

A Promise to Share

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Epiphany Sunday
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Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

“[T]he Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus. . . .” -- Ephesians 3:6

If I asked you to sing along with me -- “On the first day of Christmas . . .” -- most of you would be able to do it. You might get a little lost up there with those drumming drummers or leaping lords, but far more of us know of the twelve days of Christmas from this popular song from eighteenth-century England than from the church, which is where those twelve days actually came from.

The twelve days of Christmas are an invention of the church, based on the story from Matthew that I read for you a few minutes ago. The story of the wise men – magi, astrologers, eventually kings – is the basis for the twelve-day season the church calls Christmastide, which lasts until January 6th, which is the day of Epiphany. Like many churches, we celebrate Epiphany on the Sunday closest to January 6th, which is why we’re celebrating Epiphany today and not on this coming Tuesday.

But why twelve? Why did the church decide the wise men arrived in Bethlehem twelve days after Jesus’s birth and not ten or six or forty days?

We don’t really know the answer to that question, but since the Bible is full of symbolism, it’s likely that the number twelve was chosen because of the twelve tribes of Israel, who were the first intended recipients of the gospel message, and since Epiphany is about the spread of the gospel message, it would be logical to observe the start of that spread with its innermost circle, Israel’s twelve tribes.

“Go nowhere among the Gentiles,” Jesus told his twelve disciples when he made them into apostles by sending them out, “and enter no town of the Samaritans; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” That’s Matthew 10:5-6, the commissioning of the disciples as apostles, and there are twelve apostles because there were twelve tribes, one apostle for each tribe.

So when wise Gentiles appeared from the east twelve days after Jesus’s birth, it’s a symbolic foreshadowing of what’s going to happen to that Jewish baby and his Jewish mission. His first followers will indeed come from among the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but the sheep who didn’t consider themselves lost – that is, those who thought that their way of life, including their religion, was working just fine – they weren’t as receptive to the news that God’s realm had come near in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

And before we go all anti-Semitic and wailing on what one Good Friday prayer used to call “perfidious Jews,” let’s remember that we Gentiles, in the long run, have been no more receptive to the life and teachings of Jesus than his Jewish contemporaries were. Jesus’s Jewish peers rejected his message of radical obedience to God and a comprehensive counter-cultural lifestyle for the same reason we reject it: we’re the culture.

With our buying and selling, our marrying and giving in marriage, and in our trust

in violence rather than God to see us through conflict, we are the culture that Jesus's message of renunciation and sacrifice undermines; and we sensible, suburban, Gentile Midwesterners are not going to go there.

What we'll do instead is turn Jesus's message of challenge into a message of charity. We'll leave the basic cultural system in place and manipulate it to help the less fortunate – some of whom were made less fortunate by that very system. Our system, along with just about everyone else's in human history, makes very few haves and a great many have-nots, and once we Christians became part of the power structure – which we did in the third and fourth centuries by convincing the authorities and our pagan neighbors that we're basically nice people who pose no threat to anyone – once we became culturally respectable, in other words, to a violent and unjust culture, we became violent and unjust ourselves. We became as co-opted by the dominant cultural system as those Jews led from Egyptian bondage became once they had a culture and system to maintain in Canaan.

That's the old, old story that I, for one, don't love to tell. It's such a downer to tell a story like that on the first Sunday of a new civil year. It would be so much more pleasant to tell you about the blond pastor like me who went into the post office to buy stamps at Christmas time, and when the clerk asked what denominations he wanted, the pastor said, "Oh, I suppose 22 Catholics, 12 Lutherans, 6 Presbyterians, and a couple of Baptists would do."

Now isn't that a nicer story than the story of our simultaneous promotion and rejection of the gospel? That latter story is confusing and troubling, and it makes you wonder if we're in some way to blame for the mess the world's in, if we're as much a part of the problem as the solution. The story of our rejection of Jesus's way of life makes you wonder if Nietzsche was right when he said that the last Christian died on the cross. No one likes to harbor such thoughts at the start of a new year, so we throw ourselves a New Year's Eve party to banish such thoughts along with the winter darkness and chill.

And it'll work for a while, and for some folks, it'll work for a long while – until New Year's Eve 2015. But for those of us with the annoying habit of churchgoing, the message of the gospel keeps intruding, with its twin proclamations of promise and hope. The hope is that there is a better life than this one, and the promise is that there is. The message of the gospel is that we can have this life or we can have something better. New life in Christ, being born again, God's realm on earth, realized eschatology – call it what you will, that better life that is the hope of all religious people stands in stark contrast to the life we know, and life's ultimate choice boils down to one thing: choosing the life and world we have now, or choosing something better.

Isn't that what all those new year's resolutions finally come down to – choosing the same old same old or choosing something better? Losing weight, getting organized, saving more – don't we all hope for a better life for ourselves and, presumably, those around us, by achieving at least some of those lofty goals?

But what if we stepped back a moment from that list of resolutions and let the light dawn on us that the most important part of resolutions is realizing that we have the power to choose them, whatever they happen to be? What if the light that dawned on the Gentiles then is the same light that dawned on the Jews centuries before, namely, that they could choose to allow themselves to be God's instruments to make a better world or they could refuse that commission and go it on their own – and create as rotten a society for themselves as any of their polytheistic neighbors?

And what if that's the same light waiting to dawn on us Gentiles? What if the light of Christ is the light that says you can choose a better life – for yourself, for your loved ones, and for your world? What if we understood the central, simple Christian command

from Jesus -- "Follow me" -- to mean that we can choose to follow, in every aspect of our lives, or we can choose not to?

Would that realization not give to many of us a sense of enormous power, enormous freedom, and enormous hope? What more would any of us wish for from a new year than a new sense of ourselves?

Yes, of course, friends, things happen, and they happen to us often without our desire or consent. But those things aren't, in the long run, the things that matter when it comes to making you you.

What matters is what we do with those happenings, and how we allow God, through the Holy Spirit, to help us shape our life's happenings into a life. That's the crucial difference between a truly spiritual person and everyone else. Other people let life shape them; a truly spiritual person, guided by the source of all that is and ever will be, allows that source and only that source to shape them.

And that guidance comes from the daily choice to open oneself up to it, choosing to listen to what it's saying, and then choosing how to respond with considered and prayerful action, and not merely with thoughts or words.

That's the life of faith -- the daily process of choosing God -- and it's available to everyone who wants it. But it's lived only by those who choose it. We share in God's promise of new life only when we live out that new life. The promise is waiting; how long, in 2015, will you make it wait?