

New Beginnings

Happy New Year! By the Gregorian calendar, we have now entered the year 2016. Maybe by the end of February or March I'll be writing it correctly on my checks. We've turned the page on the calendar. We watched the ball drop in Times Square. We toasted friends and family. We have made resolute plans, to diet, to exercise, to be more disciplined or less uptight, to be more grateful or less negative, to stay in touch with loved ones more regularly, to tithe our time and our money – whatever the resolutions are! They signify new beginnings.

“In the beginning...”, wrote John. It was the beginning of *his* story about Jesus. Such a clever recall of “In the beginning...” – the beginning of *everything*, the story telling about humanity recognizing a Creator, a Presence, something/someone beyond themselves. Genesis. “In the beginning was the Word...” Jesus. *Logos*, in Greek, “sometimes translated as God’s logic, reason, or rationale. As if Jesus captures the very mind, design and purpose of God.” Yes, indeed! But let’s think about that word, “Word”. What do words do? “They allow us to express ourselves to each other, to be understandable and approachable. This is what Jesus does. Jesus is... God speaking to us as clearly as possible. And through Jesus, John tells us, God is clearly doing something new, offering a new beginning. In earlier days, God gave the law and the prophets as expressions of God’s will (and love), but now God is going a step further and actually speaking to us directly, having ‘become flesh and lived among us’. The United Church of Christ is an entire denomination who believe that “God is still speaking”. They believe it so strongly that in 2004 this phrase, “God is still speaking”, became their campaign, “to make religion relevant again and to extend an extravagant welcome to all”. A new beginning, for sure.

“...connected to this new, tangible, enfleshed Word is a new possibility of a new relationship with God. ‘No one has ever seen God’, John testifies. That’s something most of us don’t have to be reminded of. When tragedy strikes, when disappointment crushes us down, when hope and happiness flee, we often wonder where God is and sense the palpable absence of God far more profoundly than we’ve perhaps ever experienced God’s presence... Which is why Jesus – the One nestled in the very bosom of God – comes as God’s Word made flesh. To reveal to us God’s parental love. And not just to reveal, but to speak through word and deed as eloquently as possible that there is nothing God wouldn’t do, nowhere God won’t go, nothing God won’t endure... so that we might know we are God’s beloved children, worthy of dignity, honor and love.” (David Lose – <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/christmas-2-c-on-new-beginnings-and-audacious-promises/>)

This is John’s language – all conceptual and esoteric. But we also have Matthew’s take on Epiphany; his language is story – a little easier to grasp, perhaps. As Barbara Brown Taylor begins the story, “Once upon a time there were some very wise men who were all sitting in their own countries minding their own business when a bright star lodged in the right eye of each of them. It was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their

own imagination, but they were wise enough to know that it didn't matter. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives."

"So they began," writes Mariann Edgar Budde "as we do whenever light beckons us, not knowing what the journey will mean when we consent to it. Sometimes, truth be told, we never know. All we have is the light, the desire, or the pain to guide us. Poets, I think, understand best what drives us forward on such journeys. W.H. Auden writes, in the voice of the magi, 'All we know for certain is that we are three old sinners. That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners, and miss our wives, our books, our dogs, but we have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are. To discover how to be human now is the reason we follow the star.'" (<http://www.asa-dc.org/sermons/a-sermon-for-epiphany-by-the-bishop-of-washington>)

"Epiphany is all about seeing beyond what is obvious on the surface and recognizing a call to move from the ordinary to the extraordinary... Epiphany is about believing in the possibility of change... Epiphany challenges us to see things differently. It reminds us that God is at work in the world, constantly opening up new paths, inviting us to trust in God's lovingkindness. But the call of Epiphany doesn't happen in just one quick burst of light. Because, just as the people mentioned in John 1, we are (also) a people who walk in darkness." And when our eyes are accustomed to darkness and a bright light suddenly turns on, the light doesn't actually illuminate so much as it blinds us. We have to allow time for our eyes to adjust to the light before we can see clearly. Meanwhile, the light can actually cause pain and discomfort, disorientation. Sometimes "the most hopeful thing (we) can do when (we're) in that period of disorientation is to remember what (we've) come through before." This is one reason we need each other. To be held up and led forward by those who know us and know our story, to have trusted companions who can receive our anxiety and fear without participating in it, to hear them tell us that they are confident in our ability to make it through – this makes all the difference. (Anna Shirley <http://thelabyrinthway.net/change-of-fortune/>)

Matthew and John have very different styles of communicating their gospel – their good news. But they agree that "in Jesus we receive a love letter written in human flesh and blood from the God who created the vast cosmos in the beginning, who continues to sustain the universe even now, and who values each and every one of us more than we can possibly imagine." (Lose)

I close my sermon today with the words of two wise poets. The first is Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar. The second is Anna Harder, an attentive student of life.