

“A TIME FOR NEW BEGINNINGS”
Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany Sunday (January 3), 2010

This is a day of new beginnings
Time to remember and move on
Time to believe what love is bringing
Laying to rest the pain that's gone.

So begins the hymn “This Is a Day of New Beginnings,” written by Brian Wren.

Today is the first Sunday in the new year – a time for new beginnings. This month, January, is named for Janus, one of the few Roman gods without a Greek counterpart. Janus was depicted as having a double face – one looked to the past for wisdom, and the other looked ahead to the future. Janus was thought to influence beginnings and endings and was often found at doorways and entrances.

January is the time of the year when many of us take inventory of the past and make corrective resolutions for the future. Since an honest in-depth inventory of the past is sometimes painful, we often skip over the excruciating and embarrassing places that undermine our favorable self-image and dwell on the times and places that make us look good. Oh, we’ll root around in the events of the past year and find a few “not so bad” things we thought, said, or did, and exercise enough superficial honesty about socially acceptable shortcomings to fool any onlooker and make us immune to being honest about the real problems in our lives. Then we proclaim a few of the “standard” resolutions such as eating less, exercising more, and attending church more often. Thus, we deceive everybody, including ourselves, while the “real” resolutions that would lead us into a significant new beginning never cross our minds.

Does that sound like anybody you know? How do you think I know about these interesting avenues of escape from reality? Well, I’ve been there.

New beginnings require a number of things – let me suggest two this morning: commitment and risk-taking.

In our gospel story this morning, we hear of both the commitment and the risk of the magi.

We learn of the commitment of the magi when we consider the distance in which they traveled to see the baby Jesus and pay him homage. Because we’re not told exactly how far or how long they traveled, we need to put the pieces together to get our answer. First, we know that they didn’t find Jesus immediately following his birth. If we read carefully, we learn that they found Jesus in a house, not a stable. In that same verse we read that Jesus is called a child, not a baby. Obviously, he has already done some growing up and the parents have relocated.

Putting together another set of clues, we can guess that the magi embarked on a journey that lasted approximately two years to complete. How do we know that? When the wise men arrived in Jerusalem, they asked, “Where is the child (again, not a baby) who has been born king of the Jews?” When we read ahead in Matthew’s gospel, we find an angry King Herod ordering the murder of baby boys two years old and younger.

Herod was attempting to rid the world of this new king who was viewed as competition, a threat to Herod's rule. If Jesus were still a baby when the magi stopped in Jerusalem to inquire about where this new king could be found, Herod certainly wouldn't have had two year olds killed.

If we eliminate the jokes about men not stopping to get directions, we can get a better picture of how far these magi likely traveled. We know that they came from the East, and there is much speculation that Persia was their starting point. My geographical sources tell me that the distance between Persia and Bethlehem is just over 1,000 miles – 1,050 miles to be more accurate. Since airplanes had not yet been invented and even cars were a thing of the future, that would mean ground travel – across deserts and mountains, through wind and all other sorts of weather. A huge commitment would be required to complete such a journey.

But the magi also took a few risks to complete this journey. A lengthy trip across the desert would be a risk in and of itself. But when you add to it the fact that they double-crossed an angry and jealous King, the risk would be multiplied.

We know from our story that these wise men came to Jerusalem hoping to gain more clarity around where the child could be found. King Herod called together the chief priests and scribes – the ones in the know – and asked them where the Messiah was to be born. They referred to scripture – the words of the prophet Micah – to pinpoint Bethlehem as the exact location. With that information, they prepared to continue on their journey. But before they left, Herod called the magi in for a little conference. He asked them about when and where they had spotted this star. And then he sent them on their way to Bethlehem with instructions to return with clear directions so that Herod might also go and pay tribute to his kingly counterpart.

Herod and his entourage had done the wise men a favor – they had supplied them with the name of the city where they could find Jesus. The magi should have been appreciative. They should have done whatever Herod asked of them. But they were warned in a dream not to return to the King, and so – at great risk to life and limb – they left for their own country by another road.

Because of their commitment and willingness to take risks, the magi accomplished what they set out to do.

What is it that you're setting out to do this new year? What kind of new beginning are you striving to make? Whatever it is, know that it's going to require a commitment on your part to make it happen. You can't just say, "I'm going to exercise more often" or "I'm going to read the Bible every day" and snap your fingers and see it done (we only wish it were that easy, don't we?). No, we need to make a commitment to make the changes in our lives so that this new behavior or activity can find room.

And whenever we make a change in our life, it is a bit of a risk. What if the new behavior isn't as pleasing as the old behavior? What will people think of me if I'm no longer doing one thing, but doing another instead?

But new beginnings are worth the risk. Look at the new beginning Jesus created. The child that the magi worshipped grew up and changed all the rules. Jesus taught a revolutionary ethic of unconditional love, stubborn forgiveness and radical hospitality to

those who were marginalized in his society. Is that the new beginning to which we are being called?

None of us wants to lose that to which we have grown accustomed. Our trivial desires obscure our genuine longing. We know much of that to which God invites us. God invites us to spend less money on ourselves and more on those in need. God calls us to waste less time amusing ourselves and give more time to our family, friends, and strangers. God tries to gently persuade us to turn our attention from the temporary to the permanent – from passing time to investing in eternity. We know far more about God's invitations than we admit, but we're sometimes afraid or unwilling to make that kind of commitment or take that kind of risk.

Let's let this year be the one in which we put aside our own wants and desires and focus on God's. Let's make the commitment that will allow us to go forward in our faith, rather than shrinking back in fear. Let's take the risks necessary to follow the light rather than hiding in the darkness. Let's make a new beginning that will move us closer to becoming the people and the church that God calls us to be. **AMEN.**