

A Brave New Year
Matthew 2:13-23
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
January 1, 2023
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Happy New Year! Today is January 1st. For those of us who follow the Gregorian calendar- which is most of the world, it is the start of something fresh. Today we begin the year 2023 in the common era.

Meanwhile, on the church calendar, this is still the season of Christmas. The 12 days of Christmas are the time from the feast day of Christmas to Epiphany. So, this is still a time in the church year when we are also celebrating that which is new...not a new year, but a new birth - the birth of Jesus.

So in the midst of these realities, why in the world did we hear this piece of scripture? Let's be honest - we would rather hear more of the stories of angelic appearances and a mother treasuring things in her heart, stories of kind visitors coming to see the baby and Mary and Joseph beginning to understand what is happening.

But instead today we stepped a little further into the story and read a passage that we would prefer to forget even exists.

Because we love a cooing baby in a manger. We love cattle lowing and shepherds visiting, magi traveling from afar to bring gifts.

But what do we do with a king who wants to kill the little children?

What do we do when the baby Jesus isn't warmly tucked in on a bed of hay, but instead held in his shivering mother's arms as they make their way to another country out of fear for their very lives?

What do we do with a holy family who looks little like the classical artwork we see and much more like the poor families at our own southern border?

And what does any of this have to do with this new year upon which we are about to embark?

Well, what better time than now, as a new year begins, to step away from our half truths and partial stories, and to commit to living in the complex realities of our lives and of our faith?

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What better time than this day when we start a new calendar, when we look ahead with anticipation, to commit to living fully as the people God calls us to be?

And, if we are going to do so, that does require difficult honesty. And so we start by remembering that the story of Jesus' birth is not an easy one.

Sure, we acknowledge that in some ways when we talk about Luke's story which has Mary, nearly full term in her pregnancy, making a hard journey to Bethlehem. Yes, we acknowledge that when we see them having to stay in a place less comfortable than we might hope for our newborn Jesus. But, those are the palatable challenges of this story.

Matthew asks us to swallow a more difficult pill of truth telling. Matthew asks us to see beyond the inconveniences and discomfort, and to come face to face with the life and death of realities of Jesus' birth.

As Eric Barreto, Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote, "From the very first, the road Jesus walks is marked by both God's promises and human resistance. Jesus is both the living presence of God's promises and a consistent irritant to those in power" ([Commentary on Matthew 2:13-23 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)).

So, perhaps that is where we begin - being honest about the implications of Jesus' story not only for our personal faith, but the implications of Jesus' story that challenge the powers that be, that resist the ways of the world, that speak truth to the systems and people in power even when that truth is risky.

Friends, we talk a lot about following in the footsteps of Jesus. And we are actually really good at this in many ways. We are good at being kind and compassionate, at responding to the obvious needs of people, at welcoming those who others keep out. These are things that Jesus did and they are ways we are comfortable following him. They are things we are comfortable continuing to do.

But, what we often choose to ignore are the ways that Jesus' life was disruptive to the systems, to the powers in charge. We often choose to tell ourselves that Jesus is personal but not political and yet here in the very story of his birth there is a political, a systemic response to his very presence.

As Professor Barreto said, Jesus' presence in this world is both "marked by human resistance" and is "a consistent irritant to those in power".

So, what do we do with this?

Because, let's be honest, it is more comfortable to follow a Jesus who asks us to be kind. And some days that is challenging enough. It is more comfortable to follow a Jesus who invites us to bring canned food to the hungry or to make a donation for housing or medical care for those who cannot afford it themselves.

But what happens when the Jesus we follow asks us to not only be kind and obedient, but to be courageous.

See that's what happens in this story. Matthew focuses his telling of the birth of the person of Joseph and most often we talk about Joseph as faithful and obedient. But, let's not forget what a difficult choice this must have been. Let us not forget how courageous Joseph had to be to trust his dream enough to take his family on the run to another country not knowing what the welcome there would be like - a country, let's not forget, from which the Hebrew people escaped slavery centuries earlier.

Joseph wasn't just obedient. Joseph, and Mary alongside him, they were brave.

So, what about us?

Are we ready, in this new year, to welcome Jesus not only as a personal savior in our hearts, but to welcome him as a power that pushes us to courageous actions even when they are risky?

Are we ready, in this new year, to follow in the footsteps of a Jesus who challenged the powers that be even when the ways of resistance led to the cross?

Are we ready, in this new year, to renew our commitment to speaking the truth even when people don't like it? Are we ready to step beyond inconveniences and really offer our lives for the cause of God's kin-dom?

And, if you find it difficult to say yes to these questions, you are in good company. Please know that. The reality is that following Jesus is not easy, no matter how often we like to tell ourselves it is. But if we live with the whole truth of who Jesus was and what he stood for, with the whole truth of how people resisted his purpose and how the powers that be were shaking in their boots when they knew he was near - then we will discover that following Jesus isn't about wearing the label of Christian, but is about living a life that is brave and risky.

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So, what will we do with this reality?

How will we enter this year differently than others?

What commitments to courageous living will we make?

In a new year's post from Cameron Trimble, CEO of Convergence, she wrote "As we travel through Advent, Christmas and the new year, I pray we are brave. I pray we take risks. I pray we let go. I pray we make room" (Convergence Weekly, 12-15-2022).

Friends, that is my prayer for you. I pray that you are brave enough to speak words of challenge and act on your faith commitments. I pray you are willing to take risks in order to bring justice and compassion to this world. I pray you find ways to let go of those beliefs that get in the way of your courage. I pray you make room for Jesus to lead you in new ways. Amen.