

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
January 6, 2019
Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2:1-12

Spirit of God, in the proclamation of your Word, reveal to us the hidden mystery of your love in Christ, and strengthen our faith that we may approach the New Year with boldness. Amen.

“New Beginnings”

I have a sweet story I'd like to begin with as we think about the Wise Men, a new year, and new directions God may be calling us to take this year.

It's a story about 20 girls, ages 3-12, who practice traditional Korean dance at a Korean Cultural Center. According to Korean custom, everyone takes off their shoes when they enter a building. The girls observe this ritual-but in their own way. They topple over one another as they toss their shoes into a large pile and head off to rehearsal. While the dance teacher leads the class, one Mom methodically picks up each of the dozens of shoes in the large pile and sorts them into pairs. She matches up the shoes and sets each pair down with the toes pointed toward the door. By the end of her ritual she has turned all the shoes around. When the girls are finished dancing, their shoes are ready for them to head out the door and move on to the next event in their lives.

I think those turned shoes are a good metaphor for us to begin with this morning, as we reflect on the new year, and the story of the Magi, those mysterious travelers who followed the star to the baby Jesus but go home using a different route. As we embark on a new year, I wonder what different routes or new directions is God calling each of us – or the church -- to take this year?

A new year is so ripe for new beginnings and new possibilities, that it's hard not to think about what's in store. The new year is a time to take stock, and to consider the possibility that maybe, just maybe, God is turning our shoes around, and helping us to get ready to go in a new direction.

The Wise Men, after visiting the baby Jesus and offering him their gifts, went in a new direction. Matthew writes, “Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” It’s a small detail at the end of the story, and one we usually chalk off to the Wise Men being smart enough to know that if they go back to Herod, he’s going to find the baby Jesus and kill him. After all, if you’re the king, you can’t really have another king wandering about your country.

But I think there’s something more to it than that.

I think God is telling the Wise Men, and us by extension, that sometimes the old, familiar route, is not the best one to take. Sometimes, God is calling us to take the road less travelled, to use the words of Robert Frost.

Sometimes, God calls us to take the risk of following a star into new times and new places.

Which is scary. It’s scary to think about new directions, because familiar is good. As someone once told me and I’ve shared with others, “Even if the road I travel by is full of ruts, they’re my ruts . . .and I’m comfortable with them.” So we travel the road with deep ruts and potholes, even though the ride may be anything but smooth, because it’s easier to take than the one we don’t know. After all, the new road may have a curve we don’t quite know how to navigate, or a detour we aren’t familiar with, so . . . best to stay on the well-worn path where life is familiar, albeit a bit bumpy.

But the story of the Wise Men invites us to look deeply within our very own lives and ask, “What direction does God want me to take this year?” And the New Year is a great time to do that, to take up the challenge of forging a new path, and leave behind the path, places, perhaps people, and habits that prevent us from following God’s star.

A few nights ago I watched the new Netflix show “Tidying Up With Marie Kondo”. Kondo, a Japanese organizing consultant and tidying up evangelist, is a strong advocate for letting go of the things that don’t spark joy in our lives, so that our home can be a space that suits our ideal selves; i.e she’s an advocate for forging a

new path in life . . . and that life goes straight through your closet . . . or garage or basement . . . or – well, you get the picture.

Now, for those of you who aren't familiar with Kondo, or her book "The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of De-cluttering and Organizing", you should know that the book and show is more than just a how to declutter, and not just another system to help deal with all your stuff. Kondo's method of organizing is based on the principle of only keeping items that "spark joy". If an item doesn't spark joy, Kondo instructs you to thank the item for its service and let it go.

Now, that may sound like a really weird thing to do, but let me tell you – as someone who read Kondo's book 4 years ago and followed her advice, I can assure you that it works. I spent nearly a year, with obvious gaps in time, sorting all of my stuff, which Kondo says to do by category not location.

When I started the Kondo process, I started with my clothes. I found every piece of clothing of mine, even the stuff tucked away in the basement, and proceeded to take every item and throw it into piles – shirts, pants, skirts, belts, scarves, etc. And when I was done emptying my closet and dresser and the like, I picked up every piece of clothing and asked myself, "Does this spark joy?" Not, "Huh. May I'll wear it someday, but does it spark joy?" And if it didn't, I thanked it for its service, put it in the donate pile. That's Kondo's other piece of advice: thank something for its service, and move on. Which sounds really weird, but it worked for me. I was able to get rid of a sweater my Mom bought for me in Hawaii, a beautiful pink cashmere sweater that just never worked. I only kept it because of the memory it held, but Kondo says that the true purpose of a gift is to be received – and that present gave me joy when I received it, but it didn't any longer. So I thanked it for its service, for the joy it gave me in receiving it, and donated it. And I don't regret it. In fact, I can't recall one thing I've regretted donating.

When I was done with my closet, I felt lighter, I had empty space, my closet and drawers only held items I like and wear, and – as an added bonus – when I shop I know what I truly like and what I don't.

Since Kondo's system worked for me, I moved on to the next category – linens, and did the same thing. Sheets, towels, napkins, placements – I gathered up all of that stuff, held each one by one, and got rid of the stuff that didn't spark joy. By the time I got to the last category, sentimental items, I'd honed my "does this spark joy" radar – which is why Kondo says do the sentimental stuff (which includes photos) last; it's the hardest stuff to part with. But in gearing up for that process, I was struck by one thing she wrote, and it's this:

“By handling each sentimental item and deciding what to discard, you process your past. If you just stow these things away in a drawer or box, before you realize it, your past will become a weight that holds you back and keeps you from living in the here and now. To put your things in order means to put your past in order, too. It's like resetting your life and settling your accounts so that you can take the next step forward.”

As we enter a new year, and in thinking about the story of the magi in preparation for today, those words kept coming back to me.

To put your things in order means to put your past in order, too. It's like resetting your life and settling your accounts so that you can take the next step forward.”

Friends, God is constantly calling us to take the next step forward, both personally and communally. And not only does God call us to travel new routes and follow distant stars, God calls us to do this when we don't have much light to guide our way. The Magi had very little light to guide them on their way; but they made it go a **long** way. In fact, the Magi, who weren't particularly religious, can teach us that it is surprising how little light we need sometimes, if we have faith to follow it.

You know, the Bible says faith is hearing the voice of God, and following the star, if you will. Faith means following this new star, this new light, this new thing in the sky, even when we don't know what it means or where it will lead. It's what Sarah and Abraham did, and Moses and Paul, and Mary and Joseph, and all the disciples, and the Wise Men. They followed God's call to go in a new direction. Faith is having the courage to follow God when God turns your shoes around.

Now if that sounds scary, “fear not”, as the angel told Mary because you’re not alone. Plenty of people in the Bible were fearful when God turned their shoes in a different direction.

I’m guessing the Wise Men were a bit fearful, too.

But when the star stopped over the place where the child was, they were overwhelmed with joy.

Overwhelmed with joy.

So not only do we have fear in this story, we also have joy.

Those are two strong, contrasting emotions. But then again, sometimes there are moments in life when those two emotions reside together. The birth of a child, a new home; a move; a new job; one can sense fear and joy in some of the biggest life changing moments we experience. Believe me; it was about a year ago this time I made my first trip to Fort Wayne, and it was both fearful and joyful.

Whenever God turns our shoes around and calls us to go in a new direction, that moment can be quite scary but also quite joyful, too.

But friends, sometimes God calls us to thank something for its service and move on, to take a new direction in life. And when that happens, we have to trust God to be faithful, no matter how scary that might be. After all, if we don’t follow God’s lead, we may never experience the overwhelming joy God has in store for us. We may wind up surrounded by stuff that doesn’t spark joy.

In this New Year, ask yourself, what new direction might God be calling you and us to take? What sparks joy, and what in our lives might it be time to thank for its service, and move on?

For as the old hymn sings:

“O star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,

Guide us to thy perfect light.”

Amen.