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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
January 6, 2013  
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 you with boldness. Amen.*

I heard a sweet story just recently that I'd like to begin with as we think about Epiphany, 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, and 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 neatly 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 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 story of the Magi, those mysterious travelers who followed the star to the baby Jesus but went home using a different route. As we embark on a new year, I wonder what different routes or new directions God is calling each one of us to take?

What new direction might God be calling you to take in your life, or what new direction might God be calling the church? A new year is so ripe for new beginnings and new possibilities, that it's hard not to think about what is in store. It's also a chance to slow down from the business of Christmas, 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.

Now, having said all of this, you should know that I am not talking about making a new year's resolution. For one, I'm not prone to make New Year's resolutions. I read last week that most people fail at their resolutions by January 10, and I'm certainly one of those people. So I stopped making them years ago. But at the end of 2012, Terry and I were talking with one another about what a great year 2012 was for our family, highlighted, of course, by our Grand Canyon trip and Terry and Henry's trip to the boundary waters, but also highlighted by so many other adventures and opportunities. Thinking about the year, we got to wondering, what's in store for us in 2013?

I'm guessing some of you may be wondering the same thing, as you adjust to life in retirement, or an empty nest, or a new job, or a move, or a change in health, or a change in life. I know many of you are in the midst of change, some big and some not so big, but

change is change, right? Shoes pointed in another direction, even if one is only contemplating shoes being *turned* in a new direction, is scary. What does the new year have in store? Is God turning our shoes around, calling us 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 wondering 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, “Even if the road I travel by is full of ruts, they’re my ruts . . .and I’m comfortable with them.”

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There is a parable about a farmer who had a few animals he kept in a barn that had gotten old, drafty and leaky. Concerned for his animals’ well-being, the farmer decided to build a new barn.

He built a fine new barn, tore down the old one, and was comforted to know his animals were now safe and dry.

One day a storm came through the area. The farmer decided to look in on his animals, and he was shocked to discover that the barn door had been left unlatched, and all of the animals had left the new barn and were huddled in the storm on the foundation of the old, familiar barn.

Now why would those animals leave their new barn during a storm to seek shelter on the foundation of the old one? Because it is easier to hold on to what we know than to face something new.

After all, even if the road we travel has ruts, they’re our ruts. And we’re comfortable with them.

But God calls us to travel new routes and follow distant stars, even 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 go with 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 Ruth and Naomi, 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.

Which means that faith is a verb, not a noun.

Many people think that faith is a noun-that it's something to be understood and grasped. Usually we define faith as a set of beliefs that we must subscribe to, because that's secure. It's rational. We can grasp that.

Presbyterians, especially, are good at the intellectual side of faith. We believe that no knowledge is off-limits. There isn't much we don't know for certain, or don't think we'll eventually discover. But the hard truth this story teaches us is that the faith journey begins without knowing all the facts.

I mean, just look at the Wise Men. They didn't have religious traditions or scriptures to prepare them for their journey. Herod's help had to interpret the scripture for them. They didn't even grow up in a culture that expected a savior to come and rescue them.

They were astrologers, magicians perhaps, from modern day Iraq and Iran, who naively ask the current king where his replacement is so they can go and pay him their respects.

If you ask me, they weren't exactly "wise". But they sure did trust. And sometimes, that's more important than knowledge when it comes to faith.

William Sloane Coffin once said, "It's terribly important to realize that the leap of faith is not so much a leap of thought as of action. For while in many matters it is first we must see then we will act; in matters of faith it is first we must do then we will know, first we will be and then we will see. One must, in short, dare to act wholeheartedly without absolute certainty." (*Credo, page 7*)

That's what the magi did. They hit the road without all the facts. No new member classes, no orientation sessions, no discussion as to where they were going. They just went.

Coffin also said, "I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap, and then you grow wings." (*Credo, page 7*)

Now, if that sounds scary, “fear not”, as the angel told Mary and countless others in the Bible. You are 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 when they started out on their journey, 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; one can sense fear and joy in some of the biggest life changing moments we experience.

When 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.

About a year ago I heard a wonderful story from the midrash that I’ve been wanting to tell you for some time. It’s about the parting of the red sea. You know the story from Exodus about God telling the Israelites to cross the red sea in order to escape the Egyptians, who were chasing them after regretting their decision to set them free.

Legend has it that the Red Sea didn’t actually part until the Israelites stepped into it. As the story goes, they’re standing at the shore of the sea, its waves are roaring before them, the Egyptians are close behind them, and they’re supposed to dive into its waters, waters that could drown them, in order to be saved? It didn’t make any sense. Moses was supposed to lift his staff to part the Red Sea. But here they were, and they could do no other than trust God. “Fear not!” Moses said. And just as soon as the stepped into it, the sea parted.

Which meant they had to leap and then grow wings.

Friends, sometimes God turns our shoes around and calls us 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. But if we don’t follow God’s lead, we may never experience the overwhelming joy God has in store for us.

In this New Year, what new direction might God be calling you to take?

Amen.

