

I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas! The good news for all of us today is that Christmas is not over, at least not in the life of the church. On sundown on Christmas Eve, we started the season of Christmas and it runs through January 6, which we call “the Epiphany.” This is a day we celebrate the arrival of the wise men and their realization that they were meeting the Savior of the world. So, Christmas is not over, and we are officially on the third day of Christmas. These twelve days of Christmas are not just about a partridge and a pear tree and all the things my true love gave to me, they are about the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Our Scripture today from Matthew 2 invites us to journey with the wise men as they witness the star and find the Christ child. This past week we were blessed to witness the Christmas star, a star that had not been seen for hundreds of years. Seeing this star causes us to experience some of the wonder and awe that the magi may have experienced as they followed the star not knowing what may lie ahead.

We like the magi are filled with hope as we leave behind 2020 and start 2021. What will we find in the coming days, months, and year? What are we looking for? Whatever it is, Christ calls us to follow as we continue to search for God’s light in the world.

It is fitting that the light of a star is the light that points to the Christ child. If we read this Scripture from Matthew 2 closely it disrupts our perfect nativity scene where the three kings are at the manger with Jesus, and the shepherds and the animals. In fact, the magi are not kings, but “sages or astrologers” and they arrived two years after Jesus was born.¹ At that time, they had been watching the sky for a sign that the prophecy of a Messiah had been fulfilled. When they saw the star, they knew this was it.

As we celebrate the revelation of Jesus Christ to the magi, it is a beautiful time for us to make some New Year’s faith resolutions. And let’s be honest these days we find ourselves at home more often, so this may be the perfect time to follow through on those things that make our lives better, those things we always say we are going to do.

One thing I am working on this year is exercising three times a week. I want to continue to do good things to care for myself as I continue in my ministry. What is something you are excited about taking on or letting go of this year? Do you want to take up a hobby that you really enjoy? Do you want to let go of something that is not bringing you joy?

John Wesley, the founder of our denomination, understood that the beginning of the year was a very important time to make some faith resolutions and recommit our lives to God. Every year he led what was called a “Covenant Service or Watch Night Service” usually on New Year’s Day.ⁱⁱ The purpose of the service “focused on the Covenant Prayer, which requires a person to commit themselves to God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Let’s pray this prayer together now as we recommit our lives to God:

“I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”^{iv}

As we approach the New Year in a couple of days, the question for all of us will be: “Will we, like the magi, follow Christ, the light of the world, with reckless abandon?” Will this be the year that we embody our faith every day?

The magi are an amazing example for us of what it means to truly believe that Jesus was God’s love that came down to us. All throughout Advent, we studied the book “Making Room” by Ed Robb. This book helped us to prepare our hearts for Christ to come again on Christmas Eve, but making room for Christ is never something that stops in our lives.

Each day we are called to carve out space for God. This is how we nurture our relationship with God and grow in our faith. So, what is stopping us from doing these things we know are helpful for our faith formation?

Many times, we get in our own way saying we don’t have time for God. Sometimes it is apathy that stops us. Church, there are so many things these days that can get us down. COVID-19, politics, poverty, shootings, unhealthy family dynamics, social media, wildfires and bullying can ruin our days and lives if we let them. It is so easy for us to live with a mindset of distrust and it is so easy for us to be down on ourselves.

Maybe you have had the worst year ever and you can’t think about adding anything to your life at this moment. The good news for you is that this year is almost over and soon you will have a new beginning.

So how will this New Year be different? What faith resolutions will you make and how will you recommit your life to God? We will be having a Bible Study starting in mid-January and I hope you will consider joining in virtually. We can respond to the gift of Jesus Christ in our lives by offering Christ the gifts of our lives each day.

The magi celebrated that Jesus was Lord with the gifts they brought to him. UMCDISCIPLISHIP.COM tells us the meaning of these gifts: “[The magi] did the thing that people in the East would do when visiting royalty. They brought gifts. Gold was the kind of gift that you brought to a king. Frankincense was the kind of gift that you would bring to a priest. Myrrh was given to someone who was about to die.”

There is one more thing that is special about these gifts, they were gifts for a king prophesized about in Isaiah 60:6. This is an example about another prophecy in Isaiah that is fulfilled.

What kind of gifts will we offer to Christ this year that show that we believe He is our king, our priest, and our savior?

1. Christ as King

This year, how can we recognize that Christ is the Lord of our lives? How can we put Christ first and ourselves second? How can we humble ourselves before God?

One way to do this is to start each day on our knees in prayer to God, thanking God for our very lives and each breath. Starting our days this way will help us align ourselves to Christ so that we can go about the rest of our day with a Christ-like mindset. You may want to start your day with the Wesley Covenant Prayer.

2. Christ as Priest

How can we recognize Christ as our spiritual director? One way to do this is to meditate on one of the gospels. In the New Year, I am going to go through the gospel of Luke, my favorite, once again. In this Gospel we can meditate upon how Christ showed the love, grace, accountability, and mercy of the Father. Or you can do the Bishop’s Bible challenge again. This information was in the newsletter this week. Or you can create your own study or devotion time. There are so many ways to recognize Christ as a shepherd and guide through this life. Reading Psalm 23 each day may help you prepare yourself to face the day.

3. Christ as Savior

How can we truly accept once again that Christ is our Savior? That Christ came down in the form of an infant to save us from sin and reconcile us to God?

We recognize Christ as Savior when we also give our lives to show God’s love to others. We can do this by serving people in the community and in the church.

The Food Pantry is always looking for volunteers. This past week we handed out Christmas bags to many children in the Rappahannock Community. There are so many people in need of God’s embodied love through feeding ministries. There are many people in our church in need of support and encouragement. The pandemic can make all of us feel more isolated from one another, so make a practice to reach out often and pray for one another.

Church the good news for our lives today is that these are the gifts we can bring the Christ-child this year and they have nothing to do with our money and everything to do with our time. So be encouraged there is something we can all offer Christ.

Like the magi, my prayer for all of you is that you seek Christ with such passion and determination that with every fiber of your being you know that Christ is the light of the world who came to save us. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/what-was-the-star-of-bethlehem>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/covenant-renewal-service>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/blog/the-wesley-covenant-prayer-and-the-baptismal-covenant>