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Sermon

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A New Road

Happy New Year! It has been a busy and strange holiday season and now we are all settling back in to our “normal” routines, if that word even has meaning anymore in pandemic life. School starts back soon, be it online or in person, and so does work. Many of us will return to life just as it was before Thanksgiving and Christmas... as if nothing important happened, just another holiday. And honestly, a return to some routine sounds welcome to me these days, its not always a good thing.

The New Year is a time for change, not more of the same. That's why we make Resolutions, trying to promise ourselves that we will be different. And so, here are the top 10 New Year's Resolutions:

1. Eat Healthier
2. Exercise More
3. Spend less, save more
4. Learn something new
5. Quit Smoking
6. Read more
7. Change Jobs
8. Drink less
9. Spend more time with family
10. Get organized

What are some of the trends you see in these resolutions? Lots of self-improvement with losing weight, staying healthy, getting organized, spending your money wisely. Lots of ways for

a person to live their own self-centered life better. It is not until number 9 on the list that we even see the mention of other people in resolutions: Spending more time with family. It's a shame this falls so late in the list and by the numbers the selfless ideals fall far below the top Resolutions, making less than 10% of all resolutions.

Every year we make these promises to do something different, and how many people actually keep the promise each year? Only 10%. It's a pretty low success rate. Why do we keep on doing it every year though? There is something about the idea of a new time, a new year, a fresh start. We have travelled on the same path for a long time, and the 2020 path was really rough, and now we wish to go on another road.

Enter... the Wise Men coming on a road from the East. "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage." And so who were these men? Where did they come from?

Let's start with the number. How many Magi were there? 3? We don't know, the text doesn't actually say. We always assume there are 3 because there are 3 gifts, but it doesn't say that. Are they Kings? Nope. My favorite Christmas hymn is "We Three Kings" and it's bad scripture reading. No Kings, and 3 is a total guess. I bring this up to show you how easily it is to ignore the text and forget to read things carefully. We get so enthralled with the legend of 3 Kings coming across the desert on camels that we forget the real story and its purpose.

Carrying on, if they are no Kings, what are they. The New Revised Standard version calls them Wise Men, but the Greek word is 'Magi.' The translation here is not so simple as Wise

Men. We have to do a little history to get to the true meaning of Magi. I'll make this very long story as short as possible. Herodotus was a Greek Historian who lived about 450 years before Christ. Now he wrote the first History of the World and is considered the Father of History. In his writings he described a people who were called 'Magi' and they were the Medes, from the land of Media. This area is on the south eastern coast of the Caspian Sea, in the heart of the Persian Empire or modern day Iran. It's a long way East of Israel. The Medes had a small kingdom at one point, but had always been part of the larger Persian Empire, the same Empire that would free the exiled Israelites from Babylon and send them home. The Medes however lost their kingdom and were stripped of political power, but they were sent all across the Empire because they were know as Wise and Holy men. The Medes became the Levites of the Persian world. In Israel, if you wanted to make a sacrifice at the temple, at one point or another, you would talk to a Levite. The Levites were priests, pastors, chaplains, musicians, prophets, and sages. They did everything for the Temple. The Medes became this for Persia, being spread out all over the Empire, and being called by a new name, Magi.

So these men that came from the East most likely came from Persia and were not Kings, but instead were priests. They followed a star from the lands of Persia and came to Jerusalem. Why a star, well, they were Astrologers.

Astrology is an ancient practice, one that has been practiced everywhere in the world at one point or another. It has played a major role in almost every religion in the world, even Judaism. Early Israelites used the stars as a way to determine God's favor and purpose. These Magi were priests of Astrology and watched the skies every night. Every change that was noticed was recorded and compared, each thing given meaning. Modern scholars have tried pretty hard to figure out what star these Magi followed, but it's near impossible to tell. My

personal favorite theory is Haley's Comet, as it crossed in 11 BC (dating of Christ's birth is a little rough so it's not out of question for an 11 year difference). But whatever it was, there was something in the sky, that pointed west and as the Magi chased this new light on the world, they seemed to close in on it.

The star brought them to Jerusalem where they met King Herod the Great. The Magi believed that some great king was being born, so what better place to find one than the palace of the King. But they found nothing in the palace, and they scared Herod half-to-death. Herod, panicked a little a called all his priests and advisors and asked them. "Where is this new King supposed to be born?" See... Herod... liked his position, and he didn't want to give it up. Herod was half-Israelite and half-Edomite (a curious combination as they were ancient tribal enemies from Genesis), and he knew the Jewish people were looking for a Messiah. Herod was a little paranoid as a king. He had killed his own wife and her mother, and his two sons, all to ensure no one would take his throne from him. Emperor Gaius Octavius Augustus (as in Julius Caesar's Nephew) even said that it was better to be Herod's pig than to be his son. And so, when these Magi came looking for a child, all Jerusalem became afraid, for Herod would not stop until he had prevented this child from taking his throne.

Herod learns that the child will be born in Bethlehem and sends these Magi to find him and report back. The Magi go and are successful, finding the young boy and family in a manger, most likely a dugout cave that served as a stable. They are overwhelmed with joy. They are over-come, knocked off their feet, they are changed. They then give gifts to the family, submitting to them by paying tribute as one would give gifts to a King. They give them 3 gifts as we are told, each of them an interesting choice.

Gold is the easiest to understand. It's valuable, as much today as it was then. It was called the King of metals and so was a good gift for the King of humanity. Gold was the gift for a King.

The second gift was Frankincense, or just simply incense. The importance of this one is not so clear. Incense was used for a few different things, but most commonly it was used in the Temple. Incense was burned around sacrifices, during prayers times, and at holy meetings. Why? Well... burning animals, sometimes skin, hair, and all... stank. And getting a bunch of unwashed men in a room for a long time... well, that stank even worse. So the priests burned incense. The Church still does this out of tradition, often saying the smoke carries up our prayers to the LORD, and while that's a nice thought, the real reason is the congregation stinks and we don't want to smell it. Incense was the gift for a Priest.

The last gift is the strangest. The gift of Myrrh. In the Christian church we use Myrrh as a perfume that goes with candles and incense burners. It's aromatic and helps Frankincense cover up the stink I was just talking about. But we use Myrrh for that because of this text. What was its purpose in the Ancient World? Myrrh was a perfume used to embalm dead bodies. When someone died, the body would be cleaned and washed, and then covered with myrrh as a perfume in order to cover the quickly rising smell of death. It was a dark gift, but a truthful one for Christ was born to die for us. Myrrh was a gift for one who is to die.

And so... with their prophetic gifts bestowed upon Jesus and his family, the Magi leave. They are warned however in a dream, that they cannot go back the same way, and so they set out upon another road.

And what does all of these have to do with New Year's resolutions? Today is Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany, which means to be revealed, is January 6th and is the day the Church celebrates the arrival of the Magi to Christ. This event reveals to the world that Christ was not born only for the Jews but to all persons, even Astrologers from Persia, and that all the world would pay the Messiah homage, as these wise men did. It reveals that Jesus will be a King of all nations, a Priest to all people, and would die for all sinners. That is what Epiphany celebrates. And it is fitting that this celebration occurs at the beginning of every year.

This is a time for new things, just as Epiphany was. There was a fresh revelation to the world, a new light that would shine forever, and it changed lives. The Magi came as they thought they should, going to Jerusalem and dealing with King Herod. But they were overwhelmed with joy, and gave gifts to Christ, and they were changed. They did not return the way they came, instead they set a new path. Will we follow in their footsteps?

Every year people try to make a fresh start with the new year. We've travelled on the same road for ages and we get tired of it. We know there is something better out there for us. We try and figure it out, thinking of how our individual lives could be better. Maybe if I lose 10 more pounds, maybe if I save more money, maybe if I do this or that... I'll be a better person. The reality is that none of these things will make you a better person, because they are all selfish desires. Nothing actually changes about you, just a few surface appearances. Only 10% of people who make a New Year's resolution complete them because 90% of people are making bad resolutions.

I want us to make a New Year's Resolution as a church. I want us to make a good Resolution that fits in the 10%. It won't be easy to achieve, but it will make us better people. I want us to be more like the Magi in this New Year. I want us to leave our comfort zone in

Persia, go out and find Jesus Christ in our lives, submit to him as our King, Priest, and Savior, and then go by another road to where-ever Christ is leading us. This is not a simple or easy task. It will require you admitting you are not a great Christian all the time, if ever. It will require you giving up your own selfish desires and wants, sacrificing what you need for what others need. It will require you to be humble before the God that created you and be connected to his people. And it will require you doing new things that you think you hate. Our New Year's Resolution is to be Christians like the Magi.