Oh yea," he said. "I threw all that stuff into the fire."

And that was that. So much for my ritual. But somehow it is a fitting end to a very unexpected and difficult year.

Thinking back to the first Sunday in January 2020- can you believe how naïve we were? We were looking ahead to a new year with great hope. 2020 is such a round number. It signifies good, clear vision, right? So perhaps it would be a spectacular year- a year to remember- and it was- but not at all in the way we had hoped. In January our church board decided that we would start to meet online periodically to save driving and meeting time. We subscribed to Zoom- glad to know that we had a good virtual meeting platform to use every now and then.

As we moved into the season of Lent in February, we started hearing the first rumblings of a new virus that was infecting people in China. Before we knew it, this virus had crossed continents and oceans and was stampeding with abandon across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa until it finally landed on our shores and found us.

By the second Sunday of March, we had closed the church building to in-person gatherings and held our first zoom worship service, thinking it would be a temporary way of worshipping. We started stocking up on hand sanitizer and, of all things, toilet paper. Face masks became not just our latest fashion accessory, but also the first weapon in a political war that would quickly begin to rack up an astronomical body count. Rather than standing together to fight this invisible assailant, our already divided nation became even more entrenched in political ideology and verbal and physical violence. Medical experts and respected scientists became the voice of reason for some of us and the targets of hate by others. And still more people died.

In July, Sister Joan Chittister suggested that we are dealing with two pandemics- one physical and one political and we have somehow managed to braid the two- to the detriment of not just our nation, but the world.

And then we had a presidential election- a whole new experience of chaos in this braided pandemic. And here we are- January 2021- the death toll from Covid- just in the United States- is inching ever quickly toward a half a million. How have we allowed over 350,000 of our citizens- our mothers and our fathers, our sisters and our brothers, our friends and our neighbors- to die alone in overflowing hospitals with only the company of exhausted medical personnel to honor their passing?

We never could have imagined this a year ago- and now it is our reality. In DuPage County alone, by the end of December, there were 61,805 positive cases of Covid with 1,030 deaths. One in every 1000 people in the U.S. has died from the Corona virus.

As if all of this wasn't tragic enough, in 2020 we have seen up close the devastation and deadliness of white supremacy and racist ideology in police departments and in the halls of power. Innocent Black men, women, and children have been gunned down in the streets and in their own beds simply for being black. Cell phone video has finally revealed this evil truth that our black brothers and sisters have suffered for generations.

If we ever needed God to close the distance between us- it is now. So, I am glad we are celebrating Christmas in these days- and this morning- celebrating Epiphany. Epiphany means "revelation, revealing" and it celebrates our belief that God became a person and stepped right into the midst of human history. In order to close the distance between us God put on human skin, breathed our air, and left footprints on our earth in the form of Jesus.

We turn to the Gospel of Matthew and find that it was quite a desperate time for God's people, the Jews. Matthew's original audience would know, from the first few words, that it was a time of terror and pain and they would cringe when they heard it. "In the time of king Herod."

Anna Carter Florence gives us this description. *"Herod was one of the cruelest dictators ever to pass through the Middle East, a man so paranoid about succession that he had his own sons executed to keep them from inheriting his throne. You couldn't pick a worse time for the Messiah to be born in than in the days of king Herod."*

You couldn't pick a worse strategy for the wise men to cross the border into Israel, head straight for the capitol, and openly ask for the address of some baby that has been born king of the Jews- adding, of course, that this baby's birth announcement was actually written in the stars, for everyone from here to Persia to see."

There was a good reason why, when Herod was afraid, all of Jerusalem was terrified. He was a raging, insecure, narcissist. Bad things happened when Herod felt threatened- innocent people died, blood was shed, many suffered. After hearing the report from the strange foreign visitors, Herod gathered the Jewish scholars- who, if they really knew anything at all about God and the scripture, would have already been at the stable. They looked into the prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures and found an obscure text from the prophet Micah, who wrote, "*and you, Bethlehem.*" Bingo!

Herod sent the unusual travelers on their way with a map and a request. "*When you find him please come back and tell me so that I may go and worship him too.*" So, the ones we call wise traveled the nine miles from the holy city to the small town of Bethlehem whose only claim to fame was that it was the birthplace of the great king David.

These travelers were outsiders, non-Jews, Gentiles, and yet when they found the child they had searched for- they fell to their knees and they worshiped him. They gave him their rare and expensive gifts and then prepared to leave. Legend tells us that these men had traveled for years, for hundreds of miles over difficult and dangerous terrain just to find this child, this baby king. But the most important part of this story for us today, on the cusp of a new year, is just one verse- the last one- verse 12. "*And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their home country by another road.*" And just like that they are gone from the story never to be heard from again.

These wise ones didn't build a mansion or a temple in Bethlehem so they could remain near to the baby king and worship him. They saw him. They worshiped him. They packed their bags, climbed up on to their camels, and headed for home. But they didn't go home the way they had come. They went home another way. And I don't mean they just followed a different route home. I mean they went home as different people. Because how could you meet the baby Jesus and not be changed?

I imagine the same thing happened to the shepherds. They had been on a hillside just down the road from Bethlehem and didn't have a long way to travel- but I doubt they went home the same either. They may have looked the same, but I doubt they felt the same. They had heard the message of the angels, laid eyes on the Messiah. They were changed forever. Like the strange foreigners, they unfolded a new map, they charted new territory, and discovered an alternate way home. It was a way they didn't even know existed. But once they took the new road, they couldn't ever travel the old way again.

Into the time of king Herod, a time of violence, corruption, greed, and exploitation, comes the Messiah bringing with him God's new reign of healing, inclusion, restoration, and community. A new kind of power is loose in the world. Herod was right to be afraid. The birth of this child signals the undoing of oppressive human structures. The foundations of the Empire are beginning to crumble. The walls of power and deceit are beginning to crack.

Even as Mary and Joseph rocked their little baby to sleep, Mary's song was ringing across the universe. *"God has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."* Herod had a reason to be afraid and so do all of the herods who still roam the earth. And they do, you know, still roam the earth. They

set up shop in halls of power around the world- in courthouses and the halls of congress; in the oval office and corporate headquarters. They ply their trade on Wall Street and in the arenas of mega churches and the pulpits of not-so-mega ones.

As we think about what the birth of Jesus means for us, and for the world- we should begin to hear our inner GPS start whispering, "re-routing." "re-routing." It is time for us to take another way home.

The Covid virus doesn't operate by our calendar- it doesn't care that we just celebrated Christmas and it doesn't recognize this new year. But we do. I am glad we have this opportunity to stop and take stock of the year just past and to look ahead to this new one- a gift, bright and shiny, unused, untrampled, alight with possibilities. To us the call of the prophet Isaiah comes, *"Arise! Shine for your light has come! The glory of God has risen upon you."*

As the light dawns upon us in this new year we must open our eyes to see the blessed new world that God is birthing right in front of us. I hear people talking about "getting back to normal." But we cannot go back to normal. Things will never be the same again because we will not be the same. We have all been changed by the events of 2020. Time will tell if we have been changed for the better or not.

Writer Sonya Renee Taylor has said, *"We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate, and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature."*

She issues a challenge that people of God must take seriously. It is time to throw away our old maps, our useless guide books, and to seek the new way God has set before us. In

looking ahead, Old Testament theologian and prophet, Walter Brueggemann, recently said that *"what happens depends on whether we have the courage and imagination to devise a new way of being human together or whether we just go back to the way things used to be. If we do, that would be a very terrible, missed opportunity since the old way was not working very well for an awful lot of people. We ought not to be returning to that."*

Brueggemann believes that *" What has happened during this virus is that we have been able to gain a new vision of neighborliness. And the question for us now is, 'How shall we take up this new vision and put it to good use and good public expression?' So, that is what I think our work is, and I think it is fair to say that God will see us through all this. But God will not do our work, and we have huge work to do. Everybody is at a new place with new tasks and new opportunities."*

When asked how people can hold on to hope in this time Brueggemann responded- *"We must model generosity and hospitality. That is really the ground of hope. It is the walk, not the talk. We must commit neighborly acts that show we care about others. And we must keep praying for God's guidance about how to best help those in need."*

We know that throughout history God has called, empowered, and sent forth human beings to act as divine instruments of change and grace in this world. And now it is our turn.

We have the opportunity on the cusp of this new year to make a choice. Will we live in despair or in hope? Will we acquiesce to Herod and his lies or will we grasp onto the hard-to-believe, heart-achingly beautiful truth of the Gospel- that God came to earth to be with us as one of us; to show us how to love God and one another?

Hope is our map and Jesus is our guide into this new year and new world. Taking this new way home will be so much easier in community- so let us continue to travel this journey together. When one of us falters another can give them a hand. When one is filled with courage, they can inspire the rest.

Things in our world are not as we want them to be; they are not as God wants them to be. Jesus was born to fill us with the power of God's love and courage.

In the days and months to come, remember the words of activist and writer, L.R. Knost. *" Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break, and all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention."*

So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you."

Listen... do you hear it? "Re-routing. Re-routing."

May it be so.

Amen.