

Happy New Year!

The first Sunday of the New Year always presents an opportunity to start afresh, to begin anew- to recall the resolutions we’ve just made (before we forget them) and set ourselves to achieving them, this year, for certain.

In many ways this year, 2008, is much the same as always - but is very different, too. Since life post-September 11, 2001, the phrase ‘a new normal’ has made it’s way into our vocabulary, and it applies to more areas of life than you might at first think. In a quick survey of how the ‘new normal’ is now being applied, I’ve seen it used in reference to life after cancer, life with diabetes, life in business after the dot.com bubble and beyond the housing bust, financial opportunities in the midst of risk; and basically, life after any significant change in the usual course of things. In this way, ‘the new normal’ can apply to each of us, and it fits us each differently according to our circumstances.

In terms of our life together as part of our Second Church family, 2008 presents a number of opportunities of challenge, change and transition. We are on a new leg of our journey together as a congregation. We’re still very much the midst of our wondrously successful Capital Campaign and have lots more visits to do - I think our number is around 120. So please, when you get a phone call from one of our members to arrange a visit, do everything you can to welcome them.

As part of the Campaign- we’re already positioned to follow through with our Impact Mission plans, to move forward with new initiatives in education and job training in our city and venturing to fund a new school for girls in Afghanistan - it’s breathtaking, really.

Though its still very early in the year- and we might really want a chance to sit back, take a deep breath & relax a bit, previous plans we’ve made and events to come are overtaking us already. This is not a bad thing, at all. It’s all part of the ‘new normal’ we live in- created in part by what we have had in the works, and in part by what God has in store for us yet to discover. Part of this New Year is carry-over from our previous labors, and part comes brand-new, unasked-for, unanticipated, unplanned. That’s life. It’s what happens now and what has happened through the ages.

It's what happened in the story Matthew tells us today - of Magi; wise men who tracked a star, following the message of the prophet Isaiah- that a light would shine into the world to make people's hearts rejoice. They followed directions given long before them, plans forecast before they were born. Yet what they encountered upon arriving in Bethlehem was beyond their imagining - too simple and yet too profound ever to have anticipated. In the humility, simplicity and poverty of the stable, the Magi gained a new understanding of God's purposes. In following a star, their hopes rising to the heavens, they met the child of God, grounded firmly in the immediacy of earth.

In telling his gospel story, Matthew took what was already going on in the lives of new Christian believers and then shared the story passed along to him of Jesus' birth. Matthew wrote to new followers of Christ, those who first began their understandings of God with nature alone as their source of revelation.

They knew God acted in their lives not because God had come to them with a name they already knew, but because they had experienced a yearning, a tug, a conviction that there was a power much greater than themselves who could and would call them, redeem them and fulfill them, so that they could break out of cycles of meaninglessness and despair.

Exactly who that was- they couldn't yet say, but that there was One calling them, they know as plain as the noses on their collective faces.

So it is that this day is called Epiphany - which means 'appearance' or 'manifestation' of God. Something new now begins to dawn on us, it has roots in what we've experienced before- but yet is something bigger; we've done this all before- but it won't be the same as last year; we know the routine, but some things have changed, will change, and will continue to change - and not just by our doing, but by purposes much, much larger than all of us combined. We've got lots of hard work to do- but we're assured of a very strong tailwind behind us.

In some ways Epiphany is the ongoing the work of Christmas. Christmas was God's doing and not our doing. Whether it was the prophet Isaiah or the gospel writer Matthew, they each say that it was God who revealed the good news of which they speak. All we've done is received the news- very gratefully.

Today is the first day of this New Year that we can step forward and let God do God's work with us all over again, to claim us, to stir us, and to renew us for all the wondrous, challenging and exciting purposes in store for us, together and as a people of God.

For, surely, we can't do it all ourselves.