

Isaiah 63:7-9
Ps 148
Matthew 2:13-23

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry, To
release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations, To bring peace among others, To make
music in the heart.

- Howard Thurman

Happy New Year Trinity Church!

I pray your holidays were good ones!

Every year, the week between Christmas Day and New Year's day has this mysterious timeslessness to it? Doesn't it?

During this week, we take time to eat all of the foods, open all of the presents, play with (and potentially break) all of the presents, and in the midst of all of the swirling travels (planned, unplanned, and changed) we find ourselves looking backward and forward at the same time.

I love to look back and marvel at things that happened in the past year, moves, new adventures, things that stayed the same and things that changed that no one could have imagined.

We pausing to take note and listen to where the rhythm of joys, sorrows, deep learnings existed in the midst of all 365 days of last year.

And it takes community to remember.

There are things we have completely forgot that that happened this past year or remember differently than others!

I also love to look ahead and wonder.

Wonder what will change in the new year.

Wonder what adventures might lie ahead (planned and unplanned)

Now, in wondering, We am not planning, instead-
We sit with curiosity- where will God guide us this year?
How can I make myself open to the path that is made clear,
chosen or unchosen by me....
Pausing to listen, to absorb and make space for more than the
daily routine and to do list.

Our reading from Isaiah today is a beautiful reminder of looking
backward. Listen those words again, “I will recount the gracious
deeds of the Lord....
Because of all that the Lord has done for us.. (note not to us)
According to his mercy,
According to his steadfast love.

This recalling is no small statement, we should not sweep it away
as platitudes or kindness. Rather, Isaiah ???? , is reminding God’s
people that despite the challenges,
God HAS been there in their midst-
“Look back and see God has provided a path through the
challenges, the means to endure, the love with which to not only

survive but to thrive.” It may not have been the path you planned or hoped for, but still the path was there.

Recalling and retelling allows for the light to shine through even in the darkest times.

Just like that Christmas morning when the light shown in the heavens, the shepherds arrived and followed, the angels sang and later, even the kings arrived by light.

Guidance interrupting in the midst of their routine and ordinary lives.

Steadfast love and mercy appears in the unplanned adventure called the Holy Family in Bethlehem. A baby called Emmanuel. God with us.

Which brings us to today.

8 days after Christmas Day.

As the words of Howard Thurman ring out-

“After the stars have faded, the shepherds have left, (and just before our gospel reading today) the magi have visited and departed, the holy family have settled into home life, the ordinary, the mundane.

Now the work begins.

And another angel appeared.
An angel appears to Joseph.

In Matthew's Gospel account, Joseph is to whom all the angels appear. We hear nothing of Mary's personal encounter with Gabriel- that is Luke. You will remember two weeks ago we heard of the first appearance of an angel to Joseph in a dream.

The Angel appears and allays Joseph's fears. In Matthew's gospel we do not even hear of shepherds or angels in the fields with their Glory to God choruses. No, in Matthew's gospel, Joseph receives word from an angel that Mary is pregnant, he is to still marry her and to name that baby Emmanuel. God with us.

Can you imagine Joseph looking back at that year and saying, "Well, I never could have planned that any of this would happen."

Yet, Joseph is obedient, he is kind, he follows his instructions, Jesus is born, they travel home, the Magi arrive visiting with gifts.

Perhaps after the visit of the Magi, Joseph and Mary took surprises in stride, nothing could shock them anymore.

Because then, a second Angel of the Lord appears to Joseph.
Appears and commands again.

Go, Joseph, go to Egypt for safety.

Go and take your wife and child and find safety there until I visit again.

And the family went and they stayed.

Mary and Joseph and sweet baby Jesus went to a country where their people had once been enslaved, a space with history that they never wanted to go back to, a place that Moses had led them from to freedom and yet at this moment that very space was a harbor of safety for this young family.

Into the unknown, into the in between,

Mary and Joseph went into the land of Egypt waiting and surviving.

I wonder how they felt having escaped the senseless violence that King Herod ineffectively used in an attempt to squash the threat of this newborn king.

Were they afraid of being found out?
How their hearts must have broken for those children who died
How they must have wondered to themselves, “how long will we be here, what is next?”

And yet the steadfast love of God endured.
According to god’s mercy.

And a third Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told them to return to their homeland. And Mary and Joseph went and settled into Nazareth.

Listening and seeing the divine in their midst.
They, like the Magi, home by a new route to survive, to thrive, to live in hope and to see this baby grow into the man that will rebuild the nations, bring peace and music to the heart in such a unique way.

The next appearance of the divine affirming the path of God ...is our gospel next week, as Jesus is baptized, the dove will descend, voices will be heard by all who are present and Jesus will begin his ministry. But that is for next week.

Listening to the call of God in our lives takes a certain willingness to listen and to respond.

Joseph and Mary did not let reflecting back on their path inhibit them from moving forward on God's path for them.

They listened, they trusted, had faith and took one step at a time. From going to Bethlehem to Nazareth to Egypt to Nazareth again.

They received the strangers with gifts and were received as strangers without any gifts to give in return.

They wondered and wandered but never strayed from the knowledge that God was there with them on this topsy turvy path that was a gift to the world.

I wonder how often Mary said, “Joseph go take a nap- perhaps tonight is the night the angel will appear and we can go home already.”

I wonder if Joseph was afraid or found comfort in those dreams when the angel of the Lord gave him direction?

The work of the Holy Family is at work today, they let the music of the blessed birth of Jesus carry their hearts into and beyond the challenges.

They used each day to respond whole heartedly to the call.

Just as we, too are called to do.

Where might you find yourself in this story?

Joseph with dreams?

Mary who also responded with love and care?

Magi, from afar encountering a new beginning in a new way?

Arriving like the holy family in a new space with no plan, needing hospitality and care?

Welcoming, like the Egyptians, a new family in their need?

Wherever you might be on your spiritual journey, let the words of Isaiah ring through- know the abundance of God's steadfast love and keep listening to those angels who appear on the path to guide you along.

Amen.

A Blessing for Epiphany

If you could see the journey whole,
you might never undertake it,
might never dare the first step
that propels you from the place
you have known toward the place you know not.
Call it one of the mercies of the road:
that we see it only by stages
as it opens before us,
as it comes into our keeping,
step by single step.
There is nothing for it but to go,
and by our going take the vows
the pilgrim takes:
to be faithful to the next step;
to rely on more than the map;
to heed the signposts of intuition and dream;
to follow the star that only you will recognize;
to keep an open eye for the wonders that attend the path;
to press on beyond distractions,
beyond fatigue, beyond what would
tempt you from the way.

There are vows that only you will know:
the secret promises for your particular path
and the new ones you will need to make
when the road is revealed by turns
you could not have foreseen.

Keep them, break them, make them again;
each promise becomes part of the path,
each choice creates the road
that will take you to the place
where at last you will kneel
to offer the gift most needed—
the gift that only you can give—
before turning to go home by another way.

—Jan Richardson

from [Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons](#)