

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the Second Sunday after Christmas



Year A
RCL

Psalm 84 or 84:1-8
Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a
Matthew 2:1-12

The Collect

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Psalm 84 or 84:1-8

Quam dilecta!

- 1 How dear to me is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts! *
My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.
- 2 The sparrow has found her a house
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young; *
by the side of your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.
- 3 Happy are they who dwell in your house! *
they will always be praising you.
- 4 Happy are the people whose strength is in you! *
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.
- 5 Those who go through the desolate valley will
find it a place of springs, *
for the early rains have covered it with pools of
water.

6 They will climb from height to height, *
and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.

7 LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; *
hearken, O God of Jacob.

8 Behold our defender, O God; *
and look upon the face of your Anointed.

[9 For one day in your courts is better than a thousand in my own room, *
and to stand at the threshold of the house of my God
than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.

10 For the LORD God is both sun and shield; *
he will give grace and glory;

11 No good thing will the LORD withhold *
from those who walk with integrity.

12 O LORD of hosts, *
happy are they who put their trust in you!]

Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord

Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:
`And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold,

frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

SERMON

New Years are like the first day of school. You go to school with a bunch of shiny new pencils, crisp notebooks and empty heads. The goal is to leave at the end of the year with heads stuffed with new knowledge. The torn and soiled notebooks and chewed up pencils are the casualties in our search for education. Our torn up and soiled lives are like the pencils and notebooks, the casualties in our search for a more perfect relationship with God. And every year, we would do well to take stock of what went well, and what didn't, then clear away the detritus. Usually, though, what we do is make a New Year's resolution to go to the gym and lose some weight. This resolution does not normally

make it past Epiphany. I want us to talk about some more sweeping resolutions. I want to see if we can clear away those thoughts and images which hold us back from a fertile relationship with God. I'd like to suggest three.

The first thing I'd like to see us clear away is our perception of God. The problem of our perception of God, as I see it, is that we think we can perceive God. What we end up doing is imagining somebody like us, only more powerful in some way. If your idea of God is an old guy with a long white beard sitting on a throne, you may be worshiping Galdalf the Magician for all I know. God is greater than your image of Him. Simply put, I can't perceive God in His Wholeness. Any attempt to do

so inevitably winds up by putting God in a box of my own limitations, and that's where we get into trouble. We stop worshiping God and start worshiping our **understanding** of God. The idea that we can contain God in such a box is something that needs to be cleared away, not only so that we can reach a more perfect relationship with God, but so that we can stop picking fights with people who envision God differently than do we. For the new year, the first thing I'd like to clear away is the notion that I can perceive God in His Glory.

The second thing I'd like to clear out of the way is the idea that we can't truly connect to God except through a specially trained intermediary. Why do we insist on moving our relationship with God

just out of our grasp? Is that a reasonable thing to think about a God who could speak such imaginable grandeur into existence with a mere word?

Paul's encouraged his church at Ephesus by saying:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.

The portion of this text that really caught my eye was the phrase "I pray that God...may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation." This is at the core of a declaration to become a Christian – God grants to us a spirit of wisdom and revelation. While we

lack the power to perceive God's wholeness, God, who loves us individually, grants to us individually the spirit we need to enter into a relationship with Him. It does not flow from a preacher or a priest with especially good mojo. It is a free and undeserved gift of faith to each of us.

The Presbyterian Church believes strongly in an educated clergy. It is easy to drift from that worthy goal to a perversion of it whereby we come to think that the whole business of religion is so complicated that we have to hand it over to a professional, educated class. If we do that, we are refusing to acknowledge God's gift of individual grace to each of us. I wouldn't be happy if I gave Mrs. Schneider a Christmas gift and she referred it to an

expert. There's no reason to think God would be happy about our handling of His gift of grace in such a way. The second thing I want to clear away is the idea that some mortal has to intervene with God in order for me to have a relationship with him.

The third thing I'd like to clear away is the idea that a Christian is someone who does good deeds, or is a "nice" person. Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts do good deeds. The Dali Lama is, by universal acclaim, a nice person. Neither the doing of good deeds nor a pleasant personality define a Christian. Christians are different because they insist on relating everything they do to their relationship with God. If everything you do is weighed in the scale

of how it affects your relationship with God and your brothers and sisters, you will, inevitably wind up doing good to God and His Creation, but non-Christians do a lot of good things, too.

The idea that Christians are “nice” people, or that Christians are the people who do good things is dangerous because it leads to the notion that people who are **not** Christians are neither nice people nor do good things. When you take a minute to think about it in that way, it’s clear that this is not true. The wise men from the East were certainly not Christians. They were priests of Zoroaster, but they were the ones who announced the coming of the king and who protected the babe from Herod.

When they saw that the star had stopped, they

were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

It's just hard to be objective because the idea that Christians are the good guys is flattering to us, and hence hard to evaluate objectively. This is not to say that Christians aren't nice people. Emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363 c.e.) complained that Christians

...not only feed their own poor, but ours also. See their love feasts and their tables spread for the indigent. Such practice is common among them and causes a contempt for our gods.

We are not kind, sharing and friendly people because we are the good guys. We are kind, sharing and friendly people because we have accepted with gratitude the free offer of grace from God and committed ourselves to following the indwelling spirit which leads us to a kind, sharing and friendly lifestyle.

Three things to clear out of the way in 2020: the misconception that the mental image of God we form is God in his wholeness; the misconception that connection with the Spirit is so difficult that we can only learn about it through the intervention of a religion specialist, and never experience it for ourselves; the misconception that Christians are the good guys who do good deeds and the rest of the

world is “the enemy.”

I think you could make your own list of things to clear away for the new year. This is just my list.

Whatever you come up with, though, it is my wish that you do so with intentionality, with a commitment to and determination to find your own route to the relationship God is offering. May you be blessed in the coming year, you and all your loved ones.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Resolve to remove the clutter from your hearts and minds this year, church. Make a way for the Spirit.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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